

# Trapped in Greece: is there any perspective for labour market integration?

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## Introduction

The two-year period 2015–2016 marked a radical change in the phenomenon of migration regarding Greece. The massive influx of people, mainly asylum seekers, into the Greek islands via Turkey from the middle east and the warring regions of Asia and Africa, particularly north Africa, has reached the upper limits of capacity for reception and hospitality in a country with a depressed economy and fragile political balances resulting from efforts to address its multiple internal and external problems.

In the years between 2012 and 2017, it was predominantly the degraded situation in a number of countries around the Mediterranean, where there had been a deterioration in living conditions amidst political tensions (i.e. Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya), that created new, strong migratory pressures (Ministry of Immigration Policy 2018). The vast majority of arrivals in the previous five years originated initially from Asia's least developed countries but, later, the intensification of conflicts mainly in the wider region of the middle east (and in some other African, sub-Saharan countries) created large numbers of people seeking escape routes. The situation within Greece deteriorated considerably after the border closure by North Macedonia, when tens of thousands of migrants became trapped on the Greek side. By early 2020, this had escalated even further with over 40,000 asylum seekers trapped in overcrowded facilities under the threat of a looming health emergency in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the same time, it should be remembered that the large majority of those who have arrived after 2011 in Greece are not aiming to settle in our country but to move quickly to another, more 'attractive' one than Greece (Ministry of Immigration Policy 2018).

It is important also to mention at this point that the EU did not have a common migration policy and was totally unprepared for the numbers of arrivals, leaving first destination countries to face the challenge. Furthermore, the Greek public administration had no experience, coordination was inadequate and resources – just like external assistance – were, and remain, limited. Equally, it is not obvious: (a) whether and for how long Turkey will be able – and willing – to stick to the 'zero flows' policy commitment, in line with the EU-Turkey Statement;<sup>1</sup> and (b) whether a number of EU countries (and, if so, how many) will accept the settlement of existing asylum seekers and migrants (still less those arriving in the near future). Evidently, the situation in the main source countries for these flows to Europe has not been normalised, while major instabilities

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1. See further in Section 2 of this chapter.

continue to exist in countries outside the wider middle east (mainly in Africa), caused by the rapid growth in their population and from exceptional inequalities (Kasimati and Panagiotopoulou 2018).

This chapter focuses on the challenges posed by historical migration since 2015, with Greece being one of the main entry points for those seeking to reach Europe. Section 1 provides the national context of migration in Greece and sets the background for the recent history of migration in the country, while Section 2 describes and analyses the main processes behind the numbers of people entering Greece since 2015. Section 3 introduces the main policies of reception and registration for asylum seekers, proceeding in Section 4 to an overview of labour market integration policies. Section 5 presents social integration policies towards refugees and asylum seekers, highlighting the important role played by actors in the field, such as NGOs and trade unions. Finally, Section 6 provides conclusions that summarise the major points.

## **1. National context of migration**

### **1.1 Recent history of migration**

The phenomenon of migration has always been important in the history of Greece, but developments in recent years have led to its profound transformation from a country of emigration to one of immigration. This change occurred, initially hesitantly, in the second half of the 1970s before strengthening in the 1980s and intensifying during the last decade of the 20th century.

Of particular interest here is the pattern of immigration in the 1990s arising from the magnitude of the flows and the changes which could be observed in the characteristics of the migrants themselves. Additionally, one significant development at this time was the recognition of the need to develop an immigration policy from the perspective of Greece as a host country for migrants.

Even though there has been net immigration since 1975, the differences between 1975-1990 and from 1990 to date are particularly significant. The net immigration of the 1975-1990 period is linked to the gradual shrinking in emigration flows and the return (or repatriation) of Greek nationals who had migrated abroad during the initial post-war period, as well as the arrival of foreign citizens in Greece (Mousourou 1991). The first migratory flows in the late 1980s came mainly from neighbouring Balkan states and the former Soviet states in which there was a Greek diaspora, mainly as a result of civil conflicts. These inflows found the country unprepared and somewhat disoriented as it had never before regarded itself as a host country and lacked corresponding policies. Initially, however, there was not only a reception but also a partial acceptance of migrants, many of whom came from Albania (Kasimati 2003).

Common cultural references and the employment of migrants in sectors of the national economy where there was a shortage of labour, due to a shift of native workers into the service sector and also to the stronger entry of women into the labour market, created

suitable conditions for integration into Greek society. Migrants largely contributed both to the revitalisation of the primary sector and to the overall development of the country. Migrants were mainly employed in agriculture and livestock farming, construction, cleaning and catering, and they also provided household services as well as care for children, sick and elderly people. Their employment was complementary to that of the native population, but also favoured the competitiveness of Greek products due to their low wages relative to native workers (Kasimati and Panagiotopoulou 2018). Neither did the small number of migrants from Asia (from the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia), north Africa and Egypt raise any issue as this was focused either on the migration of women (from Asia) finding work in the care sector or men (from north Africa) finding work in unskilled or low-skilled segments.

## 1.2 Population structure

Census data (see Table 1) demonstrates the change reported above of Greece, a traditional country of emigration, becoming since 1990 a country of immigration. In 1981, nationals of third countries accounted for 171,424 people (less than two per cent of the total population); whereas in 2011 their numbers stood at 911,929, almost 8.5 per cent of the total population (Kasimati and Panagiotopoulou 2018).

Despite the methodological and scientific difficulties involved in accurately recording quantitative and qualitative data on migration in Greece, it may be concluded that the overall dimension of the phenomenon was moving within the normal limits for a modern European host country. At no point between 1990 and 2011 did the number of permanent foreign nationals exceed 8.5 per cent of the country's total permanent population, as Table 1 shows.

The financial and economic crises arising in the last years of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century again changed the balance of inflows and outflows which, once more,

Table 1 Total population in Greece by nationality

Year	Total population	Foreign citizens *	Foreigners in total population (per cent)
1971	8,768,641	92,568	1.05%
1981	9,740,417	171,424	1.76%
1991	10,259,900	167,276	1.65%
2001	10,964,080 (10,929,178 permanent population)	797,093 (762,191 permanent population)	7.27% (6.97%)
2011	10,939,727 (10,815,197 permanent population)	n.n. (911,929 permanent population**)	n.n. (8.43%)**

Notes: \* This number includes expatriates and people from the European Union. \*\* In the 2011 census, with regard to foreign citizens, ELSTAT exclusively quoted the permanent population and not the real population.

Source: Population Censuses, ELSTAT (2011)

turned negative (251,000, according to ELSTAT for the five years from 2011-2015), with inflows amounting to 300,000 people and outflows to 550,000. Leavers were predominantly concentrated in two major groups: a) economic migrants of the two previous decades returning – even if not permanently – to their countries of origin due to the crisis; and b) young Greeks of working age (2011-2015), but also older ones (35-50 years). Entrances, on the other hand, were focused among new foreign citizens (mostly migrants), but secondarily to older Greeks.

A perpetual problem continues to be the legal status of migrants in the country (Kapsalis 2019a). Throughout the thirty-year period up to 2018, the share of undocumented migrants in the total population remained very high; in fact, much higher than in almost all European countries receiving migrants. The stock of undocumented migrants numbers approximately at least 300,000 people; and, in general, always corresponds to a figure of between 35 and 50 per cent of foreign citizens who might, or would be, entitled to acquire a residence permit. At the peak of the economic crisis (in 2012), the OECD (2018) estimated that, out of a total of 1.2m foreign citizens in Greece, those staying with illegal status exceeded 500,000, i.e. they were as numerous as were estimated for Italy, a country with a much larger population (both migrant and indigenous).

Table 2 Migrant population with residence permits in Greece by country of origin (2017)

Country of origin	Number of residence permits	Percentage of all residence permits
Albania	353,826	67.56
Georgia	18,865	3.60
Ukraine	18,447	3.52
Pakistan	16,853	3.22
Russia	14,486	2.77
India	13,580	2.60
Egypt	11,586	2.21
Philippines	9,949	1.90
Moldova	7,958	1.52
China	7,226	1.38
Bangladesh	7,175	1.37
Armenia	6,043	1.15
Syria	5,467	1.04
Serbia	2,988	0.57
USA	2,553	0.49
Other countries	26,713	5.10
<b>Total</b>	<b>523,715</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Migration Information System, Ministry of Immigration Policy, April 2018.

At the end of 2018, out of a total of 543,973 valid residence permits, a small share concerned employment and the permits which refer to this either indirectly or initially (and which are, mainly, long-term). Table 3 shows that the largest share of permits, more than 40 per cent of the total, concerns all aspects of family reunification. Without such a possibility, the percentage of unofficial stayers would be overwhelmingly higher (Kapsalis 2019a).

Table 3 Residence permits by type and background (December 2018)

Type of permit	Total
Residence permit of indefinite term	16,243
Residence permit for family reunification	11,944
Humanitarian reasons	1,421
Independent residence rights	1,665
Ten-year long residence permit	61,252
Ten-year term	69,304
Second generation	24,248
Exceptional reasons	25,135
Investor: permanent residence	6,892
Long-term EU resident	28,148
Special purpose workers	2,798
Work	68,016
Family member*	293,325
Economically independent person	1,598
<b>Total</b>	<b>543,973</b>

Note: \* Family member of Greek citizen, EU citizen or permanent resident.

Source: Migration Information System, Ministry of Immigration Policy, December 2019.

## 2. The refugee crisis since 2015

All the relevant literature (for example Xipolitas 2018; Tramountanis 2017) establishes that the current influx of migration into Greece is indeed unprecedented in its intensity. Data from the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) show that, during the period from 2007 to 2015, irregular entrants to the European Union reached 3m people, of which 58.4 per cent (1.8m) had entered through Greece. In the period 2015-2018 alone, the number of foreign nationals reaching European territory was almost 2m of whom up to 56 per cent (1.2m) had entered via Greece (UNHCR 2019b).

According to the main scenario in demographics forecasts (Kotzamanis and Karkouli 2016), the impact of recent immigration in the medium term will not exceed 100,000 people and this is expected to have a balanced and smooth dispersion across the territory of the country. It is worth reminding ourselves at this point that, while migrants during the two decades before 2015 have settled in the country as permanent residents, most of the newcomers since then have already left Greece. Within a volume of 11.2m permanent foreign residents in Greece since the mid-1990s, tens of thousands of new arrivals cannot be considered to constitute a phenomenon deserving of the term 'crisis'.

### 2.1 Background

Greece faced an unprecedented stream of humanitarian inflows between January 2015 and February 2016 with the arrival of more than 950,000 people. Most were passing

through Greece on their way to elsewhere in Europe and, so far, less than 1 per cent of them have requested asylum in Greece.

The whole two-year period between 2015 and 2016 nevertheless marked a radical change in the phenomenon of immigration in Greece which served to push Greek reception facilities and hospitality to their limits. In particular, since North Macedonia sealed its border in 2016, closing the so-called western Balkan Route, a significant number of people (around 65,000) have been trapped within Greece, hoping for European Union member states to implement their commitments under the Relocation Programme.

Despite the efforts of the authorities, the timely delivery of international protection status, as well as the integration of those who have been granted recognition in the host community, still presents a huge challenge even after the significant management improvements that have been made. The safeguarding of applicants for international protection and the integration of the beneficiaries of such status is recognised as a key priority and challenge for the Greek state both because of its scale and the distinct qualitative characteristics of the particular population (see further in Section 2.3).

### **The EU-Turkey Statement**

One of the measures that the European Commission formulated in order to manage and control mixed migration flows across the EU was the statement it drew up with Turkey. On 18 March 2016, the European Council and Turkey essentially reached a joint agreement aimed at stopping the flow of irregular migration via Turkey to Europe. According to the EU-Turkey Statement, all new irregular migrants and asylum seekers arriving from Turkey to the Greek islands, and whose applications for asylum had been declared inadmissible, should be returned to Turkey which the Statement recognised as a safe third country for refugees. Moreover, the Statement envisages that all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands from 18 March 2016 would be returned to Turkey; and that, for each Syrian returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another would be resettled in the EU.

## **2.2 Arrival and asylum applications**

Numbers have always played a significant role in the civic debate regarding immigration and the number of refugees. In this context, it seems crucial to examine the situation that Greece was called upon to deal with in the light of available comparative data. This can help to decipher aspects of immigration and people seeking refuge as well as contribute to the interpretation of these processes.

In 2015, the number of refugees was the largest that Europe has experienced since the Yugoslav wars of the mid-1990s. Greece had already dealt with similar substantial issues of migration at this time but, in certain circumstances, the current situation is completely different in terms of both the qualitative characteristics of migrants and the intensity. Indeed, the large-scale arrival of refugees from Syria substantially changed both Greek and international public opinion regarding the nature of migration.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2016), monthly arrivals of immigrants and refugees in Greece over the three-year period between January 2015 and December 2017 reached a peak in October 2015, with 212,168 arrivals. During 2014-2018, over 1.1m people were recorded as arriving in the country via the territorial waters of the Aegean, while another 36,000 entered by land. Undoubtedly, it is a tragedy that 1,878 people lost their lives, or are still missing, during their dangerous journey to Greek territory in this five-year period alone.

With regard to the corresponding statistics for 2019, arrivals started to pick up again, reaching nearly 75,000 of whom some 60,000 arrived by sea (almost doubling the 2018 figure) with the remaining 15,000 coming by land (UNHCR 2020a). Furthermore, the number of total arrivals in the first three months of 2020 reached almost ten thousand.

Table 4 Type of arrivals by year

Years	Sea arrivals	Land arrivals	Total number of arrivals	Dead and missing
2020 Q1	7,569	2,072	9,641	
2019	59,726	14,887	74,613	70
2018	32,494	18,014	50,508	174
2017	29,718	6,592	36,310	59
2016	173,450	3,784	177,234	441
2015	856,723	4,907	861,630	799
2014	41,038	2,280	22,401	405

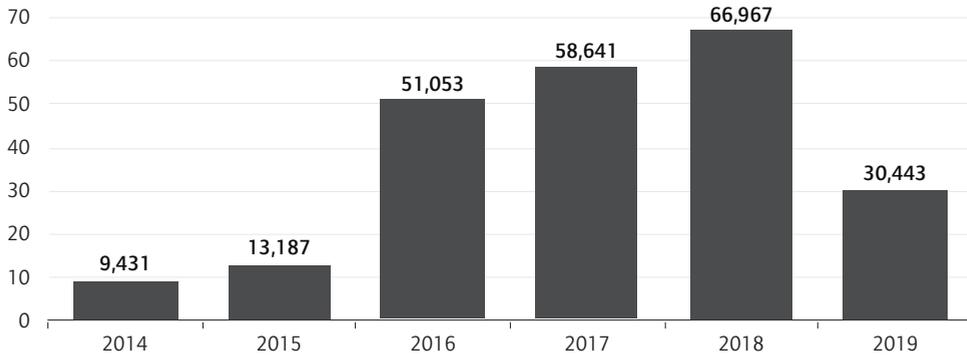
Source: UNHCR.

### Data analysis on asylum and relocation applications

According to UNHCR (2020a) figures, following the closure of the western Balkan route and the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, some 118,000 asylum seekers and refugees continue to be stranded in Greece, 76,000 on the mainland and 42,000 on the islands, as of February 2020. Regarding the statistics provided by the Greek Asylum Service, it is quite obvious that, since the announcement of the Statement, asylum seekers have been trapped in limbo in particular hotspots within the Greek islands and so have to request asylum as this seems to be their only option of remaining on European soil and gaining legal status. Consequently, the rise in asylum applications since 2016 seems quite logical, as Figure 1 shows (Greek Asylum Service 2019).

The number of asylum applications does not, however, precisely depict the situation in Greece regarding trapped asylum seekers. While there has been an increase in asylum requests, this does not mean that people who requested asylum in previous years are still in the country. In accordance with the Relocation Programme and the Dublin Regulation procedures (concerning family reunification), those affected have to apply for asylum and are then able to submit the relevant documentation that will offer the right to be included in Dublin or Relocation procedures.

Figure 1 Asylum applications in Greece (2014-2019) (in thousands)



Source: Greek Asylum Service.

Given the harsh economic situation in Greece over the last decade, it is certainly not the destination of choice for refugees. This can be seen in the thousands of applications that asylum seekers made under the Relocation Programme, which offered relocation to various European countries to some 66,400 asylum seekers. As Table 5 shows, however, by 25 March 2018, when the Programme reached its end,<sup>2</sup> just 22,822 had actually been relocated. Most requests that had been made were met with acceptances, but the number of the former being well within the Programme’s superficial capacity demonstrates, among others, the bureaucratic and time-consuming procedures it entailed as well as the political constraints that member states put up in the effort to avoid receiving refugees (Greek Asylum Service 2018).

Table 5 Relocation procedures, by gender (up to 25 March 2018)

Men	14,052
Women	10,859
Total requests	24,911
Total acceptances	22,822

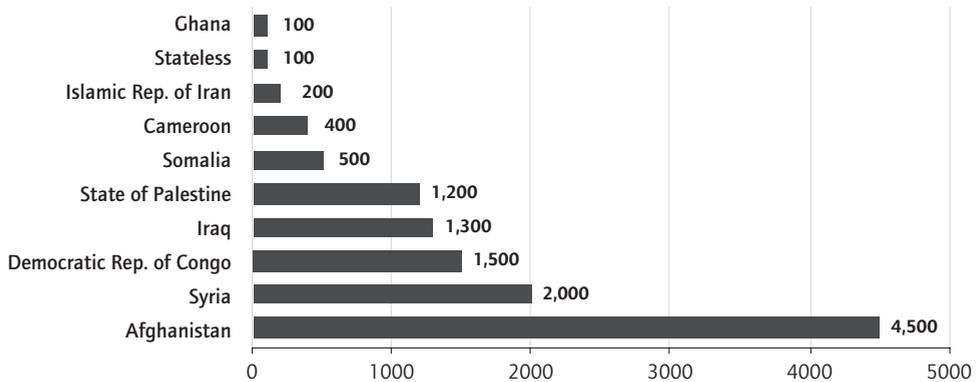
Source: Greek Asylum Service.

### 2.3 Main characteristics of asylum seekers

The main countries of origin for asylum seekers arriving on the Greek islands between January and June 2019 are shown in Figure 2, based on UNHCR data. This highlights the role of wars, conflicts, disasters and political instability in prompting refugee numbers.

2. The Relocation Programme, set up in September 2015 by Council Decisions (EU) 2015/1523 and 2015/1601, was designed as an emergency measure to alleviate pressure on Italy and Greece. In accordance with these Decisions, the Relocation Programme was officially ceased at the end of September 2017, but the Relocation Unit continued operations on pending cases until the end of 2017.

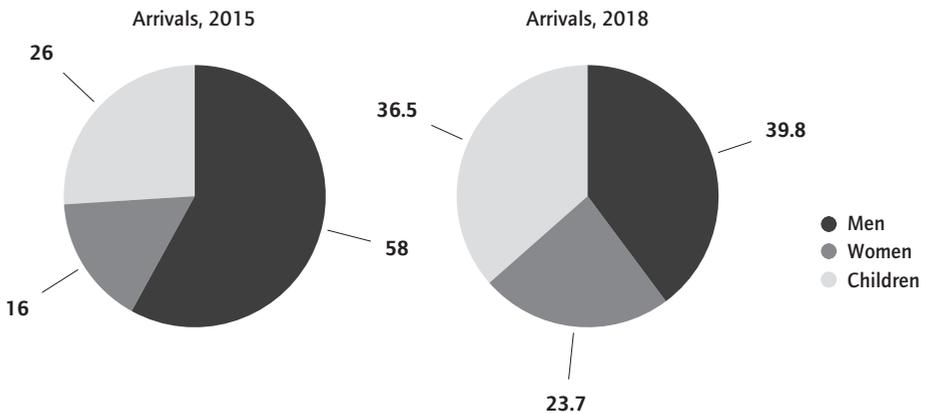
Figure 2 Arrivals in Greece by sea, by country of origin (January-June 2019)



Source: UNHCR.

In current years, there have been variations in the gender and age characteristics of such movements of people. In 2015, 58 per cent of those entering Greece were adult men, while 16 per cent were women and 26 per cent children; but, by June 2018, the demographics had shifted to 40 per cent men, 24 per cent women and 36 per cent children, as Figure 3 shows.

Figure 3 Refugee arrivals in Greece by gender and age (2015 and 2018)



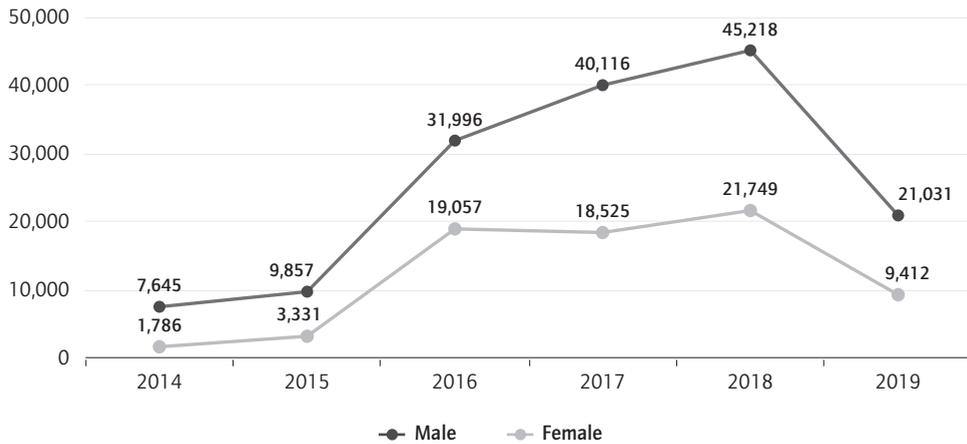
Source: UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM.

Figure 4 shows the trends in asylum applications by gender. It is important to highlight the rising number of women and children travelling in groups formed of extended family or kin, or groups of friends of different sizes. According to one source, one in ten refugee women travelling through Europe is pregnant (Huffington Post 2016).

The increase in the number of women travelling to Europe alone or with children in extremely dangerous conditions and with uncertain outcomes is a particular response to the continued presence of conflicts and instability in countries of origin. It is also,

however, a consequence of trends in the asylum practices of European countries. The Women’s Refugee Commission (NGO) states that, such are the problems with family reunification procedures in Europe, women are deciding to risk their lives making dangerous and costly journeys rather than use complex and lengthy processes directly from their own country. Moreover, we should mention that there is ample evidence from the outset of this unprecedented human mobility that women on the move – and to a lesser extent, but of paramount importance, children – have been at risk of, and have experienced, severe and widespread forms of sexual violence and harassment as they travel (Women’s Refugee Commission 2020).

Figure 4 Asylum applications in Greece by gender (2014-2019)



Source: Greek Asylum Service.

### Unaccompanied and separated children

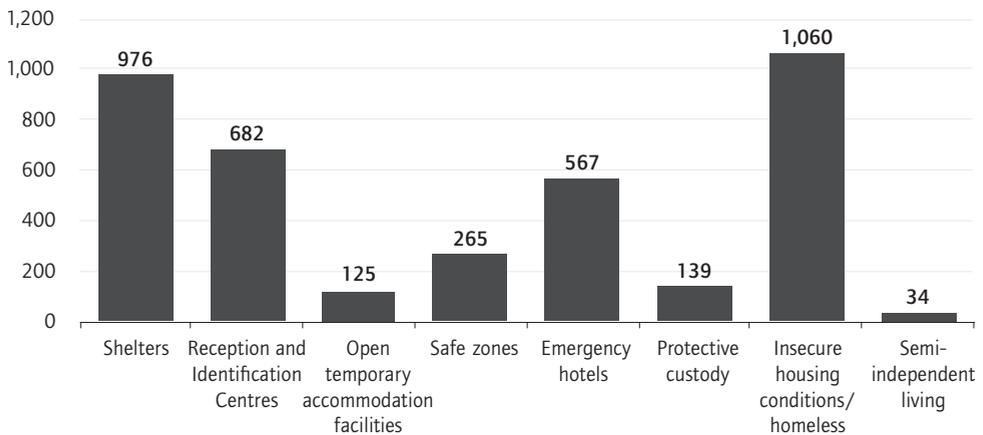
Approximately one-third of those seeking protection are children, including a growing number of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) who have arrived in Greece without a parent or guardian and who are extremely vulnerable to various forms of abuse and exploitation. More specifically, according to official figures, it is estimated that unaccompanied and separated children amount to 5.5 per cent of the total migrant and refugee population currently residing in Greece. Statistical data provided by UNHCR show that, between January and June 2018, over 5,000 children arrived in Greece by sea, including 636 (13 per cent) classed as UASC. Although the overall arrival of children in Europe decreased by 37 per cent in the first half of 2018, children arriving in Greece increased by more than two-thirds compared to the first half of 2017 (when it stood at over 3,000). The arrival of numbers of unaccompanied and separated children also increased by 57 per cent on the first half of 2017. Most of the children, including those unaccompanied and separated, arriving in Greece by sea in this period were from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

According to official data provided by the National Centre for Social Solidarity, there are currently 3,868 unaccompanied and separated children in total residing in Greece,

out of which 94 per cent are boys and just six per cent girls. Some 6.6 per cent are under 14 years old.

As is often the case, a large number of unaccompanied and separated children remain in detention facilities in Reception and Identification Centres and/or are in protective custody in the absence of suitable accommodation facilities. This is inconsistent with the European Parliament's 2013/33/EU Directive of 26 June 2013 on common rules for the reception of applicants for international protection, in which unaccompanied minors are to be subject to detention only as a last resort and for as short a time as possible. At the same time, the number of minors who are reported to be living in precarious conditions, and even in conditions of homelessness, is remarkable. Furthermore, temporary forms of hospitality, such as safe zones and emergency hotels, tend to end up being permanent, as highlighted in Figure 5 (National Centre for Social Solidarity 2019).

Figure 5 Reported place of stay for unaccompanied and separated children (as at 30 July 2019)



Source: Greek Asylum Service.

### 3. Reception, registration and the management of the asylum process

#### 3.1 Reception

The majority of reception capacity remains within hotspots for asylum seekers established on the Greek islands under the legal form of Reception and Identification Centres (RIC). Their functioning is regulated by Law 4375/2016, which was developed out of the EU-Turkey Statement which foresees a fast-track asylum procedure for those entering Greece irregularly via the islands. All new arrivals are transferred to the respective RIC, where they are subject to a three-day 'restriction of freedom within the premises of the centre,' which can be extended for a maximum period of

25 days, and which is revoked once registration is completed. Applicants considered to be vulnerable, including unaccompanied children and single parent families, or applicants falling within the scope of the family provisions of the Dublin Regulation, are excluded from the fast-track border procedure and are transferred to the mainland where they enter the regular procedure.

The islands-based asylum procedure might have been envisaged as fast-track but, in practice, it lasts for significantly longer periods during which applicants are obliged to remain where they are. For example, in December 2017, the average waiting time for a first instance decision, i.e. between the registration of the intention to apply for asylum up to the issue of that decision, was 83 days. This time is prolonged where appeals and judicial review procedures are initiated (Greek Council for Refugees 2018).

Currently, the Greek state operates five hotspots that are located in the eastern Aegean on the islands of Chios, Kos, Leros, Lesvos and Samos. The breakdown of the data by RIC presented in Table 6 demonstrates a major shortcoming in terms of how reception needs are addressed. The situation has been dramatically escalating in the last eighteen months, with occupancy rates far above capacity: for the largest one in Lesvos by almost seven-fold and, for Samos, by almost twelve.

In the context of the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, overcrowded reception centres with low sanitary standards and limited health care provision pose a life-threatening emergency and present a looming humanitarian catastrophe.

Table 6 Reception and Identification Centres (RIC) for asylum seekers in Greece

Island/RIC	Start of operation	Capacity	Occupancy October 2018	Occupancy March 2020
Lesbos	October 2015	2,757	7,352	19,271
Chios	February 2016	1,014	2,361	5,363
Samos	March 2016	648	4,185	7,291
Leros	March 2016	860	718	2,117
Kos	June 2016	816	1,114	2,970
<b>Total</b>		<b>6,095</b>	<b>15,730</b>	<b>37,012</b>

Source: National Coordination Centre for Border Control, Immigration and Asylum. Situation as of 31 December 2018: <https://bit.ly/2N1znbX>; and, as of March 2020: <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/8275/apotyposi-tis-ethnikis-ikonas-katastasis-gia-to-prosfygiko-metanastefitiko-zitima-tin-22-3-2020/>

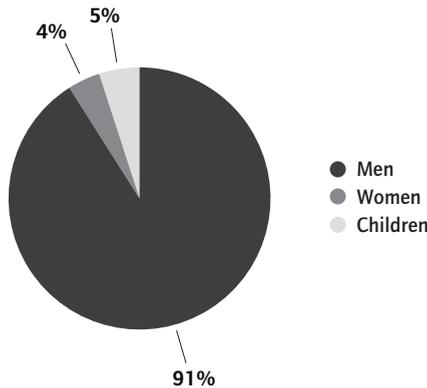
People entering Greece across the River Evros are subject to reception and identification procedures at the RIC in Fylakio, located in the region of Orestiada. After the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement, the number of newcomers crossing into the region of Evros between 2016 and 2018 was greater than the 28,390 new arrivals registered there. For example, about 2,900 people arrived in Evros in April 2018, mostly families from Syria and Iraq. This equates to about one-half of the estimated number of arrivals in Evros during the whole of 2017. According to data collected by UNHCR, land arrivals in April 2018 exceeded arrivals by sea (UNHCR 2019b).

Delays in transfers to the mainland originate in the lack of accommodation for vulnerable people. For example, as of June 2018 some 2,700 people, whose geographical restrictions had been lifted by the authorities, remain on the islands due to limited accommodation capacity. Moreover, the extremely precarious living conditions within the Greek hotspots (overpopulation, lack of protected spaces for children and single women, prolonged detention, etc.) increases the risks of the exploitation of vulnerable groups while they are waiting for their legal status to be processed and/or their transfers to other locations to be put in place. Children, especially those who are unaccompanied and separated, represent the largest vulnerable group on the Greek islands and in the Evros region due to these protection gaps that affect both them and women (Greek National Commission for Human Rights 2018).

### 3.2 Returns from Greece to Turkey

We can examine the numbers of returns to Turkey made within the context of the two main provisions of the EU-Turkey Statement. The Greek Ministry of Citizen Protection stresses that, between April 2016 and June 2019, the total number of returns from Greece to Turkey were 1,885, the distribution of whom is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6 Total returns to Turkey under the EU-Turkey Statement (as of June 2019)



Source: UNHCR

Most of the people who had been returned under this scheme had come from Pakistan (38 per cent of the total). Syrians constitute 18 per cent of returnees, followed by Algerians, Afghans and Bangladeshis. In total, 347 Syrians had been returned to Turkey as of June 2019 (UNHCR 2019b).

### 3.3 First instance decisions on asylum applications

International protection, according to the law, includes those with refugee status (i.e. those who have been granted asylum) and those with subsidiary protection status, commonly referred to together as ‘international protection’, which means that a person

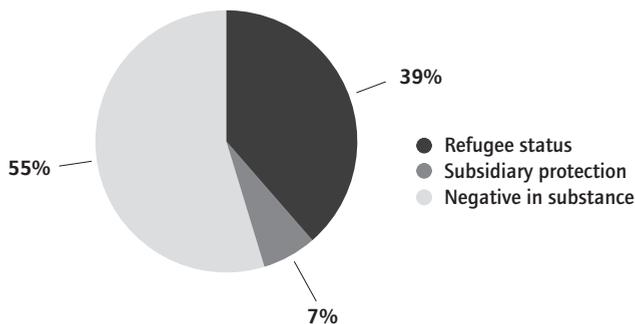
enjoys the protection of the international community in the safeguarding of his or her fundamental human rights. The requirements for granting asylum are based on the Geneva Convention of 1951, relating to the status of refugees, while subsidiary protection status is granted to people who are in danger of serious harm in their country of origin.

In order to understand what asylum applications mean in reality, we have to pay attention to the chaotic European regulatory framework. The Dublin Regulation states that the first country of entry is responsible for examining the asylum claims of people looking for international protection in the EU. At the same time, most refugees are aiming to claim protection not in Greece but in other member states and, in order to prevent being sent back at a later stage, avoid making asylum claims there. Even though Germany and some other member states have suspended the implementation of the Dublin Regulation, the situation remains chaotic: the Greek authorities have been simply overburdened while the European solidarity mechanism for the redistribution of asylum seekers remains non-functional. Consequently, the actual numbers of asylum applications need to be interpreted with caution.

Data on decisions on asylum applications are available at two levels: namely, first instance decisions; and final decisions taken following appeal or review.

Between 2013 and 2019, almost 93,887 first instance decisions on asylum applications were made in Greece and a further 51,023 appeals were submitted by applicants. First instance decisions resulted in 36,224 persons being granted protection status while a further 6,260 received subsidiary protection. Figure 7 shows the distribution of substantive decisions in terms of shares of the total number of applications. Negative first instance decisions accounted for more than 51,000 cases, i.e. 55 per cent of total applications. Countries of origin with the highest recognition rates include Syria, Yemen and Palestine (up to 97 per cent), followed by those made stateless, Eritrea and Somalia where the recognition rate was up to 88 per cent. There then followed Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan and Iran, reaching an average recognition rate close to 66 per cent (Greek Asylum Service 2018).

Figure 7 First instance decisions on asylum applications (2013-2019)



Source: Greek Asylum Service.

## 4. Labour market inclusion

### 4.1 Barriers to labour market access

Before discussing the labour market integration of asylum seekers and refugees, it must be stressed that, for those trapped in overcrowded reception centres under life-threatening conditions, this is a very distant, if not impossible, perspective.

There is also a paradox emerging out of the economic crisis with, on the one hand, the related stress on the labour market and, on the other, legislative initiatives to attribute legal status to irregular immigrants and to manage asylum procedures more effectively. This paradox may be observed in the trends toward a greater degree of convergence between the employment relationships of Greek workers with those of immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees than had been the case in the past. However, this trend is not necessarily due to any improvement in the working conditions of foreign workers, more to the deterioration of labour rights and a worsening of the working conditions of Greek citizens arising from liberalisation and the flexibilisation of the labour market. As a result, there has been a kind of convergence between common labour law and immigration law in a downwards spiral (Kapsalis 2018c).

According to national legislation (Article 71 of Law 4375/2016 and Article 15 of Law 4540/2018), asylum seekers have automatic access to the labour market and to the possibility of finding employment or work at an early stage, i.e. as soon as they have formally requested asylum and received an asylum seeker card (Petracou *et al.* 2018). However, in practice, few beneficiaries and applicants for international protection are able to access the labour market as a result of bureaucratic obstacles (Skleparis 2018). Even though certain regulations on the asylum seeker card have recently been repealed, further obstacles remain. The effects of economic crisis and high unemployment rates, combined with the unresolved issues of previous years and the settlement of new refugees, have raised specific barriers that obstruct the practical integration of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers into the labour market.

The legal obstacles include the prolonged absence of changes to the legal framework that regulate the residence and work of thousands of immigrants. As a result, these people are at an *impasse* and in a position of insecurity as regards their employment and legal status (Kapsalis 2018a). Indeed, the process of issuing and renewing residence permits has been criticised for the high fees required, the income criteria and the number of required stamps that led to many non-renewals (Bagavos *et al.* 2019; Kapsalis 2018b).

Furthermore, administrative delays during applications for residence permits have left many immigrants with temporary protection against deportation but, over an extended period, without the right to access the labour market legally. Also, there have been problems with the initial grant of work permits to asylum seekers (Bagavos *et al.* 2019). This has led them to turn to undeclared work in order to survive, which is having a significant impact on the Greek insurance funds (Kapsalis 2018a). In addition, NGOs emphasise that long delays in the application process for international protection are

driving applicants towards undeclared work since pre-registered asylum seekers are denied the right to work (Bagavos *et al.* 2019).

In this already difficult situation, further administrative problems have caused added problems in connection with the provision of a social security number (AMKA) and tax number (VAT). This creates difficulties regarding the right of asylum seekers to register with the Hellenic Manpower Employment Organisation (OAED). Furthermore, beneficiaries or applicants of international protection face additional hardships in connection with opening bank accounts, including those dedicated to the payment of salary. The four major banks in Greece have repeatedly refused to open bank accounts for asylum seekers, even in cases where an employer has certified the recruitment.

The liberal-conservative government that entered office in 2019 (led by New Democracy – ND) revoked the decree on the assignment of AMKA to foreign citizens (Press Project 2019) which had made it easier for immigrants, applicants for international protection and unaccompanied refugees to receive AMKA. The aforementioned decree was one of the main facilitators in integration of all those people into Greek society by granting them access to a range of rights regarding health, education and employment.

A 2019 decision by the new Minister of Labour (42862/2019) on the provision of AMKA encompassed a differentiated approach for European citizens, irregular immigrants from other countries and recognised refugees for international protection. Now, the only opportunity for irregular immigrants to receive an AMKA is if they work in the agricultural economy or if deportation has been deferred and they have a work permit. Minors from third countries born to irregular immigrants in Greece are not entitled to AMKA under this Ministerial decision. However, all recognised refugees with international protection normally receive AMKA. It seems that, under the new approach, the provision of AMKA in Greece, especially for irregular migrants, is directly linked to employment/work or the development of business activities.

At the same time, the Greek Ombudsman (2019) has highlighted that there is a problem in Citizen Service Centres (in Greek: KEPs) with incorrect translations into the Greek language of applicants' personal data. This has created administrative problems as well as duplicate registrations within the AMKA system. If refugees, asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors do not have the required documents translated into Greek, then, in some cases, KEPs have refused to grant them AMKA. This problem may worsen, not only as a result of the continued non-activation of the Health Care Card for Foreigners (in Greek: KYPA – prescribed in law three years ago but not implemented), but also by the failure to grant AMKA which, up to now, has been the only way to ensure access to free health care services (Greek Ombudsman 2019).

In addition, amendments introduced under a new law adopted at the end of 2019 (Law 4636/2019) seeking to overhaul the asylum system promote a rather complicated procedure. Upon the filing of an application for asylum, entitlement to employment is granted but only after a delay of six months under the normal procedure and twenty days in the accelerated one. According to the UNHCR, this delay may lead to a longer duration of the *de facto* ban on working and thus raise doubts as to whether applicants

can have effective access to the labour market, while it will also result in people turning to undeclared work, thereby manifesting labour exploitation (UNCHR 2019a).

Apart from the legal barriers, an important factor regarding labour market integration is knowledge of Greek; this is considered by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers themselves to be the main obstacle.

Furthermore, in a survey by the NGO SolidarityNow, a large percentage (70 per cent) of specifically Syrian refugees said that they do not have documents proving their level of qualifications. This makes it difficult for them to integrate quickly into the labour market and thus they are heavily dependent on the financial and humanitarian aid provided by NGOs (SolidarityNow 2017).

The government emphasises that a lack of knowledge of the skills, work and educational profile of foreign citizens will not allow targeted employment programmes to be implemented (Bagavos *et al.* 2019). Consequently, it is not possible for them to be linked to occupations that meet the needs of the market and to positions that may be more specialised than the native workforce is able to meet. Alternative paths to the validation of skills and the recognition of qualifications are of particular importance for asylum seekers and refugees especially where there is a lack of paperwork proving their education and qualifications (Greek Ombudsman 2013).

In addition, discrimination based on nationality in the selection, access and pursuit of a particular professional occupation has been the subject of many reports examined by the Ombudsman and the REACT housing and legal support programme. The findings indicate that many migrant women have limited opportunities to benefit from policies and programmes specifically aimed at integrating them into the labour market, via vocational training and education, since such policies and programmes were *ad hoc* and fragmented (Bagavos *et al.* 2019). Moreover, nationality represents an obstacle in terms of access to new opportunities, as does the employment of many migrant women in sectors of the economy marked by informality, such as care services and domestic work. It should be noted that there is a difference in the protections afforded by social and labour rights between female migrants working in the informal economy and those working in the formal sector (Kapsalis 2018a). Indeed, female immigrants are frequently treated in an institutional context as dependent family members rather than as autonomous and active actors.

What is clear is that the economic crisis has exacerbated the problems associated with the informal employment of immigrants. Academic research findings highlight that ‘Residence permit requirements and procedures and labour rights issues are the biggest obstacles to overcome’ (Bagavos *et al.* 2019). Ultimately, due to the ongoing economic crisis in Greece and the lack of assistance programmes for job seekers, the integration of foreign citizens, in particular refugees and asylum seekers, is also hampered by them being likely to want to relocate to another European country and not to integrate into the labour market of Greece, which is considered by many to be a transit country.

## 4.2 Labour market participation rates

The active participation of applicants for international protection in the labour market as well as in the local community is extremely crucial in ensuring both social integration in the host country and the ability to function as autonomous and productive citizens. However, access to the official labour market in Greece, at both national and local levels, is seriously compromised by the economic, legal and bureaucratic obstacles set out above, all of which may prevent integration in host countries' labour markets and drive foreign citizens into undeclared work. In practice, it is mostly the financial circumstances that shape the labour market outcomes of both foreign- and native-born workers (OECD 2018).

It is likely that the increased numbers of refugees during the 2014-2018 period had only a minor impact on labour market participation on the whole. However, given the lack of statistical data regarding access to the labour market among refugees and applicants for international protection, it is difficult to examine the situation in Greece in practice.

Furthermore, in the very first phase, people were acting on the basis of their high expectations of moving elsewhere within Europe and, thus, they did not seek employment in Greece amidst the hope of a quick departure from Greek territory. Despite the lower prospects for mobility that has followed the closure of the western Balkans route and the implementation of the EU-Turkey statement, this new situation has not been accompanied by any changes with respect to the labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers: the vast majority remain out of any kind of employment and without a significant upwards trend in integration.

In the light of this unsustainable situation, we assume that: a) expectations of moving elsewhere in Europe still remain, either by regular or irregular means; b) the lack of language support is a major barrier; and c) national policies on integration, especially regarding access to the labour market, are still at an embryonic stage (Papastergiou and Takou 2019).

Before the economic crisis, the employment rates of the immigrant population in Greece stood at very high levels (see Table 7), higher even than those of natives. Additionally, based on data from the 2001 statistical census regarding salaried employment, it seems that the employment rate of immigrants reached 89 per cent while among Greeks it stood at just 62.8 per cent (Kapsalis 2019a).

In the context of the economic downturn and the financial and economic crisis, the access of foreign citizens to the labour market has deteriorated significantly. In particular, during the period 2008-2018, unlike for native workers, the percentage of employed migrants decreased from 68.9 per cent in 2008 to 46.1 per cent in 2013, before recovering a little by 2018 to 54.1 per cent. In the meantime, the proportion of migrants who were employers or self-employed increased, over the same timeframe, from 7.1 per cent to 11.2 per cent in 2015 before falling back to 9.3 per cent in 2018. These trends indicate that many immigrants have been turning to entrepreneurial activity in order to address the impact of unemployment and income loss.

Table 7 Trends in the employment participation rate of foreign citizens in Greece (2008-2018)

Year	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009	2008
	54.1%	54.5%	54.0%	52.5%	50.9%	46.1%	49.5%	61.0%	64.8%	67.0%	68.9%

Source: Greek Asylum Service.

Migrants are, as a rule, much more widely affected by labour market downturns because of their tendency to be over-represented in cyclical sectors and in specific occupations. Moreover, in the majority of OECD countries, immigrants are more concentrated than native workers in jobs involving routine tasks, which renders them more at risk of job loss as automation progresses (OECD 2018). The majority of immigrant workers are mainly concentrated in just four sectors: construction; manufacturing; private households; and hotels and restaurants. Throughout the 1990-2010 period, one in two immigrant men was employed in construction and two in ten in manufacturing; whereas women, in the exact same respective proportions, were employed in private households and manufacturing. The strong degree of concentration in these sectors is only different in the case of young women descended from immigrants and who have completed basic education in Greece. In this case, 27 per cent are employed in hotels and restaurants and only 20 per cent as domestic help in private households (Kapsalis 2019a).

### Unemployment

It is crucial to stress at the outset here that the data refer to official unemployed foreign citizens, meaning that unregistered or undocumented people are not encompassed by them.

As can be easily noted from the figures presented in Table 8, foreign citizens tend to have a higher rate of unemployment than native workers. It is also worth mentioning that, as is captured by the data, we can notice that there has been a gradual reduction in unemployment among all categories since 2013. As far as the picture of unemployment rates during the economic and financial downturn is concerned, it is clearly the case that the access to employment of foreign citizens was dramatically affected. In practice, the percentage of unemployed immigrants (i.e. from third countries outside the EU) soared from 6.4 per cent in 2008 to 38.6 per cent in 2013, and still stood at 25.4 per cent in 2018.

Table 8 Unemployment rates by nationality (2008-2018, in per cent)

Citizenship	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009	2008
Greek	18.60	20.80	22.70	24.10	26.00	26.30	22.90	16.30	11.70	8.90	7.40
non-EU	25.40	25.70	28.10	29.60	33.00	38.60	32.80	18.10	14.40	9.90	6.40
EU	22.80	23.40	24.10	21.70	28.50	34.50	22.90	12.60	12.00	9.90	6.40

Source: UNHCR.

In particular, the employment status of immigrants is less stable and, as a consequence, people tend to enjoy less seniority which makes them more likely to be laid-off. There is also some, albeit limited, evidence of employers internationally selectively firing immigrants first (Arai and Vilhelmsson 2003; OECD 2009). As a result, immigrant unemployment rates grew much faster during the economic crisis and financial downturn than those of native populations, particularly in those countries most affected by it, such as Greece (OECD 2018).

## **5. Social integration**

### **5.1 Social integration measures**

Greece's common national policy provides for equal treatment concerning rights and procedures both for Greek citizens and for legal residents of foreign citizens. The principle of equal treatment concerning rights therefore applies to those who are legal immigrants as well as those who are recognised as in need of international protection regarding access to the labour market, housing, education and other social services and benefits.

#### **Housing – ESTIA programme**

Under the influence of EU policies, the main form of refugee housing implemented in Greece was camps which in no way guarantee the protection of human rights (Kourachanis 2019). The Ministry of Migration Policy closed the camps and moved refugees into social housing; this was achieved through the implementation of the ESTIA Programme (Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation) whose purpose was to improve living conditions and promote social integration for asylum seekers.

At the end of March 2020, the ESTIA accommodation programme (UNHCR 2020b) had created 25,533 places in total. Actual capacity was 22,593, while the numbers accommodated stood at 21,983, reflecting an occupancy rate above 97 per cent. Accommodation is in 4,600 apartments and buildings in 14 cities and seven islands, with 54 per cent of the places being in Athens and a further 39 per cent in the rest of the mainland (and seven per cent on the islands). Meanwhile, the ESTIA cash assistance scheme aimed to reach 80,000 people during 2019. Under its provisions, refugees and asylum seekers receive a pre-defined monthly cash grant through a dedicated cash card. This allows them to meet their basic needs as they choose, with a degree of dignity, while supporting the local economy.

In 2017 and 2018, the ESTIA programme was funded by the European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid fund. In 2018, €167.5m was made available for Greece, an increase on the 2017 budget of €139m (UNCHR 2019b). In 2019, a further step-up in funding to £190m was provided under the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.

## Labour market – OAED

A prominent example of integration in the labour market is the registration procedure with the Hellenic Manpower Employment Organisation (OAED) for foreign citizens (including migrants, refugees and the beneficiaries of subsidiary/humanitarian protection) legally residing in the country. This follows the same procedure as for Greek citizens regarding employment and covers the right of legally-resident foreign citizens to access free public education (Skleparis 2018). Legally-resident foreign citizens thus enjoy access to the labour market on an equal basis to each other and to Greek citizens – especially in relation to dependent employment, unemployment benefits and employment enhancement programmes (Petracou *et al.* 2018).

Good practice from the OAED can be seen within the ‘I\_ReF\_SoS’ project, developed within the framework of the ERASMUS+ Youth Programme, which is aimed at developing an effective reception and social support programme to facilitate the smooth integration of new refugees aged 16-24. The coordinating agency in ‘I\_ReF\_SoS’ – Innovative Response to Facilitate Social Assistance for Young Refugees – is the OAED, while project partners include the Centre for the Development of Educational Policy (KANEP) of the General Confederation of Greek Workers (INE-GSEE); the Ministry of Education of Turkey – the country from which refugees come – and the DEKRA Akademie Training Organisation of Germany – the country of refugees’ potential final settlement (Gerakopoulou and Christakis n.d.).

The central idea behind the project is to take advantage of the time between the arrival of new refugees in their countries of entry up to the time of their final residence in their host countries – time which is still untapped within the official mechanisms of states receiving large-scale refugee populations. Under this project, the OAED is seeking to create a new approach to the vocational training of newcomers, enriched with innovative educational counselling, mentoring, language and intercultural training and career guidance for trainers and trainees. The project has been designed and implemented at pilot level for new refugees who have applied for asylum (Gerakopoulou and Christakis n.d.).

## 5.2 The role of trade unions and the outsourcing of migration-related services to NGOs

### The role of trade unions

The relevant research literature on the attitude of Greek trade unions towards immigration is very limited. In the context of a more comprehensive study of labour relations and policies concerning the Greek immigration experience, however, two general conclusions could be drawn (Kapsalis 2018a).

Firstly, the – presumably – immigrant-friendly attitude of the Greek trade union movement over time has not translated into increased trade union membership by immigrants. Secondly, in the absence of comprehensive and targeted strategic trade

union planning for immigrant workers, there is a significant gap among trade unions regarding the registration and regulation of collective and individual labour relations issues.

The Greek trade unions have shown elements of both resilience and continuity in relation to their historical role in defending workers' rights in connection with the rise in immigration from 2015 onwards. The ideological context on the basis of which they approach the refugee question implies the development of a humanitarian logic, inextricably linked to an authentic tradition of internationalist solidarity that has been prevalent in the Greek case for the last thirty years (Kapsalis 2019b). Despite such an exemplary approach, however, ideological and organisational weaknesses have mounted a block on effective action in the pursuit of this humanitarian logic over this timescale (Kapsalis 2019b). Unlike in many other European countries, the Greek unions have adopted a solidaristic and supportive attitude towards immigrants' rights and claims in the long-term, whether or not in the presence of economic crisis. Even so, there are very few cases since the early 1990s in which unions have been involved in national, sectoral or operational negotiations to address issues specifically related to the employment or residence of immigrants.

One example of this is the GSEE (the General Confederation of Greek Workers) press release on World Refugee Day (20 June 2017) on the issue of practical solidarity and the social integration of refugee-migrant populations in the period after 2014-2015: 'The organised trade union movement was mobilised immediately, offering every possible help. In the eastern Aegean islands, as well as in the rest of Greece, labour centres and unions continue to contribute to the reception, care and hospitality of refugees, utilising every available means but also collectively responding to and condemning public racist and xenophobic practices which have appeared in some areas.' Equally, there are records of action by public sector unions related to the responsiveness of public services towards the management of the administrative requirements posed by the reception and accommodation of displaced people, and particularly in the area of access to public education by refugee children.

### **Outsourcing of migration-related services to NGOs**

One of the key features of state immigration policy concerns the privatisation of the work of the ministries responsible for services, a practice which is rapidly spreading in several environments in the wake of the recent humanitarian migration towards Europe. The term 'privatisation' in the context of migration-related services describes the phenomenon of the state gradually withdrawing from its obligations regarding the management of modern transnational movements and, although a matter of public interest, leaving a significant part of the implementation of policies on the reception and integration of displaced populations to the private sector (Kapsalis 2018a).

Many trade unions in the private and public sectors have pointed to the dangers of engaging any kind of NGOs or individual professionals in 'refugee management'. This cautious attitude of a large part of the Greek trade union movement usually derives from ideological starting points under which social policy generally entails specific

obligations on the part of the state which should not be circumvented by outsourcing, contracting-out or privatisation in general.

A new blend of the commercialisation of solidarity and the professionalisation of humanitarianism has resulted from these trends towards privatising social policy and refugee policies, with the third sector of the economy becoming 'NGO-ised' (Kapsalis 2019). The delegation by the Greek state of responsibilities and functions – even part of them – to third parties, whether they are international organisations or domestic NGOs, leads to small-scale organisations, often with a kinship background in the 'rights' field, suddenly turning into large-scale employers employing hundreds of workers on a permanent basis when the vast majority (95 per cent) of the country's businesses employ fewer than ten employees.

According to recent theoretical work in the field (Kapsalis and Mentinis 2018), employment in many NGOs typically entails a model of labour relations that combines a number of characteristics such as militarised organisation, indeterminate and unpredictable work, extremely short-term or project-based contracts, delayed payrolls, the abolition of the eight-hour day and the limitless extension of hours of work, exorbitant salaries, high-priced missions for meaningless training commitments, nepotism, poor customer relations and opaque recruitment procedures. Furthermore, the phenomenon of 'burn-out' among the workforce of agencies and NGOs may also be observed due to the limited financial resources (Kourachanis 2019).

## 6. Conclusions

The question of the integration of refugees and asylum seekers into today's Greek labour market is raised in exactly the same way as it has been for economic migrants over recent decades: in terms of entrapment and self-regulation. Although the Dublin Treaty has been *de facto* suspended from 2012 with respect to Greece as a result of European Court of Justice cases, compliance with the EU-Turkey Statement has abandoned tens of thousands of asylum seekers in the Greek islands under conditions of geographical immobility and a lack of social freedom.

Asylum seekers obtain the right to work six months after filing their application for refugee status. Up to that point, their employment can only take place in the context of undeclared work, the same as all those who will not be recognised as refugees but who will remain in the country undocumented. In addition, the relocation of those who are recognised as refugees to areas of mainland Greece is hardly ever accompanied by state policies for the recognition of professional skills or vocational training, while NGOs' action at this level is extremely rare and on a very limited scale.

However, whether in the context of undeclared work or not, occupational immobility is the issue that is more or less dominant in respect of all new entrants after 2015. Specifically, opportunities for flexible and undeclared work are limited to sectors such as tourism or the rural economy which are, incidentally, those to which the Greek state is, indirectly, trying to push them. The Greek trade unions as a whole have adopted a

solidaristic and supportive position on the fundamental rights of refugees and asylum seekers but, for reasons of general ideological and organisational weakness, their involvement in the field of social rights protection is not particularly active.

Greek immigration policy remains residual and privatisation is being promoted in the area of 'refugee management'. Many trade unions highlight the dangers of engaging NGOs or individual professionals in the reception and integration of refugees. In the face of increased demands and needs, NGOs themselves are sowing the seeds of poor working relationships with their employees, dominated by insecurity and short-term contracts. On top of that, the phenomenon of 'burn-out' in the workforce is very often the result of the limited financial resources.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that all these factors are contributing to a prescribed course as regards the employment future for the victims of this humanitarian crisis: integration into the labour market will be a strictly personal affair, implemented in a precarious fashion and on the basis of undeclared terms, in particular in dirty, dangerous and demeaning jobs and in a limited number of sectors. This is probably not the result of a failure or insufficiency of Greek immigration policy but rather a reflection of how this policy has tacitly been pursued.

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