

Refugee Integration in Mainland Greece: Prospects and Challenges

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This policy brief provides an outline of the prospects for and challenges to integration of international protection beneficiaries and applicants in mainland Greece, based on emerging research findings. It focuses on three policy areas, which are key to social and economic integration: (1) labour market; (2) healthcare and social welfare services; and (3) education and training. Structural factors, such as a shrinking labour market, high unemployment rates and an ongoing restructuring of labour relations, as well as various bureaucratic hurdles hinder labour market access. A generally overwhelmed and underfunded health system, the ongoing curtailment of social welfare provisions, and a number of practical obstacles limit access to healthcare and social welfare services. Despite the significant progress that has been recorded in the area of integration of refugee children in Greek schools, some practical problems still persist, while there are still steps to be taken towards their formal integration in school life. On the other hand, limited progress has been recorded in the area of integration of adult refugees in higher education and vocational training programmes. The brief concludes that apart from objective obstacles, various perceived issues of concern among the public, as well as the living conditions of displaced persons who remain on the islands equally hinder the prospects for refugee integration in mainland Greece.

INTRODUCTION

Greece currently hosts approximately 48,000 displaced persons that entered the country since 2015.¹ About 34,000 are residing in the mainland, and 14,000 on the islands.

Greek asylum law was amended in April 2016 to make the EU-Turkey Statement operable in the country.² The new law (4375/2016) established an exceptional asylum regime on the Greek islands and other border areas. Displaced persons in the country adhere to one of two different international protection procedures depending on whether they arrived prior to or after the EU-Turkey statement came into force. Those who had arrived in Greece before 20 March 2016, fell under the “normal” international protection procedure, and were transferred from the islands to accommodation facilities across the mainland with other displaced people when the statement came into effect.

On the other hand, those who arrived in Greece after the implementation of the Statement fall under the exceptional fast-track procedures of the new asylum law. Only vulnerable groups and persons are exempt from these procedures. According to the new law, all international protection applications are deemed “admissible” or “inadmissible” based on the applicants’ interviews with European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and Greek Asylum Service officers. The Greek authorities’ decision determines whether Turkey can be considered a safe country for the applicants on a case-by-case basis. Those applicants deemed admissible have to remain on the islands until their application procedure is completed. Those deemed inadmissible are given the right to appeal. If the appeal is rejected they are returned to Turkey.

In reality, however, the situation in the country is far more complex. The hardships and systemic flaws faced by those who remain on the islands regularly feature in news reports and have been extensively discussed in NGO policy papers and reports.³ Displaced persons who remain on the islands live in a state of limbo and are excluded from targeted state integration policies. Yet, less information is available regarding the situation of those who reside in the mainland, and fall under the Greek state’s integration strategy. This policy brief provides an outline of the prospects for and challenges to integration of international protection beneficiaries and applicants in mainland Greece. More specifically, it focuses on three policy areas, which are key to social and economic integration: 1) labour market; 2) healthcare and social welfare services; and 3) education and training.

LABOUR MARKET

The Greek state currently faces the major challenges of a shrinking labour market and an ongoing restructuring of labour relations, which hinder, the already problematic, economic integration of legally residing third country nationals (TCNs). In principle, legally residing TCNs enjoy equal access to the labour market as Greek nationals, with a few exceptions (e.g. restricted access to public sector jobs). In practice, however, legally residing TCNs are still mainly employed in low-skilled and high-precariousness jobs, while they also face large percentages of unemployment. Besides the nominal right to labour market access, legally residing TCNs receive virtually no additional support to get oriented, trained or recognised in their field of work, which was the case even before the financial crisis. More than eight years into the financial crisis, the majority of legally

¹ Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/61158t>.

² For more information on Greece’s response to the “refugee crisis” see Skleparis, D. and Armakolas, I. (2016) “The refugee crisis and the role of NGOs, civil society, and media in Greece” in Phillips, D. L. (ed.) *Balkan Human Corridor: Essays on the Refugee and Migrant Crisis from Scholars and Opinion Leaders in Southeast Europe*. New York: Institute for the Study of Human Rights (ISHR), Columbia University, 171-184; Bolani, L., Gemi, E. and Skleparis, D. (2016) “Refugee Crisis and Asylum Policies in Greece and Italy” in Shteivi, M. (Ed.) *Migrants and Refugees. Impact and Policies. Case Studies of Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Greece*. European Institute of the Mediterranean, 82-109; Skleparis, D. (2017) *The Greek response to the migration challenge: 2015-2017*. KAS Katoptron #5. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Greece; Skleparis, D. (2017) *European Governments’ Responses to the ‘Refugee Crisis’*. *Southeastern Europe*, 41(3), 276-301; Skleparis, D. (2017) “A Europe without walls, without fences, without borders”: A desecuritisation of migration doomed to fail. *Political Studies*, DOI 10.1177/0032321717729631.

³ For a recent example see Joint Agency Briefing Paper (2017) *Transitioning to a government-run refugee and migrant response in Greece: A joint NGO roadmap for more fair and humane policies*. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/greece_roadmap_oxfam_final.pdf.

employed TCNs are mainly occupied in the sectors of hotels and restaurants, manufacturing, and wholesale and retail trade as unskilled/manual labourers and small professionals and salespersons in stores and outdoor markets.⁴

Similar difficulties are experienced by international protection beneficiaries and applicants. A new law (4375/2016) established that all international protection beneficiaries and applicants have access to wage employment or self-employment on the same terms and conditions with Greek nationals, provided that they have a valid residence permit.⁵ Yet, within the current context of financial crisis and high unemployment rates very few international protection beneficiaries and applicants make use of this provision. On top of these, bureaucratic obstacles in obtaining the necessary documents for employment, as well as opening a bank account to receive salary, also hinder access of international protection beneficiaries and applicants to the labour market.⁶ This is exacerbated by the fact that

priority is given to Greek and EU citizens over available job opportunities, which makes it even harder for international protection beneficiaries and applicants to find employment.

As a consequence, those few who manage to find a job are usually employed in the informal economy, which deprives them of access to social security, and subjects them to further precariousness and vulnerability. Henceforth, the vast majority of international protection beneficiaries and applicants rely on food, non-food item and financial assistance distributions to meet their basic needs.⁷ This often forces them into dangerous income generating activities, and extends the need for emergency services, increases the risk of exploitation, and hinders their integration prospects.⁸

Indeed, our research paints a similar picture.⁹ More than half of our respondents were unemployed at the time of the survey, while less than one in ten were in some kind of employment, either full or part time (Figure 1).

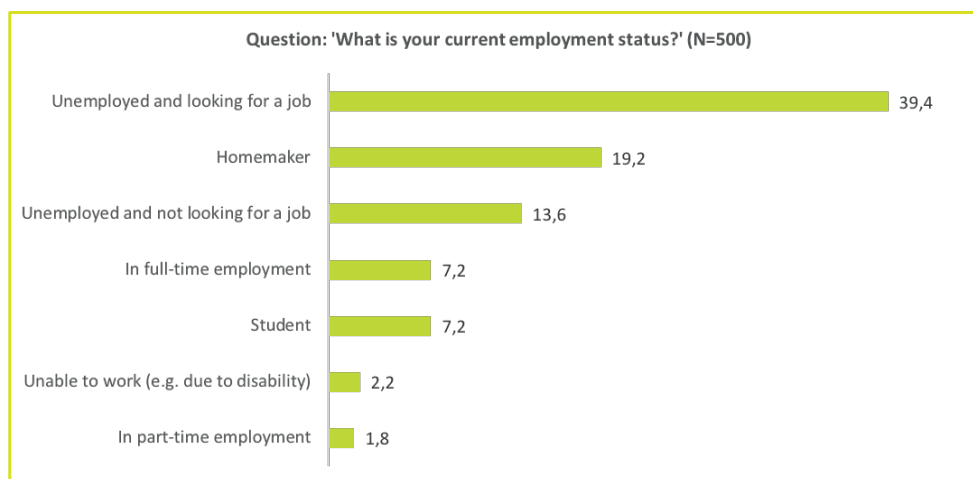


Figure 1. Employment Status

⁴ Data obtained through the Social Security Organisation and refer to April 2016.

⁵ International protection applicants residing in the mainland are granted access to the labour market from the moment they obtain an asylum seeker's card. This provision, as well as the rest discussed in this brief, excludes those who remain on the islands.

⁶ Joint Agency Briefing Paper, 13.

⁷ Actionaid, Care, NRC, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, DRC, JRS, Save the Children, Solidarity Now, and Oxfam (2016) More than six months stranded – What now? A joint policy brief on the situation for displaced persons in Greece. Available at: <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/responses/More%20than%20Six%20Months%20Stranded%20-%20What%20Now%20-%20English%20final.pdf>.

⁸ Actionaid et al.

⁹ The University of Glasgow's research findings are based on 500 surveys with young Syrian international protection beneficiaries and applicants, 18-32 years old, which were conducted by a partner organisation, Solidarity Now, between April and July 2017 in mainland Greece within the context of the "Building Futures: Aspirations of Syrian Youth Refugees and Host Population Responses in Lebanon, Greece and the UK" research project. Funding for this project has been allocated from the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), in a joint call by the ESRC and AHRC. For more information about the project see www.RefugeePolitics.net.

From those few who had managed to secure employment, more than half did not have access to social security, which manifests the precarious labour market conditions which international protection beneficiaries and applicants face in the country (Figure 2). Finally, respondents identified cash from humanitarian/charitable organisations, government support/welfare, and remittances as the three main sources of income they rely on to sustain their household in Greece.

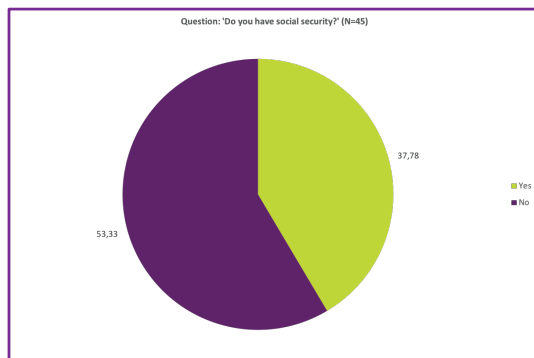


Figure 2. Access to social security

HEALTHCARE AND SOCIAL WELFARE SERVICES

The Greek state currently faces the major challenges of a generally overwhelmed and underfunded health system, and the curtailment of social welfare provisions within the context of financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures. In principle, international protection beneficiaries and applicants are entitled to free access to pharmaceuticals and healthcare in medical centres and hospitals. In practice, however, accessibility remains an important challenge as there is a lack of female medical staff, interpreters are not always available in healthcare facilities, drugs and medical examinations are not provided for free, hospital personnel are not always informed, and transportation to hospitals from remote sites is virtually non-existent.¹⁰ As a result, mainly NGOs together with some municipal authorities

and volunteers provide basic health services and medical and psychological support.¹¹

Moreover, international protection beneficiaries and applicants are entitled to, at least in principle, access social security and welfare services. For instance, if a refugee loses his/her job, s/he may contact the Manpower Employment Organisation (OAED) through which s/he may be insured as unemployed, receive an unemployment benefit for a fixed period of time, take part in subsidised vocational training programmes and receive employment counselling services in which s/he may get advice on accessing the labour market. OAED provides its beneficiaries with other benefits too, such as family allowance, maternity allowance or access to the day nurseries of OAED. Programmes targeted to the labour market are also provided by other public and private actors as well as some NGOs, and include individualised support and information on the most effective techniques for finding a job, assistance in writing resumes and cover letters, professional help in job search and preparation for interviews.

In practice, however, only a limited number of international protection beneficiaries and applicants make use of these provisions, since lack of communication by the Ministry of Migration Policy about availability of social security mechanisms limits their prospects to access social welfare provisions. What is more, at least one year of work experience with social security is a prerequisite to access these provisions, which is extremely hard to secure, as was stated above. On top of these obstacles, international protection beneficiaries and applicants also face difficulties in registering in the unemployment register due to the fact that they don't always possess official rental contracts, while they occasionally encounter the refusal of public services to issue them social security and tax registration numbers, which constitute additional prerequisites to access social welfare provisions.¹²

¹⁰ Actionaid et al., 5.

¹¹ For more information on the increasing involvement of NGOs in the provision of social welfare services to both TCNs and Greek nationals see Skleparis, D. (2015) "Towards a hybrid 'shadow state'? The case of migrant-/refugee- serving NGOs" in Clarke, J., Huliaras, A., and Sotiropoulos, D. (eds.) *Austerity and the Third Sector in Greece: Civil Society at the European Frontline*. Farnham: Ashgate/Gower, 147-165.

¹² Joint Agency Briefing Paper, 13.

The limited access of international protection beneficiaries and applicants to social welfare services is also reflected in our research findings. Only a fragment of our respondents reported that they have benefitted from the provision of career counselling services, and/or training by a job centre, while slightly more than one in ten have been provided with job search facilities (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Beneficiaries of social welfare services

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

All pupils, regardless of their legal status and that of their parents, are entitled to access the Greek education system. Until recently, TCN pupils were offered virtually no support to access or complete their education, despite the fact that they were in principle encouraged not to leave school.¹³ Following the 2015 refugee influx in the country, however, the issue of education of refugee children has attracted significant state attention.

A new law (4415/2016) introduced separate preparatory reception classes (DYEP) for refugee children in public schools as a temporary solution to their urgent need to pursue education. All refugee children have the right to access school education provided that they are vaccinated, which falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health. Refugee children aged between 6 and 15 years old are able to enrol in afternoon classes from 14:00 to 18:00

in nearby public schools identified by the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. Therein, they have the opportunity to attend courses in the English language, in Greek as a second language, in mathematics, sports, arts and computer science. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the design and implementation of the curriculum, while the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) is responsible for the transportation of refugee children with buses from their place of accommodation to the designated public schools. It is estimated that approximately 2,643 refugee pupils aged between 6-15 years old attended reception classes in public schools in 2016-2017 out of a total 7,700.¹⁴ At the same time, children aged between 4 and 5 years old are eligible to attend kindergarten facilities, which are established within open temporary accommodation sites (i.e. camps). Responsible for the design and provision of courses in these facilities are the UNHCR and NGOs with proper certification from the Greek Institute of Education Policy.

Although significant progress has been recorded with respect to the integration of refugee children in Greek schools, some obstacles still persist. Despite the fact that separate preparatory reception classes in public schools were introduced as a temporary solution, they have ended up running in parallel with formal education options such as regular morning and Zones of Educational Priority (ZEP) schools. This hinders, rather than facilitates, the social integration of refugee children in schools. Furthermore, limited number of places in public schools, lack of supporting documentation to enrol children, children's health problems, considerable divergences in literacy levels, and the co-existence of numerous linguistic backgrounds constitute additional practical barriers to the integration of refugee children in the Greek education system.¹⁵

¹³ MIPEX (2015) Greece: Education. Available at: <http://www.mipex.eu/greece/#/tab-education>.

¹⁴ Anagnostou, D. & Nikolova, M. (2017) Integration of refugees in the education system in Greece: Policy and management in 'quicksand'. ELIAMEP. Available at: http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/84_2017_-WORKING-PAPER-_%CE%9D%CF%84-%CE%91%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%B3%CE%BD%CF%8E%CF%83%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%85_%CE%9C%CE%B1%CF%81-%CE%9D%CE%B9%CE%BA%CF%8C%CE%BB%CE%BF%CE%B2%CE%B1.pdf.

¹⁵ Joint Agency Briefing Paper, 12.

Indeed, up until now, state efforts have concentrated more on facilitating the access of refugee children to schools, rather than on providing vocational training services to the adult refugee population and integrating it in the education system. Vocational training programmes and supportive services tailored for adult international protection applicants and beneficiaries are provided by NGOs and some municipal authorities. These programmes include vocational counselling, online job search with the help of specialised consultants, group workshops, seminars and networking activities among others, and aim to support the development of skills of beneficiaries of the programmes.¹⁶ Moreover, recognised refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection can enrol to the training programmes of OAED mentioned above, on the same terms and conditions with Greek nationals, provided that they hold a valid residence permit. Recognised refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection can also access Greek language, culture and history courses through the Ministry of Education. Two such programmes are available: ‘Certification of adequate knowledge of the Greek language and elements of Greek history and culture of third-country nationals’ and ‘Teaching of the Greek language as a foreign language to immigrant workers’. The duration of each programme is fixed and they are provided free of charge.

Finally, in an attempt to enable the fast-track integration of refugees in higher education and labour market, the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs introduced in 2017 the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, a document which provides an assessment of the higher education qualifications of the holder based on available documentation and a structured interview. Until June 2017, 54 refugees had benefitted from this scheme.¹⁷

Our research on young Syrian international protection beneficiaries and applicants reveals the urgent need for integration of adult refugees in the Greek education system. Approximately half of the respondents reported that they haven’t managed to complete their studies due to war. Yet, only 7 percent of the respondents have been integrated in the education system (Figure 1). Our research also sheds light on key obstacles in the integration of adult refugees in the Greek education system. About 70 percent of the respondents reported that they do not have any documentation with them that verifies their educational qualifications (Figure 4), which poses a significant challenge to the newly introduced “European Qualifications Passport for Refugees” scheme. Indeed, only a fragment (3.4 percent) has their overseas qualifications recognised/converted so far (Figure 3). Finally, only one in three has benefited from the provision of Greek language courses, and only one in ten from cultural awareness training courses (Figure 3), which significantly impedes access of adult refugees to the formal education system.

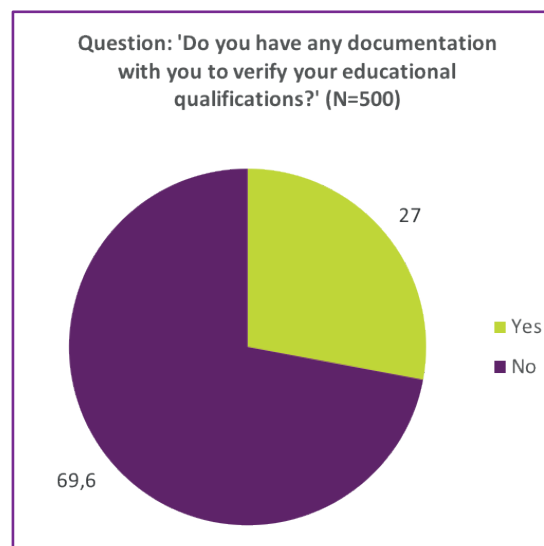


Figure 4. Documentation of educational qualifications

¹⁶ Karantinos, D. (2016) Labour market integration of asylum seekers and refugees - Greece. European Commission. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yddkr8yl>.

¹⁷ Council of Europe (2017) Greece is pioneering the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/new-video-on-the-european-qualifications-passport-for-refugees>.

CONCLUSION

The Greek state is currently grappling with the worst economic recession in recent memory, which, by extension, creates severe implications for social and economic integration of international protection beneficiaries and applicants. Economic recession and austerity have limited state capacity to respond to the basic needs of many third-country and Greek nationals, and have exacerbated long-standing structural problems within Greece's social welfare and integration policies.

Apart from the objective obstacles that were previously discussed, there are additional perceived issues of concern among the Greek public that hinder social and economic integration of international protection beneficiaries and applicants in mainland Greece. According to recent polls, the majority (57 percent) of the Greek public feels concerned about the "refugee crisis" in the country.¹⁸ More specifically, Greeks are concerned that the permanent settlement of refugees in their areas of residence would create problems (74 percent), as they constitute a potential threat to the country's security (50%).¹⁹ Greeks are also concerned that the presence of refugees will lead to the rise of criminality rates (45 percent), and terrorist threat (45 percent), and will further burden public health and education

infrastructures (49 percent).²⁰ The Greek public thinks that refugees do not constitute a potential solution to the demographic problem of the country (51 percent), nor that they can enrich Greek culture (50 percent).²¹ Surprisingly enough though, refugees are not considered a threat to the labour market (54 percent), and, in this regard, the majority of Greeks agree with the idea of refugees being granted work permits (82 percent).²² However, in all, the Greek public opinion believes that refugees will probably not be able to integrate in the Greek society (65 percent).²³

Finally, the living conditions of those who remain on the islands, despite the fact that they don't fall under the state's integration strategy, pose a challenge to social cohesion and, by extension, to integration prospects of international protection beneficiaries and applicants in mainland Greece. Several incidents of violence and suicide attempts have been recorded in camps across the islands.²⁴ Harsh living conditions combined with discriminatory policies and the fear of potential return to Turkey have led to various instances of violent protests and riots.²⁵ In turn, such incidents fuel frustration among host communities and oil the wheels of far-right movements providing a justification of the use of violence against TCNs in general.²⁶

¹⁸ Kapa Research (2016) Greece: The year that passed and the year ahead. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/ybe5thcf>.

¹⁹ Public Issue (2016) Attitudes towards the refugee issue. Available at: http://www.publicissue.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/var-155-apr-2016_ref.pdf.

²⁰ Dianeosis (2016) The refugee problem and the Greeks. Available at: http://www.dianeosis.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/immigration_04.pdf.

²¹ Dianeosis. 2016

²² Dianeosis. 2016

²³ Public Issue. 2016

²⁴ Al Jazeera (2017) 'RRDP: Women fear violence and rape in refugee camps'. Available at:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/rrdp-women-fear-violence-rape-refugee-camps-170123180556027.html>.

²⁵ Euronews (2016) 'Violence breaks out at Greek refugee camp'. Available at: <http://www.euronews.com/2016/11/17/violence-breaks-out-at-greek-refugee-camp>.

²⁶ Al Jazeera (2016) 'Spurned, hopeless and attacked, refugees' drama goes on'. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/spurned-hopeless-attacked-refugees-drama-161122183357579.html>.



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