# The Politics and Policy of the Syrian Refugee Crisis: The Case of Greece and Cyprus

Alexandra Prodromidou

Assistant Professor

Business Administration and Economics Department

CITY College, University of York, Europe Campus

Research Associate at the Southeast European Research Centre (SEERC) [aprodromidou@york.citycollege.eu](mailto:aprodromidou@york.citycollege.eu)

Yannis A. Stivachtis

Professor of Political Science and Jean Monnet Chair

Director, Center for European Union, Transatlantic, and Trans-European Space Studies (CEUTTSS) – *A Jean Monnet Center of Excellence*

Virginia Tech

[ystivach@vt.edu](mailto:ystivach@vt.edu)

Faye Ververidou

Lecturer

Business Administration and Economics Department

CITY College, University of York, Europe Campus

Research Associate at the Southeast European Research Centre (SEERC); [fververidou@seerc.org](mailto:fververidou@seerc.org)

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Alexandra Prodromidou

*University of York, Europe Campus*

Yannis A. Stivachtis

*Virginia Tech*

Faye Ververidou

*University of York, Europe Campus*

The Syrian refugee crisis began in March 2011, when Arab Spring reached Syria’s borders and the Assad regime countered protests demanding social justice and democracy in Syria (Ghadbian 2021, 55). The first official documentation of Syrian refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria was provided by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). According to UNHCR, the beginning of the refugee crisis is traced back to the end of March 2011, when 5,000 Syrian refugees fled from Syria to seek asylum in Lebanon (Ghadbian 2021, 55). Thus, the Syrian refugee crisis was born, and after nine long years of civil unrest and chaos, has created the world’s largest refugee population movement (Ghadbian 2021, 52–55; Kapusnak 2014, 209–210). The Syrian conflict has forcibly displaced about 13.2 million people from Syria, including 6.6 million refugees, 6.2 million internally displaced people, and 140,000 asylum seekers, to various destinations around the world (Ghadbian 2021, 52; Kapusnak 2014, 209–210).

Over time, Europe became the most popular destination for Syrian refugees, as well as other Middle Eastern refugees, to seek asylum (Ghadbian 2021, 57; Avraamidou et al. 2019, 105–106). The European Union (EU) took in the bulk of Syrian refugees, with Germany and Sweden taking in nearly 63% of asylum seekers as of 2020 (Ghadbian 2021, 57; Avraamidou et al. 2019, 105–106). In 2015 alone, more than one million Syrian refugees and other refugees from the Middle East applied for asylum in the European Union (EU) and approximately 3,770 refugees died while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea (Avraamidou et al. 2019, 105). This refugee movement continues to have a large impact on European society today (Alecou and Mavrou 2017, 1–2; Filc 2018, 124–131). The Syrian refugee crisis has sparked a dangerous rise in exclusionary populism, right-wing nationalist movements, and national security concerns to spread not only within Europe, but to other states as well (Alecou and Mavrou 2017, 1–2; Filc 2018, 124–131).

In particular, anti-immigration and anti-asylum seeker sentiments have continued to escalate in Europe since the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis (Moscovitz 2016, 140–143; Trimikliniotis and Demetriou 2011, 2–3). This escalation stems from concerns over nationalism and state security from the threat of ‘outsiders,’ which has resulted in the subsequent ‘other-izing’ of cultures not dominant in the state, but it also stems from the post-9/11 linkage between Islam and terrorism in Western countries, thus framing refugees from the Middle East as possible ‘terrorists’ and security threats (Moscovitz 2016, 145–147; Trimikliniotis and Demetriou 2011, 24). Due to the rising popularity of these sentiments, various far-right political parties in Europe, in general, and in Greece and Cyprus in particular, have gained significant political support and recognition over the past decade, adopting harsh immigration policies and successfully ‘other-izing’ and excluding immigrants from their dominant state cultures (Baider and Kopytowska 2017, 216–219; Charalambous and Christoforou 2018, 452–455; Fischer 2020, 971–973; Ariely 2021, 1089–1091).

Although the European Union (EU) is not a novice recipient of migration and refugee waves, it lacks an effective common policy that could be implemented at the supranational level. The EU migration and refugee regime is the result of interactions among an array of different actors including EU institutions, EU member states, states belonging to the Schengen Zone and non-state actors (D’Amato and Lucarelli 2019). The paradox of an applied common European immigration and asylum policy lies in the fact that although under the Treaties, the EU is competent to develop a common procedure, EU level provisions remain only complementary to state level immigration law, as EU member states retain the right to adopt only the more favorable regulations to their national interests, as well as, to control the volumes of admissions of third country nationals (TNCs) (Strumia 2016).

For a long period of time, migration was only perceived as a secondary concern for the European Union. In fact, migration governance has been largely viewed as a security issue mainly in response to internal and external challenges to EU security including the migrant ‘crisis’ and its backlash on the implementation and functioning of the Schengen Accord, as well as, the terrorist attacks on European soil (Ceccorulli and Lucarelli 2017). For example, although the topic of migration is not perceived nor discussed as a security threat *per se* in the 2016 European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) (European Union External Action 2019) or in any previous EU migration related document, like the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) (European Council 2009), in the EUGS, migration is most frequently mentioned in reference to ‘foreign policy objectives (including internal repercussions), geographical areas and the purported values of the European Union’ (Ceccorulli and Lucarelli 2017, 84). As a result, migration governance has revolved around deterrence of irregular migration and protection of the EU’s external borders, rather than integration.

Greece has been at the forefront of the ‘migrant crisis’, as it lies along one of the main migratory routes to the European Union. The combination of a prolonged period of strict economic austerity measures, political and social turmoil dating back to the signing of the first Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2010, and an insufficient migration policy left the country severely ill-equipped to deal with the rising numbers of irregular migrants, the majority of which crossed from Turkey to Greece via the Aegean Sea. Initially a transit country, after the signing of the EU-Turkey Statement (European Council 2016) in March 2016, Greece became a destination country. Indicatively, according to official statistics, the numbers of asylum applications in the country went up by 236,4% immediately after the agreement came into force in April 2016 in relation to asylum applications submitted in 2015 (Ministry of Interior 2016).

Despite the fact that undoubtedly the state has always been central in decision-making, after 2014, the role of the UNHCR has equally been pivotal in the coordination of activities accommodating the needs of asylum seekers, as well as, in supervising housing programs. Alongside the UNHCR, a number of International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs) dealing with migration related issues became involved in migration governance in Greece, together with local Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) which were created driven by demand and availability of funding mainly from the European Union. INGOs and national NGOs have been offering services to mixed flows of migrants in Greece spanning from medical on-site assistance, informal education, building of labour skills, assistance with state bureaucracy, legal advice and interpreters, to name but a few. The imminent departure of the UNHCR from Greece and the end of international funding signifies that national NGOs, which are central to migration governance will struggle to survive. In the current transitional period, the state is called in to fill in these gaps. Thus, one of the catalysts that defines the format and the quality of the state’s response to refugee and asylum seekers’ integration in Greece is the manner in which the state is taking over supervision and coordination of the operations and integration programs from the departing organisations, while, at the same time, attempting to address the gaps in its administration.

With reference to the Republic of Cyprus, the country lies at the intersection between multiple cultures spanning across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, making the island a perfect gateway destination for refugees to pass through in order to seek asylum in other parts of Europe (Trimikliniotis 2013, 441–445; Yaron et al. 2013, 145–147). Unfortunately for asylum seekers, the Republic of Cyprus does not harbor accommodating asylum policies and is ranked amongst the worst countries in the world for refugee integration and acceptance into civil society, which has largely affected the ability of the country to effectively respond to the Syrian refugee crisis (Trimikliniotis and Demetriou 2011, 18–20; Kalir 2015, 581).

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, to examine how Greece and Cyprus have dealt with the Syrian refugee crisis; second, to identify the factors that have conditioned the approach and policies of the Greek and Cypriot governments; and third, to provide an assessment of the effectiveness of these policies in integrating the Syrian refugees in the Greek and Greek-Cypriot societies. To this end, the paper is divided into two major parts; one focusing on Greece and the other on the Republic of Cyprus. The paper concludes that while there has been an attempt to create a normative and policy framework for integration, a critical policy implementation gap still exists.

**The Evolution of Greece’s Integration Governance within the EU framework**

The EU's integration policy in relation to migration governance has been developing steadily, over the years, since the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 with the abolition of internal borders in the EU and implementation of the Schengen Agreement in 1995. It was then that consensus for common policies on both adopting a common asylum and immigration framework, as well as strengthening policies against irregular migration were developed (Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx 2016). In the table below, a chronology of EU migrant integration policies can be seen.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **1997/1999** | **The Treaty of Amsterdam:** Integration of migrants from non-EU countries becomes affected by EU policies for the first time |
| **2004** | **The Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU:**  A milestone for the development of a common immigration policy |
| **2009** | **The European Website on Integration:** Launch of an online source of information for sharing information and best practices |
| **2010/2012** | **Agreement on a Common set of Integration Indicators:** A basis for EU monitoring and coordination. The 2012 update encompassed employment, education and social inclusion |
| **2014** | **The Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund:** It replaces 3 previous financing instruments. 20% of its budget is dedicated to integration through calls for proposals |
| **2016** | **The Action Plan on the Integration of TNCs:** A framework to support national policies and a map of concrete measures that the Commission will implement |
| **2017** | **The Skills Profile Tool for TNCs:** A tool to map qualifications, professional aspirations and to suggest next steps |
| **2020** | **The Action plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027):** Following up on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which highlighted the importance of integration, the Action plan aims at inclusion by building on multi-stakeholder partnerships, including the host communities and the private sector, providing funding and modernising access to services by using digital tools. |

The current normative framework in Greece bears a clear imprint of the EU integration legislation, but this was not always the case. As Triandafyllidou has remarked, Greece was a ‘latecomer in regularisation policies’ for non-nationals, who were long viewed as a threat to the national identity (Triandafyllidou 2009, 162; Triandafyllidou 2001). The first Immigration Law, enacted in 2001 (Law 2910/2001), bears little resemblance to the relevant EU legal documents (Mavrodi, 2005); it was, however, the first step towards the development of a national migration framework, which gradually became oriented towards a more positive inclusive approach of legally residing TNCs.

The first account of social integration in the national legislation isfound in Law 3386/2005, viewed in scholarship as the first act to treat migration as a long-term phenomenon (Anagnostou 2016). In Article 65, social integration is defined as the ‘proportionally equal participation’ of migrants in the economic, social and cultural life of the country, premised on the conferral of rights and the obligation to respect the founding values of the Greek society. Set out in article 66 par. 4, dominant parameters of integration are the certified knowledge of the Greek language, history and culture, access to the labour market and participation in Greek society.

The definition was revisited under a different light in the Immigration and Social Integration Code (Law 4251/2014). This law marked the first attempt to codify the national migrant legislation in harmonisation with the EU *acquis* and remains the main legal act regulating the integration of migrants in the country today. Pursuant to art. 128 para. 1, ‘Social integration policy aims at the smooth adaptation of third country nationals into the Greek society and the recognition, on behalf of the Greek society, of the possibility for an equal participation in the economic, social and cultural life of the country. During their integration process in the Greek society, third country nationals obtain rights and obligations, like Greek citizens.’ The new provision shared few commonalities with the one it was drafted to replace. The definition still lacked the key element of mutuality that permeates the European principles, demanding adaptation only on behalf of TCNs. On a positive note, however, it explicitly equates their rights and obligations with those of Greek citizens. In generally, the Code facilitates the legal sojourn of migrants in the country by simplyfing the procedure for issuance of residence permits, enabling access to work, and prooting the respect of cultural identity, non-discrimination, gender equality and children’s rights.

Prior to the insertion of the Immigration Code, an evolved understanding of the concept of social integration appeared in the text of the first National Integration Strategy adopted in 2013. Although Law 3386/2005 was still in force, the strategy endorsed the Council of Europe’s definition of social integration, describing it as a ‘dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of Member States’ (Hellenic Ministry of Migration Policy 2013). Along similar lines, the ensuing National Integration Strategy, developed in July 2019, envisions integration as a dynamic procedure founded upon mutuality and multiculturalism aims (Hellenic Ministry of Migration Policy 2019a). Building upon the European multicultural model of social integration, it embraces the idea of open society; promotes interaction and social cohesion; and spells out rights and obligations that fall under the same restrictions imposed on the native national population (Hellenic Ministry of Migration Policy 2019a).

The update of the national integration scheme with the adoption of a new policy was highly anticipated; yet, the new Strategy was received with scepticism by civil society. At the stage of public consultation, several complaints were voiced regarding the fact that the document was drafted without prior consultation with civil society actors and migrant associations in the country. This did not only deprive the latter of the opportunity to put forward instrumental suggestions, but it also clashed with the new strategy, which explicitly places political representation among the axes of social integration. Coupled with the fact that the first strategy of 2013 established a bad precedent by remaining largely ineffective, serious concerns emerged regarding the practical implementation of the new regime. Similar doubts were raised due to the absence of a timeframe, as well as an action plan, which traditionally accompanies strategic documents. The document was further criticised for encouraging a single understanding of TCNs, instead of adopting tailored policies for different subgroups of migrants according to a set of criteria, such as age, duration of sojourn or country of origin (Report of public consultation on the National Integration Strategy 2019).

Despite its weaknesses, the strategy has been a welcome addition to a rather limited body of legal documents that address integration. Perhaps most importantly, the new strategy posits that social integration is a complex concept that unfolds on two levels: the reception of applicants of international protection, and the integration of beneficiaries of international protection, as well as migrants (National Integration Strategy, 2019). In other words, the integration of TCNs does not commence at the moment that international protection is being granted but much earlier, at the moment of arrival in Greece. The document also lays out the axes of integration policy, which include access to fundamental needs and services (such as housing, adequate information, healthcare); integration in education; access to the labour market; interculturalism; civic participation; and a small number of policies dedicated to the key role of the local administration and the adoption of special measures for vulnerable groups of TCNs. This classification agrees with the dominant understanding of social integration in literature as a multi-faceted phenomenon (Ager and Strang 2008).

Finally, the second half of 2019 constituted a benchmark in migration governance in Greece. Following the elections of July 2019, a new government was formed by the conservative party “New Democracy”, which had been pushing for a tougher and more securitised agenda on migration for years. Only days after “New Democracy'' came to power, the operation of the Ministry for Migration Policy ended and all its competences were transferred to the Ministry for Citizen’s Protection. In the four-point plan presented by the Prime Minister in October 2019, securitisation of borders was listed among the objectives to enhance the overburdened asylum system, to strengthen the cooperation of public authorities and to relieve pressure on the islands. Integration was left out of this list (Bourdaras 2019).

The shift towards a stringent stance on migrants was also reflected in Law 4636/2019, which established a uniform regime on the status of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection in the country. In a glimpse, the new act accelerates first instance and appeals procedures; it establishes constraints to healthcare access for asylum seekers; it adopts punitive measures for families with children who do not attend school; and it extends conditions of detention. With regards to integration, perhaps the most important change was the introduction of a grace period of six months for the exit of recognised beneficiaries from the accommodation facilities, which was further reduced to one month in March 2020 (article 114 Law 4674/2020). The document was denounced, almost unanimously, by both NGOs and international agencies for posing a severe threat to the protection of fundamental rights of the persons falling under its scope (UNHCR 2019). In the same vein, the role of NGOs in the field of migration was redefined with the configuration of a new online registration system, which established onerous certification procedures and provided new grounds for the cooperation with the State (Law 4662/2020). The Expert Council on NGO Law has twice condemned this system for being incompatible with the European standards, especially for violating the right to free association (Expert Council on NGO Law 2020a; Expert Council on NGO Law 2020b).

***Integration pillars***

Housing

The 2019 framework foresaw three different forms of housing for asylum seekers: in reception premises at the national borders (this was particularly the case when EU-Turkey agreement was in place); in accommodation centres, managed by state authorities, NGOs or international organisations guaranteeing adequate conditions of living; and private houses, apartments or hotels available within the frame of funded housing programs (article 56 Law 4636/2019). As the housing environment is currently shaped in Greece, the first two forms described in the provision refer to RICs, the Reception and Identification Centers, as well as the 32 accommodation sites dispersed throughout the mainland. Despite state and private efforts for the upgrade of living standards through site management support (SMS), accommodation in camps is routinely considered as an unfavourable housing scheme for the protection of asylum seekers (Kourachanis 2018).

Beyond the in-site accommodation, the two main housing programs in place for several years, FILOXENIA and ESTIA I (Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation Program), were exclusively reserved for asylum seekers. In what has been characterised as a novelty at global level by experts on the field, ESTIA I entailed the practice of direct apartment rentals in dispersed areas within urban centres to accommodate vulnerable asylum seekers.

Refugees are entitled to housing on the same terms and conditions as TNCs legally residing in the country (art. 34 Law 4636/2019). One may conclude that the provision shapes a more inclusive framework compared to asylum seekers. However, this is not the case. Until recently, refugees were allowed to remain in accommodation sites or apartments of ESTIA I, even after having obtained their residence permit. Law 4636/2019 ended this tolerant stance, by stipulating that refugees are obliged to leave the accommodation structures within 6 months from the moment of recognition of their asylum status. In 2020, this deadline further shrunk to one month, a decision taken unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic. Under this light and taking into account that no social housing policy exists in Greece, refugees may only benefit from the “HELIOS” program, which provides financial assistance to promote independent living and integration of refugees in the social web.

Physical and mental health

Against the post-2014 humanitarian crisis backdrop, amendments were introduced in the national normative framework concerning access to healthcare. In response to the country’s label as a ‘welfare state’, Article 33 Law 4368/2016 included a vision of universal health coverage, which enables all vulnerable social groups to fully access the public healthcare system and receive nursing and medical treatment free of charge. Both asylum seekers and refugees are explicitly classified as vulnerable individuals under this provision, contrary to irregular migrants who remain outside the scope of this provision, as they are only entitled to emergency healthcare.

The newly established Law 4636/2019, in art. 31 par. 1, placed refugees on equal footing with Greek nationals with regards to healthcare access, which effectively verifies the need of a social insurance number (AMKA) in order to be able to receive treatment in the public healthcare sector. For asylum seekers, this has not been equally straightforward. Although Law 4368/2016 granted free healthcare access, there was no clarification as to whether this group is eligible for obtaining AMKA. A Joint Ministerial Decision later in 2016 established an alternative document, the Foreigner’s Health Care Card (KYPA), for those vulnerable groups clustered in article 33 Law 4368/2016 who did not qualify for an AMKA. However, the KYPA system was never implemented, and asylum seekers continued to apply for AMKA in order to gain access to the national health system.

In July 2019, the new government revoked the circular regulating the procedure to issue AMKA to non-nationals. Pending a new regime that would not be introduced until 6 months later, this executive action meant that asylum seekers were banned from access to public health facilities, a practice that was condemned by national and international actors as a clear violation of their fundamental right to health (among others, Amnesty International 2019). Finally, a new state institution provided for unlimited access to public healthcare for asylum seekers with the issuance of a Temporary Insurance and Foreigner’s Healthcare Number (PAAYPA), valid until the Asylum Service’s decision on their application (article 55 Law 4636/2019 and art. 15 of the Ministerial Decision 717 (OGG Β' 199/31.01.2020). It is noteworthy that the same law does not only deal with access to healthcare, but encompasses safeguards for the healthy living conditions of these populations.

Employment

According to art. 71 Law 4375/2016 in its original form, asylum seekers are entitled to access to wage employment and service or work provision, provided they have obtained a valid asylum card. This marked a significant advance along the road to integration; unlike the previous regime, a work permit is no longer required and Greek nationals were no longer legally prioritised over foreign employees. However, the provision was soon amended by art. 53 Law 4636/2019, which introduced a six-month time limit, from the moment of application submission, for asylum seekers to gain “effective access” to the labour market. This new restriction was met with severe criticism for hindering, instead of facilitating, self-sustainment of individuals seeking international protection (Greek Ombudsman, 2019). For refugees with a valid residence permit, the limitation does not apply; access to wage and self-employment is granted without a work permit, on the same terms as for Greek nationals (art. 69 Law 4375/2016 and article 27 Law 4636/2019), with an exception regarding working in the public sector.

In essence, every individual who wishes to enter the Greek labour market, regardless of the type of employment they may pursue, needs to have a tax registration number (AFM) and a national security number (AMKA) or PAAYPA, for asylum seekers. Hence, in revoking the asylum seekers’ entitlement to AMKA in the second half of 2019 and prior to the insertion of the PAYYPA regime, the state effectively hampered access not only to healthcare, but also to employment for this population.

Equal treatment with Greek nationals is also granted in access to vocational training, internships and consulting, as well as the recognition of foreign diplomas and other qualifications (articles 29 and 54 Law 4636/2019 for beneficiaries of international protection and asylum seekers, respectively). In the event that supporting documents cannot be provided, beneficiaries are permitted to participate in programs aimed at assessing their skills, in compliance with EU Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications (transposed by the Presidential Decree 38/2010). For asylum seekers who reside in Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) or temporary accommodation sites, vocational training and consulting may also be provided within the premises of those structures as a measure to foster social integration (art. 15 of the Ministerial Decision 23/13532/2020 - Official Gazette B' 5272/30.11.2020).

**The Case of Cyprus**

The approach of the government of the Republic of Cyprus to the Syrian refugee crisis has been conditioned by three inter-related factors: the size of the Republic of Cyprus, the number of the existing immigrants in the country prior to the Syrian refugee crisis, and the historical developments that have taken place on the island after the end of World War II and especially after the independence of the island from the United Kingdom and which have shaped the securitization of the Syrian refugees. In Cyprus, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are contextualized by the ‘Cyprus problem,’ the 1974 *de facto* division of the state, and multiple economic crises (Charalambous 2018, 25–27; Trimikliniotis and Demetriou 2011, 2–10; Hajisoteriou 2020, 31–32).

The latest stage of the securitization of politics in the Republic of Cyprus began with the 1974 *de facto* division of the island into the non-recognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and the Greek-Cypriot controlled Republic of Cyprus (Trimikliniotis and Demetriou 2011, 2–10). During the 1960s and 1970s, the two largest ethnicities on the island, the Greek-Cypriots and the Turkish-Cypriots, were embroiled in ethnic violence (Charalambous and Christoforou 2018, 452–455; Charalambous 2018, 31–33; Drousiotou and Mathioudakis 2019, 22–31). In 1974, this violence had reached its breaking point when the Greek junta-instigated a *coup d’etat* against President Makarions which eventually led to the Turkish military intervention caused the island to be split into two ethicized territories separated by the UN controlled ‘Green Line,’ which prompted the forced displacement of thousands of people (Charalambous and Christoforou 2018, 452–455; Charalambous 2018, 31–33; Drousiotou and Mathioudakis 2019, 22–31). The unresolved ethnic tensions between the Turkish-Cypriots and the Greek-Cypriots, and the unresolved question of Cyprus’ reunification, have been at the heart of what has subsequently been called the ‘Cyprus Problem,’ the largest issue in contemporary Cypriot politics (Trimikliniotis and Demetriou 2011, 2–10).

The ‘Cyprus Problem’ is a driving force behind ethnocentrism in the Republic Cyprus where the state is seen as a Greek Christian Orthodox political unit. This has led to the political marginalization and discrimination of immigrants and asylum seekers that do not fit the identity of the Greek Cypriot Christina Orthodox state (Trimikliniotis and Demetriou 2011, 2–10). In other words, the ‘Cyprus Problem’ is a major political framework used when discussing the securitization of the Republic of Cyprus and is used to reinforce ethno-nationalist sentiments amongst the Greek-Cypriot population against the Turkish-Cypriots, alongside any groups perceived to be the unfamiliar ‘other’ in civil society, which includes asylum seekers (Charalambous and Christoforou 2018, 452–455; Charalambous 2018, 31–39; Drousiotou and Mathioudakis 2019, 22–31).

There is a strong sense of ethno-nationalism in the Republic of Cyprus amongst Greek-Cypriots, who believe that they are the island’s ‘true’ inhabitants, which has played a large role in the ‘other’ization’ of other ethnic groups in Cyprus (Charalambous 2018, 33–39). This sense of nativism is only heightened by the UN controlled ‘Green Line,’ the perceived division between the ‘inferior’ Turkish culture and the ‘superior’ Greek culture in the eyes of Greek-Cypriots (Charalambous 2018, 31–33). Many asylum seekers use the ‘Green Line’ to cross illegally into the Republic of Cyprus, thus further stigmatizing this division and further stigmatizing Turkish-Cypriots in the process, even if Turkish-Cypriots are not the ones crossing illegally into the Republic of Cyprus (Charalambous 2018, 31–33).

Another critical turning point in the securitization of immigrants and refugees comes from the accession of the Republic of Cyprus into the European Union (Fischer 2020, 965; Kadianaki et al. 2018, 408). Cyprus joined the EU with the goal of solving the ‘Cyprus Problem’ and to increase their overall economic prosperity after multiple economic crises had plagued their state (Fischer 2020, 965–966). After joining the EU, however, many of Cyprus’ goals were never realized, with the EU unable to resolve the ‘Cyprus Problem’ and the economic issues continuing to affect Cyprus’s economy (Fischer 2020, 965–966).

During their accession, Cyprus was also required to adopt some of the EU’s immigration policies into their domestic legislation (Fischer 2020, 965–966). This included providing asylum seekers the ‘right to asylum’ and allowing migrants access to social services, which forced Cyprus to introduce intercultural education and social security services to asylum seekers in their domestic legislation (Fischer 2020, 965–966). Joining the EU also turned Cyprus into an attractive destination for asylum seekers, with Cyprus acting as a gateway into other, more progressive areas of the European Union (Fischer 2020, 965–966). Although Cyprus’ accession into the EU has required them to relax some of their severe laws on asylum seekers, Cyprus continues to undermine asylum seeker’s access to basic government services and access to equity in civil society through the practice of ‘other-ization’, discrimination, and a lack of social integration (Fischer 2020, 964–974; Kadianaki et al. 2018, 408).

People in Cyprus generally distrust and marginalize Middle Eastern asylum seekers and refugees (Charalambous 2018, 31–33; Trimikliniotis and Demetriou 2011, 2–10; Hajisoteriou 2020, 31–32). Right-wing political groups drive anti-immigration agendas and asylum seekers are typically ‘other-ized’ in the Greek-Cypriot society, which can be seen in the country’s educational system. However, certain immigrants are given special exceptions in Cyprus, including wealthy immigrants (Rakopoulos and Fischer 2020; Charalambous 2018, 33–38; Milioni et al. 2015, 175–179; Charalambous and Christoforou 2018, 452–455). Therefore, the Cyprus response to the Syrian refugee crisis was marginal at best, as they only accepted a small number of refugees and intentionally made government resources limited to these vulnerable populations (Alecou and Mavrou 2017 1–2; Fischer 2020, 970–971).

***A Brief Overview of Immigration in Cyprus***

The Republic of Cyprus had historically been a country of net emigration until the 1990s, when an economic miracle in the form of mass tourism brought many employment opportunities back to Cyprus, consequently transforming the state into a net immigration destination (Trimikliniotis and Demetriou 2011, 2–10). The massive amount of tourism created rapid economic development and labor shortages in Cyprus, prompting policymakers to shift their immigration policies in 1991 to allow for low-skill, temporary labor migrants to enter the state (Trimikliniotis and Demetriou 2011, 2–10; Trimikliniotis 2013, 445–446). These labor migrants were only supposed to work in Cyprus temporarily, and although they received the same employment terms as other Cypriot workers, they were restricted to working in specific sectors unpopular to Cypriot citizens and were discriminated against socially and politically (Trimikliniotis 2013, 453–456; Alecou and Mavrou 2017, 6–9). Labor migrants, as well as asylum seekers and refugees in Cyprus, do not have the right to vote, can’t exercise their civil participation in any capacity due to restrictive laws in Cyprus, and have little opportunities to integrate into Cyprus’ civil society (Alecou and Mavrou 2017, 6–9).

Cyprus is notorious for its restrictive refugee policies, which include inhumane detention policies, excessive bureaucratic processes, and the high improbability of refugees receiving asylum. As a result, the state is ranked amongst the worst in the world for the long-term integration of foreigners (Fischer 2020, 964–974; Milioni et al. 2015, 156–157). Depending on the classification of immigrant, some migrants are not marginalized as politically, socially, and economically as others, and are even able to obtain access to the Greek-Cypriot social elite (Trimikliniotis 2013, 453–456; Trimikliniotis 2018, 20–24). Immigrants in Cyprus are generally categorized as either subaltern migrants, who are labor migrants working undesired, temporary jobs in Cyprus, or elite migrants, who are highly skilled, wealthy businessmen (Trimikliniotis 2013, 447). These elite migrants are treated much differently than subaltern migrants, and in 2020, it was revealed that these elite migrants, primarily from Eastern Europe, were bypassing Cypriot immigration processes to directly purchase ‘golden passport’ applications for Cypriot citizenship from government officials (Rakopoulos and Fischer 2020). The only stipulation to these ‘golden passports’ was that elite migrants had to invest millions of dollars into high-end pieces of real estate around the island (Rakopoulos and Fischer 2020). Although this ‘golden passport’ practice has *officially* ended according to government officials, it further demonstrates Cyprus’ preference for certain types of immigrants in their state and their elitist mentality for choosing who can and cannot be a Cypriot citizen (Rakopoulos and Fischer 2020).

After Cyprus’ accession into the EU, the state experienced an increase in EU citizens exercising their right to free movement, and the overall increase in labor migrants and immigrants, accompanied by the 2009-2013 economic crises, prompted right-wing politicians and media outlets to disseminate an anti-immigration information campaign to the people of Cyprus (Trimikliniotis 2013, 447–450). Right-wing populism grew in Cyprus due to the weaponization of immigration and the use of asylum seekers and refugees as a scapegoat for economic crises and other social problems plaguing Cyprus, such as rising crime rates, rising unemployment rates, and social disintegration as a whole (Milioni et al. 2015, 33–38). Asylum seekers and refugees are securitized largely by economic concerns in Cyprus, being framed as ‘welfare exploiters,’ ‘job stealers,’ and ‘burdens’ to the Greek-Cypriot society in Cypriot media sources (Baider and Kopytowska 2017, 216–219; Kadianaki et al. 2018, 408–409). Asylum seekers and refugees are also securitized by security and identity concerns in Cyprus, being framed as ‘barbarians,’ ‘terrorists,’ and ‘invaders’ in Cypriot media sources (Baider and Kopytowska 2017, 216–219; Kadianaki et al. 2018, 408–409).

Due to the political, economic, and social hardships faced by asylum seekers and refugees in Cyprus, many incoming asylum seekers and refugees actively seek out other options besides Cyprus to seek asylum (Fischer 2020, 967). Many asylum seekers view Cyprus as an ‘accidental’ destination as opposed to a final destination for them to obtain asylum, which further shows the success of Cyprus’s deterrence policies on immigration (Fischer 2020, 966–967). In summary, asylum seekers, refugees, and labor migrants are disenfranchised politically, economically, and socially in Cyprus, except for the few exceptions of wealthy migrants, and are contextualized through economic, security, and national identity frames (Baider and Kopytowska 2017, 216–219; Kadianaki et al. 2018, 408–409; Milioni et al. 2015, 33–38; Trimikliniotis 2013, 441–450; Trimikliniotis 2018, 20–24).

***The Educational Exclusion of Migrant Populations***

The integration of asylum seekers and refugees into Cyprus’ civil society is inadequate at multiple levels, particularly within their public-school education system (Charalambous et al. 2013, 79–80; Theodorou 2014, 255–256). Intercultural education is a relatively new phenomenon in Cyprus and was added to their educational policies after Cyprus joined the EU in 2004 (Charalambous et al. 2013, 82–88). Prior to 2004, education in Cyprus was largely framed by the ‘Cyprus Problem’ and included a self-containment curriculum focused on maintaining an ethnocentric viewpoint of the Greek-Cypriot identity, maintaining a strong Hellenocentric national identity, and reproducing negative representations of Turkish-Cypriots (Charalambous et al. 2013, 82–88). Although intercultural education reform has been introduced in the Cypriot education system, it has yet to be fully integrated in practice, and there is still a strong Greek-Cypriot ethnocentric narrative and negative association of the ‘other’ being dispersed in Cypriot classrooms (Theodorou 2014, 255–256).

Asylum seekers and refugee children harbor feelings of exclusion and an overall lack of integration in the Cypriot public education system, naming language barriers and a focus on assimilation rather than accommodation as major reasons to their lack of success in school (Lambri et al. 2020, 6; Michalinos 2012, 195–196). Additionally, some Greek-Cypriot children in Cyprus are affected by ‘other-ization’ narratives and the ‘Cyprus Problem,’ with some children expressing tolerance towards asylum seeker and refugee children, and with other children repeating dominant narratives of asylum seekers and refugees being economic and security threats to the Cypriot state (Michalinos 2012, 198–199). Integration and inclusion in education is connected to debates on citizenship and economic development as contextualized by the ‘Cyprus Problem,’ and as long as the ‘Cyprus Problem’ persists, the politics of citizenship, economic development and sociocultural transformation will continue to be negatively impacted as seen in Cyprus’ public-school education system (Trimikliniotis and Demetriou 2011, 13–16).

***Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Cyprus***

The Syrian refugee crisis has impacted Cyprus through the increased volume of asylum seeker applications (Fischer 2020, 966–967). In 2017, Cyprus received the most amount of asylum seekers applications by Syrian refugees, with 1,762 applications entering the Republic of Cyprus Asylum Services system, but with only 21 Syrian asylum applications being accepted during this same year (Fischer 2020, 966–967). Over the past decade, Cyprus has received most of their applications for asylum from Syria, and although they have accepted a limited number of temporary asylum seekers from Syria, their overall asylum rejection rate is one of the highest in Europe, reaching 51.18% in 2018 (Fischer 2020, 966–967). The few applications that Cyprus has accepted, however, took an average of 18-24 months to be processed by Asylum Services in 2018, thus demonstrating the extensive length of their bureaucratic asylum processes (Drousiotou and Mathioudakis 2019, 22–31).

As previously stated, Cyprus is considered an ‘accidental’ destination for Syrian refugees due to the political, economic, and social marginalization faced by asylum seekers in Cyprus, and is mostly used as a cross-roads destination between the Middle East and Europe, with many Syrian refugees using the state to gain access to other EU member states. (Fischer 2020, 966–967). When considering political marginalization, far-right political parties in Cyprus have framed Syrian refugees as being linked to Turkish-backed forces, further delegitimizing their claims as asylum seekers, and contextualizing this crisis within the long-standing ‘Cyprus Problem’ (Fischer 2020, 964–970). Additionally, during the Syrian refugee crisis, Cypriot officials stated that they would only be willing to accept 300 Orthodox Christian refugees, claiming that these Christian refugees would be able to assimilate into Cyprus better than other refugee demographics (Fischer 2020, 971). This example further shows how race, religion, and immigration policies have been shaped by the ‘Cyprus Problem’ (Fischer 2020, 971–973).

**Conclusions**

The current Greek integration policy has been developed based on EU migrant integration policies pertinent to the broader concept and regulations of migration governance, adapted to the specificities of the Greek legal framework. Due to the securitization of migration governance both at the EU and national level, priority has been set on deterrence of illegal migration, rather than the integration of refugees and asylum seekers in Greek society. In the post-2014 context, inevitably the focus of national and supranational legislative efforts partly shifted away from deterrence of irregular migration, and towards the entry, stay and integration of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection. Nonetheless, the advent of “New Democracy” to power in 2019 reinstated a more securitized agenda on migration governance favouring border controls in order to enhance the overwhelmed asylum system and relieve pressure on the islands, overlooking the developments of integration policies.

The national integration strategy and subsequent legal documents have conceptualised ‘integration’ as a two-step process, consisting of the reception of people pending a decision on their asylum application, and the integration of those who have been recognised as beneficiaries of international protection. Sadly, despite the undeniable value of the introduction of a social integration scheme, the numerous concerns that emerged at the adoption of the new regulatory and policy framework have, by and large, been confirmed in practice. The views from the field attest to the existence of an insufficient integration scheme, both in law and in practice. At normative level, there are evident pathologies in the domestic legislation, such as the 6-month deadline for exit of recognised refugees introduced by the Law 4636/2019 or the new registry for NGOs. At a policy implementation level, several gaps have been identified with regards to the unbalanced accommodation schemes, the poor employment opportunities and the interruption of services provision in healthcare and other sectors due to the pandemic.

One of the major problems inherent in the implementation of the national integration policies is the creation of aid-dependency in the first stage of reception, which is followed by an abrupt shift to self-sustainment in the second stage of integration of refugees. In essence, asylum seekers are introduced into a system of assisted integration with no prerequisites for receiving financial support, access to services and accommodation. This inevitably gives rise to false expectations of a prolonged situation of support by the State or the civil society actors, which clashes with the reality following a positive decision on the asylum application. As a result recognised refugees are expected to ensure their survival with their own means, let alone their integration.

Finally, the change in the role of the third sector in integration governance in Greece enhances the policy implementation gap in integration. INGOs and NGOs have been central in migration management in Greece since 2014. Nonetheless, their role is gradually diminishing, either by being excluded from consolations on policies or by not taking part in new programs due to budgetary decreases. This leads to concerns that precious ‘know-how’ is lost, especially when it comes to accommodation programs. Likewise, services offered by INGOs and NGOs including, but not limited to, interpreters, psychological support and legal advice, need to be provided by the state in the near future and there is an evident gap there at the moment. This indicates that the transition of Greece to a destination nation for refugees and asylum seekers is a rather complex, long-term process, which needs drastic changes in order to bridge the policy implementation gap in integration, including safety nets when it comes to housing or integration into the labour market, as well as close cooperation between the state and the third sector.

The Republic Cyprus mandates that refugees and asylum seekers are only temporarily granted asylum and create policies that make it difficult for these groups to gain access to the social services they need to survive, even though Israel still has to adopt some international laws and Cyprus still has to adopt some EU laws into their immigration policies (Kalir 2015, 580–588; Yaron et al. 2015, 147–154; Hercowitz-Amir et al. 2017, 6–7; Afeef 2009, 1–5; Baider and Kopytowska 2017, 216–219; Kadianaki et al. 2018, 407–409; Milioni et al. 2015, 33–38; Trimikliniotis 2013, 441–450; Trimikliniotis 2018, 20–24).

While in Cyprus, asylum seekers and refugees are ‘other-ized’ by right-wing political groups in their effort to ‘protect’ the identity of the Greek-Cypriot Christian Orthodox state. Right-wing political groups use negative terminology like ‘infiltrators’ and ‘barbarians’ alongside mass media sources to further dehumanize and delegitimize these marginalized groups (Kalir 2015, 580–588; Yaron et al. 2015, 147–154; Hercowitz-Amir et al. 2017, 6–7; Baider and Kopytowska 2017, 216–219; Kadianaki et al. 2018, 407–409; Milioni et al. 2015, 33–38; Trimikliniotis 2013, 441–450).

Asylum seekers and refugees in Cyprus are also blamed for social problems, such as rising crime rates and economic problems, and Middle Eastern asylum seekers and refugees in particular are targeted and ‘other-ized’ through the context of the ‘Cyprus Problem’ (Kalir 2015, 580–588; Yaron et al. 2015, 147–154; Hercowitz-Amir et al. 2017, 6–7; Afeef 2009, 1–5; Baider and Kopytowska 2017, 216–219; Trimikliniotis 2013, 441–450). Certain migrants are given social exceptions but the majority of asylum seekers and refugees in Israel and Cyprus are racialized, discriminated against, and cut off from civil society (Orr and Ajzenstadt 2020, 149–157; Weinblum 2019, 699–702; Kalir 2015, 580–588; Yaron et al. 2015, 147–154; Baider and Kopytowska 2017, 216–219; Milioni et al. 2015, 33–38; Trimikliniotis 2013, 441–450).

The Syrian refugee crisis has had a marginal impact on Cyprus due to the strict, unwavering asylum seeker policies (Fischer 2020, 964–974; Drousiotou and Mathioudakis 2019, 22–31). Cyprus accepted a small number of Syrian asylum seekers but contextualized them within the ‘Cyprus Problem’ and marginalized them from the dominate Greek-Cypriot society (Fischer 2020, 964–974; Drousiotou and Mathioudakis 2019, 22–31). Moreover, the Greek-Cypriot state did not shift their previously held asylum seeker, refugee, and immigration policies in the wake of this crisis (Fischer 2020, 966–967; Drousiotou and Mathioudakis 2019, 22–31). As a result, the government of the Republic of Cyprus has not engaged in refugee integration and instead maintained an ethnocentric and nativism approach through exclusionary frameworks to protect cultural and economic security (Fischer 2020, 964–974; Drousiotou and Mathioudakis 2019, 22–31; Boms and Karolina 2019, 683–687; Eglash 2018; Sales 2015; Kapusnak 2014, 209–215; TOI Staff 2015).

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