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country report

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The migration challenge in Greece

Three years after the EU-Turkey Deal

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Migration has been a way of life for many Greeks for many decades, as in Greece itself. But in 2015 everything changed with the influx of close to one million migrants heading for Western Europe. Greece and Europe were not prepared. Today, the migration pressure persists for hundreds of thousands of people in Africa and the Near and Middle East to seek safety and a better life in the European Union. Is Greece, having just gone through its deepest economic crisis, better prepared for the next wave?

The way it was before

Greeks know a thing or two about migration. Many have left their country to try their luck, in the shipping industry worldwide or to work as “Gastarbeiter” in Germany in the Fifties and Sixties; most recently, half a million out of a population of around ten million Greeks have left their homeland during the financial crisis in search for jobs and a better life elsewhere.

But there were also people arriving in Greece: After the fall of the Iron Curtain hundreds of thousands of Albanians settled here in the Nineties, whereas large numbers of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis arrived until the outbreak of the financial crisis. All provided much needed workforce to the economy and a boost to the ageing and shrinking Greek population (see the demographics [here](#)). But until 2015, no stable, structured and pro-active reception and integration mechanisms were seen necessary or put into force by the state. The only official integration policy ever applied referred to the ethnic Greek citizens of the former Soviet republics who returned to their homeland in the Mid-Nineties. Until 2015, migrants reaching the islands or the land border with Turkey were mostly dealt with ad-hoc measures. The Secretariat of Migration within the Ministry of Interior Affairs was no more than that – a ‘secretariat’ issuing reports. Registration, monitoring and integration processes were, generally speaking, non-existent.

2015: The turning-point

And then the war in Syria happened. The unprecedented arrival on the Greek islands of hundreds of thousands within a period of a few months overwhelmed the country, which was at the peak of its financial crisis. Without the spontaneous outpour of help and solidarity from the Greeks living on the islands, the situation would have been even more chaotic. The Greek government could only act as a “traffic controller”, transferring the arrivals to its northern border, on to the “Balkan route”. This initial reaction relieved the country from the ongoing pressures, but ignored the obligations of Greece deriving from the Dublin regulation, namely the registration and processing of asylum applications, which has to be done by the country of first arrival.

It was before this background and with the massive support of the European and international community that an initial Greek migration and asylum framework was created: A series of laws and presidential decrees were issued in order to harmonize Greek with preexisting European legislation. Under the obligations of the “Memorandum” of the “Troika” in the context of its financial crisis, the Greek government had initially no room to hire staff for dealing with the new challenge. In November 2016, a separate Ministry of Migration Policy was created. At the same time, the Hellenic

Asylum Service (which had been founded only in 2011) underwent a full scale restructuring. Meanwhile, the entry into force of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016 required further organizational adjustments in order for the Greek Asylum system to make the step from theory into practice – a goal not fully achieved until today: The system with the notorious “Hotspots” on the five Greek islands Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Kos and Leros was established, registering arrivals and processing asylum requests, with all its flaws, lengthy procedures and lack of effectiveness still in operation today.

Coming to Europe – and being stuck on an island...

Let's look at a fictional young Afghani man arriving today on one of those five islands, who has just been picked up in international waters between Turkey and Greece by a Frontex ship or the Greek coast guard. After being registered, he will, taking current timelines into account, have to wait for over one year for his first interview to request asylum. Since the camps on the islands are overcrowded, he will have to make do with a makeshift shelter outside the official premises of the Hotspots – along with dozens or hundreds of others, waiting like him for an interview and waiting for an eventual official decision of what will happen to him.

Why are things moving so slowly? Despite many improvements in comparison to 2015, it is not understandable why a first-instance decision on an asylum status takes an unduly long time; even for women and children, who are already treated preferentially. One reason for the delay is the constant lack of trained staff (especially interpreters and medical personnel are in short supply) and the lengthy procedures caused by the country's over-centralized and under-reformed bureaucracy. The communication, coordination and cooperation between the center (the Ministry in Athens) and the periphery (the island municipality, who does not have any competencies regarding the hotspots – and has received no additional budget for handling sanitation and waste for additional thousands of migrants) are deeply flawed.

Money is not the problem

The funding allocated to Greece (more than 500 Mio. EUR, see official data [here](#)) has barely reached the municipalities, raising serious questions the efficiency and priorities set by the government in Athens. Of course there are areas which have significantly improved. In 2018, UNHCR data show that 30,000 people arrived on the islands, down from more than 850,000 in 2015. Also, Frontex and the coast guards of Greece and Turkey have managed significantly to prevent casualties at sea.

On the other hand, merely 1,800 people have been successfully returned to Turkey between April 2016 and November 2018. In 2019, the numbers of monthly returns have even decreased: Every month, around 30 people are returned on average, whereas some 90 new arrivals are registered on average on the islands - every day. Today, approximately 75,000 refugees and migrants are currently staying in all over Greece, 15,000 on the five islands alone, says [UNHCR](#). Children are, where possible, gradually accommodated in reception classes, despite skepticism in some local communities. Theoretically, access to the labor market and social welfare schemes is granted to recognized asylum holders; but because of the weak Greek economy, jobs are hard to find, making most refugees reliable on official financial assistance.

Much more difficult - as mentioned above - are the conditions on the islands: Overcrowding, poor infrastructures and services in combination with uncertainty regarding the application outcome create a fragile situation for those waiting. For the Greek islanders themselves, it is remarkable that given the persistent hardship of the recent economic meltdown, xenophobia has not increased dramatically, protests - on both sides - are only sporadic and no records exist of an increase in criminality related to the new arrivals. But this could all change, should the flow of migrants increase again and the economic situation on the five islands, whose tourist credentials have suffered because of the hotspots, not improve. Especially now that important elections are coming up.

2019 elections: Don't speak the "m"-word

It is election time in Greece: local, regional and European elections will be held on 26 May, and the national parliamentary elections will most likely take place in October. Having this in mind it is astonishing that the migration issue is not a topic in the election campaign. In contrast to many other European countries, where the issue has divided politics as well as the public, Greek politicians barely mention the situation on the islands. There, this will surely backfire in the local and regional elections. But on the mainland, Greeks have, it seems, more pressing matters to worry about. It is remarkable that extreme and populist parties have not managed to exploit the situation. They seem more focused on condemning the Prespes agreement on Northern Macedonia. But the mainstream parties seem even more determined to tiptoe around the issue, even though there seems to be a fundamental difference in the approach of the biggest opposition party, center-right New Democracy, according to all recent polls the most likely winner of the national elections, and the "let-the-refugees-come"-approach of Tsipras' ruling Syriza.

New Democracy has criticized the government for its inefficiency. For its part, it has emphasized its priorities on securing the borders, simplifying and shortening the asylum and appeals procedure, and ensuring an increasing number of returns to Turkey.

However, both New Democracy and Syriza share the same point of view when it comes to the responsibility of other EU members, pointing out the necessity for all the member States to share the burden of the migration challenge. But addressing the challenges ahead, especially those of integrating recognized asylum seekers in Greece itself, is an issue both parties have been avoiding until now. That leaves the five islands and its population alone with a problem that is the responsibility not only of the local level and not only of Greece, but of Europe as a whole.

The road ahead

A change of government this year in Greece will not improve the situation dramatically, unless a series of obstacles such as the endemic deficiencies of the public administration are removed, ideology makes room for pragmatism, and coordination surpasses confrontation. Any future government must know: it takes far-sighted political engagement, an honest communication with the public of what can and cannot, and what needs to be done. Focusing only on border security, the hot topic in discussions now underway among European populists can bring only partial results. In Greece, the democratic parties will need to focus on reforming and accelerating procedures as well as on understanding the following: At least several thousands of refugees are here to stay and therefore serious efforts towards their integration should be made. A spirit of cooperation instead of mistrust should characterize the relationship to the local authorities – and a certain devolution of competencies to the communities would help. Last but not least: In these changing times, it is in its national interest that a new Greek government should be at the forefront of the European discussions on the present and future migration policies of the Union. Only by acquiring a strong voice in Europe can Greece become a key player in finding solutions to this problem, instead of being, as has been the case in the past, itself part of the problem.

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