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EMVI

**Empowering Migrants
Voices on Inclusion Policies**

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EMVI - Empowering Migrant Voices on Integration and Inclusion Policies

WP2: National Report Greece* July 2022

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1. Participation and Integration structures in Greece

1.1. Facts and Figures

As regards legally residing migration, Greece has a long settled migrant population holding long term permits at a 37 percent rate, according to 2019 figures. According to the Ministry of Migration Policy's monthly statistics on resident permits, in 31st of August 2019¹ the stock of migrants legally residing in Greece stood at 552,485, recording thus a slightly increase of 1.5 percent comparing to August 2018 (544,443). If we added to that, the 93,962 resident permit applications that were pending on 31st August 2019, the total number of legally residing TCNs in the country could be estimated at 646,447, which in turn corresponds to 6 percent of the total population (of 10.722,300 inhabitants) living in Greece (GSMPRAS September 2019).² Similarly, 44,898 asylum applications (including Dublin cases) lodged till 31st August 2019 showed around 8 percent increase comparing to the same time cohort in 2018 (41,358) (Statistical data of the Greek Asylum Service, September 2019).

The 2011 national census³ data registered 912,000 foreigners (of which 713,000 TCNs and 199,000 EU citizens/non-Greek) living in Greece accounting for 8.3 percent (6.5 and 1.8 percent respectively) of the total resident population in the country. At the same time, the Labour Force Survey data provide a useful tool to identify trends through the years even if there is an inherent risk that they consistently underestimate the number of TCNs living in Greece. A comparison between the stay permit data with the LFS data demonstrates the LFS data estimates the TCN population to be 140,000 less, which is a 30% difference. This high rate of discrepancy can be attributed to the different goals and methodological approaches applied to collect and classify the data. This is reflected in the way of calculating the total stock of migrant population (of any age and legal status) regardless of its job status, on the one hand, and the labour force/manpower composition, on the other. Data from the 2019 Labour Force Survey (2nd Quarter) suggests an increase of 7 percent in the total migrant population (from 15 to 64 years old) with 411,400 non-Greek citizens residing in the country in 2019 compared to 382,900 in 2018 (Figure 1). Interestingly, while the total number of TCNs increased by 9.5 percent (347,500 in 2019 compared to 314,600 in 2018), the number of EU citizens⁴ (non-Greeks) decreased by 6.5 percent (63,900 in 2019 compared to 2018 (68,300)).⁵

Valid stay permits for TCNs, as provided by the Ministry of Migration Policy in August 2019, point to a slightly increased number (by 1.5 percent) of third country nationals, notably 552,485 persons, comparing to 544,443 in 2018, while the gender distribution

¹ Available: <http://www.immigration.gov.gr/miniaia-statistika-stoixeia>

² General Secretariat for Migration Policy, Reception and Asylum statistics on issuance-renewal of resident permits, the total number of third country nationals

³ While the national census of 2011 does not provide the most up to date data for 2016, it is worth consulting as regards the total migrant population residing in Greece as it does not distinguish between legal and undocumented residents. Even though one might consider that recent arrivals were not registered as at all probability they lacked a fixed domicile.

⁴ Falling under the Eurostat category of "EU 28 countries except reporting country"

⁵ Eurostat database on population by sex, age, citizenship and labour status. Available: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/lfs/data/database>.



remains at the same level. There is a gender balance trend with men constituting slightly over half (290,895) of the total migrant population, while 47 percent of the population (259,917) is relatively young, notably between 30 and 49 years of age. The economic crisis and high unemployment rates combined with legal status' precariousness magnified the size of structural barriers in a way that long settled migrants losing both their (temporary) legal and job status, and lapsing back to informality (Gemi 2019, p. 56). Data from the Greek Ministry of Migration Policy (2019) show that the largest number of legal migrants residing in Greece was recorded in 2010, when 601,675 residence permits were in force, while in the years to come (2012-2017) this number decreased. In terms of job status, the impact of the economic crisis on immigrant workers as the most vulnerable social group was manifold and largely interwoven with the systemic characteristics of the Greek labour market. The unemployment rate of migrants was estimated to be 36 percent during the height of the crisis (2012-2014). At the same time, however, the large economic sectors such as agriculture and tourism have become dependent on migrant labour working informally, while undeclared work has also been the main feature in domestic care where 40 percent of migrant women work under irregular condition (Bagavos et.al 2019, p. 323).

An estimated 65 percent of Greece's foreign population is Albanian, while the numbers of EU citizens residing in Greece are not included in the database of Ministry of Integration Policy. Georgians and Pakistanis (with 4.1 percent and 3.5 percent respectively) are the third and fourth largest communities according to TCN's database on valid permits in August 2019. In terms of resident permits' category, 57 percent of men hold permits for "other" reasons, followed by permits for "family reunification" (26 percent) and residence permits for employment purposes (17.5percent). Most women hold family reunification permits (48 percent which is decreased by 6 percent comparing to 2018), followed by "other" category permits (43 percent, an increase of 5 percent comparing to 2018) and employment permits (8.6 percent, an increase of 7 percent comparing to 2018).

Among EU Member States, the largest differences of the employment rate for the native-born population as compared to persons born outside the EU, were observed in Greece (18.8 points) (Migrant Integration Statistics, Eurostat May 2019, p.7) According to EL.STAT in the first quarter of 2019 the number of employed foreign men and women increased by 11.9 percent. Even though most new jobs were occupied by natives (81.3 percent), the increase in the number of the employed was bigger for foreigners (9.3%) than natives (2.1 percent). The rise in the number of employed foreigners is likely due to the recovery of sectors that prefer to hire low or medium-skilled foreigner workers than natives such as tourism, construction and agriculture (Cholezas 2019, p. 30). The unemployment rates of foreigners were 8 percent higher than of Greek citizens in 2018. Meanwhile, in 2019 the unemployment rates for Greek citizens showed signs of improvement from 19 percent in 2018 to 17 percent in 2019. Foreigners, on the other hand, appear to be more exposed to unemployment (probably due to undeclared job activities), as its rate has been increased by 2 percent in 2019 (29 percent) in comparison to 2018 (27 percent). According to Eurostat, the largest gender gaps in labour market participation among persons born outside the EU were recorded in Greece (27.2 points) (Migrant Integration Statistics, Eurostat May 2019, p.4).

While Greece received over a million refugees and migrants in 2015 and 2016, UNHCR estimates some 43,000 refugees and migrants are in Greece. Yet, statistics about persons from Third Countries in Greece with residence permits have not been made public for the past few years.



Most researchers resort to adding numbers to estimate the total, yet this exercise often proves slippery. For example, in 2018, 36 000 new immigrants obtained a residence permit longer than 12 months in Greece (excluding EU citizens), 18.6% more than in 2017. This figure comprises 8% labour migrants, 48% family members (including accompanying family), 2.3% who came for education reasons and 41.7% other migrants, according to <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org>.

Immigration and asylum-seeking flows via the Greek Turkish sea and land borders have increased during 2018-2021. Flows have increased in 2019 along both the Greek Turkish sea borders (arrivals on the Aegean islands) and the Greek Turkish land border. During the first half of 2019, more than 30,000 people arrived in Greece by sea and over land, the majority from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq (UNHCR, September 2019). In addition, over 7,000 migrants arrived on the Greek islands in August, and over 10,000 in September 2019, the highest monthly figures since the European Union and Turkey signed a deal to limit migrant traffic across the Aegean in 2016, and many more since then. Clamping down on border crossings, in the land and the sea, in the presence of FRONTEX operations, with the European Parliament weary about thousands of pushbacks, the death toll of drowning and deaths in the Evros river and the Aegean Sea has dramatically increased in 2022.

In 2019 nearly 22,000 people (35 percent of whom children) were accommodated in Reception and Identification Centers (RICs) across the Greek islands. These centers' capacity has been exceeded by 500 percent, forcing vulnerable people to live in degrading and dangerous conditions. This increase has been largely attributed to the long delays in processing both asylum applications and family reunification requests. In addition, even when the asylum applications have been lodged, those people remained in the RICs on the islands because of the lack of space in the reception centers on the mainland. In response, 10,000 people have been moved from the islands to the mainland since September 2019, according to the Ministry of Citizens' Protection.

1.2. Main official institutions/bodies/stakeholders in the country dealing/responsible for migrant integration on national, regional and local level

Integration depends on the willingness ability of a country, region, municipality, yet also an intergovernmental entity, to receive migrants and refugees. Greece has experienced two major shifts regarding migration and asylum since 1989. At the beginning of the 1990s, when a considerable number of people from Central and Eastern European countries started to migrate to Greece, and in the period of 2015-2016, with the massive arrival, via Turkey, of people from countries at war or conditions that endanger their lives. Following the mass refugees' arrival in 2015, the Ministry of Immigration Policy was founded, with responsibilities concerning immigration and integration, along with an Independent Asylum Service operating under the Ministry's supervision. The mass inflows overwhelmed the capacity of public institutions to process and look after migrants and refugees while Greece was still adapting to the effects of the ongoing since 2010 economic crisis. The number of asylum applications increased, but so were the recognitions, while there were developments towards the access of children to the educational system. Nevertheless, the access of asylum seekers and refugees to services and employment is difficult and limited, mainly because of the adverse economic conditions in Greece. Following the change in government after the 2019 general election (two months after the



Migration action plan was adopted), the Ministry of Immigration Policy (MIP) was dissolved and subsequently re-established as the Ministry of Immigration and Asylum (MIA).

1.3. Main legal framework dealing/responsible for migrant integration on national, regional and local level

Law 3463/2006, known as the Code of Municipalities and Communities, in Article 214, defines as obligation for the municipal and community authorities to promote registration and resolution the problems and needs of the inhabitants of their geographical region, as well as consultation “with collective social actors and population stakeholders both in the preparation of action plans and regulatory acts, as well as when making decisions of general interest.” From this general wording it follows that migrants are not only not excluded from participating in local affairs but, on the contrary, they are considered equal interlocutors with the Greek citizens towards the local principles. The required follow-up was not afforded to this provision. The participation of immigrants in local events without the introduction of new administrative tools and methods of administration, without strengthening the role of civil society, social organisations and without the necessary cuts in the system of government was doomed to remain on paper and this modernizing step to stay meteor.

For first time in October 2009 the then newly elected government tried to create a role and to determine the position of immigrants in Greek society through two legislations: Law 3838/2010 and Law 3852/2010. With this initiative the legislator tried not only to strengthen the integration of immigrants in Greek society, but also to respond to requests from active civil society and local authorities to address local level institutional issues that concern not only the indigenous but also the foreign population of the local community. At the same time, the important responsibility of the municipalities in social inclusion is recognized, and the fact that the relationship of the foreigner with the Greek society is formed in the first place at the municipal level, as well as the success or the failure of this "socialisation".

To develop more coherent management policies, governments’ priorities concerning migration and refugee issues led to the introduction and implementation of the National Action Plan for Migration Management in 2009. It was drafted by the Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection and was intended to be implemented gradually within a three-year period. This led to the introduction and adoption of Law 3907/2011 which introduced legislative changes in the screening mechanisms, registration procedures, detention, repatriation and returns. It established new services, such as First Reception Service, a new Asylum Service, and more accommodation centers to cover the needs of international protection and those with specific protection needs. The priorities were evident and focused on the border control and combating unauthorized entries while close to zero percentage rates of recognitions of international protection, difficult access to asylum procedures, great delays and long waiting times for decisions, pending asylum applications, detention of asylum seekers and refoulement remained systematic practice. The UNHCR characterized the situation at the borders and the reception conditions as a humanitarian crisis and opposed transfers to Greece under the Dublin Regulation because of inadequate protection of asylum seekers. Following judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in *MSS vs Belgium and Greece* the other member states suspended Dublin transfers to Greece since 2011.



The adoption of Law 3838 in 2010 (L. 3838/2010), provided the framework through which children of immigrants that were born in Greece or attended Greek school for several years could be granted Greek citizenship, as well as the participation of citizens of TNCs in the local elections. However, in 2011, the Council of State annulled these two provisions on the grounds of being unconstitutional. Finally, Law 4332/2015 amended the previous L. 4251/2014 making provisions for the framework of naturalization of children of immigrants. During the same period, there was an increase of the number of racial incidents, organized racial attacks, threats and sometimes lethal attacks against migrants and asylum seekers, mainly from extreme right organizations such as the Golden Dawn while in certain cases according to reports with the tolerance of the police.

Table 1: Total number of residence permits issued to migrants in the urban area of Heraklion by country of origin of migrants, April 2016

Country of origin	Heraklion
EGYPT	64
ALBANIA	9.537
ARMENIA	64
GEORGIA	323
INDIA	56
CHINA	91
MOLDOVA	222
BANGLADESH	23
NIGERIA	19
UKRAINE	513
PAKISTAN	51
RUSSIA	532
SYRIA	266
PHILIPPINES	106
Other	733
TOTAL	12.600

Source: Ministry of Interior and Administrative Reconstruction, March 2016.

Table 2: Categories of reasons for which residence permits were issued in the greater urban area of Heraklion, April 2016

	Employment	Other	Family unification	Study
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Heraklion	1110	5268	6183	39
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Table 3: Basic categories of residence permits under “Other”

Basic categories of residence permits under “Other”	Heraklion
TEN- YEAR RESIDENCE PERMIT	2176
SECOND GENERATION RESIDENCE PERMIT	673
INDEFINITE -TERM RESIDENCE PERMIT	829
SPECIAL CERTIFICATE OF LEGAL RESIDENCE	200
LONG-TERM RESIDENT PERMIT	903
PERMANENT RESIDENCE	219
TOTAL CORE SUBCATEGORIES	5000
OTHER CATEGORIES	268
TOTAL CATEGORY "OTHER"	5268

Source: Data obtained from the Ministry of Interior and Administrative Reconstruction, March 2016.

1.4. Main policies in the country dealing/responsible for migrant integration on national, regional and local level

The sudden high arrivals of migrants and refugees in 2015, drastically changing the migration environment in the country, saw national authorities and cities directly confronted with the challenge of reception and quick integration, in the context of a difficult political debate. City authorities found themselves on the frontline, and had to quickly adapt to strengthen their reception, social cohesion and integration policies. Some introduced ad-hoc taskforces for integration, others appointed a refugee coordinator or a municipal counsellor to deal with the situation. Over the past few years, several cities have increased temporary accommodation and provided early integration support, while implementing initiatives to counter a raising negative



attitude towards newcomers, always through external funding. Across local communities, the debate has evolved from how to provide humanitarian emergency assistance to ensure the sustainable management of integration. These city authorities have implemented concrete solutions to provide immediate accommodation, transport, language courses, schooling, vocational training and support to find housing and employment. Certain cities tried to respond by: Creating new bodies, implementing new strategies and strengthening policies; Adopting a holistic approach involving different city offices; Mainstreaming integration across their policies and services; Opening up to a number of local actors to pursue a multi-stakeholder approach.

Political participation and representation of first-generation naturalised migrants and refugees started becoming possible in the European and local elections of 26th of May and national elections of 7th July 2019. The naturalisation reforms (of 2010 and 2015 respectively), and some might argue the amendments (4531/2018 and 4604/2019) on the reduction of naturalization fee and applicants' interview criteria, have led to increasing numbers of citizenship applications and acquisitions mostly by children born in Greece or who came to the country at a very young age and have attended Greek schools (22,060 naturalisations in 2018). Attempts towards management of migration and integration are demonstrated in the newly introduced "Greek integration model" (National Strategy for Integration, July 2019). Yet the challenges Greece faces as regards immigration and asylum seeking are still significant.

In 2019 the government has announced a plan which foresaw the deportation of 10,000 people and the transfer of other 20,000 asylum seekers from the island camps to less crowded facilities on the mainland. According to the same plan, six new "closed pre-departure centers" were constructed where asylum-seekers are held until they are either granted refugee status or supposedly sent back to Turkey if their applications are rejected. In the context of a tougher migration stance, on 31 of October 2019, Greek government introduced a highly controversial asylum law amidst mounting criticism that it will curtail fundamental human rights as regards integration. These developments suggest that Greece is faced with two different migration realities. On one hand a long term settled population that has changed the ethnic demographic composition of the citizenry. On the other, a recently arrived population of mostly asylum seekers that remains in highly precarious status as well as living conditions. Struggling with a prolonged migration crisis fatigue, the efficiency of its governance (both at EU and national level) and the security as well as "law and order" rhetoric are questioning, particularly when it comes to humanitarian issues, legal status and social integration as the major challenges for Greece in the coming years. The current 'refugee emergency' situation constitutes a moral and political dilemma for both Greece and the entire EU, demonstrating that even if managing the flows is a legitimate policy goal both at the national (Greek) and the EU level, it is neither legitimate nor acceptable to keep people in inhumane conditions, lacking access to basic facilities and services.

1.5. Inclusion of migrants in the design and implementation of integration policies on national, regional, local level

The National Strategy for the social inclusion of third country nationals, published by the Ministry of Interior in April 2013 has until recently been the only possible blueprint for strengthening the participation of migrants at local level in general and the role of MICs. The Migrant Integration Councils (MIC) are an institution in the field of Greek Local Government, introduced with the law



3852/2010, also known as the Kallikratis Programme. Together with the institution of the Municipal Consultation Committee and its Supporter/Ombudsman of the Citizen and Business, these initiatives are invited to contribute to the most immediate and more effective citizen participation in local events, in pre – consultation decision-making, the transparent exercise of power and the upgrading of municipal institutions governance.⁶

The provision for the formation and operation of MIC is not an innovation of the Greek self-governing organisation. Already, since the mid-90s, similar consulting institutions exist and operate in many European cities with the aim of strengthening its political and social cohesion of local communities with strong intercultural elements.

In parallel with Law 3838/2010 the government launched the "modernisation" of the provisions of the law on citizenship and attributed the right of political participation of expatriate and legally residing immigrants in the elections of Local Government.⁷ The government considered this political participation imperative for three reasons. First, to harmonise national legislation with the guidelines of the "Convention on the participation of foreigners in public life at the local level" according to with the requirements of the Council of Europe (05/02/1992) .⁸ Secondly, for the adoption of the, provided for at EU level, right to participate in local events which was included in the guiding principles of the Stockholm Program under preparation (European Council, 2010) .⁹ Third, to highlight the pioneering role of Local government in the implementation of a model of democratic and open society, as well to lift blockades and ghetto entrapments.

The publication of Law 3838/2010 preceded that of Law 3852/2010 for about two and a half months, something not accidental. In the first instance legislation launched and strengthened the institution of MIC provided in the second and gives it an increased momentum and an expectation. Articles 14 and 17 of Law 3838/2010 recognise for the first time the right to vote and to be elected to those immigrants who meet the conditions set by law. And the right to participate does not remain on paper as one formal right. On the contrary, it is reinforced through article 78 of Kallikrates, where the law mentions the participation of the elected foreign municipal councillors in the MIC as mandatory¹⁰, securing the latter ones a role in local affairs, as well as to all foreigners participating in the electoral process the principle of forming a political identity.

⁶ Explanatory memorandum of the draft law "New Architecture of Local Government and Decentralized Administration - Kallikratis Program ", <http://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/2f026f42-950c-4efc-b950-340c4fb76a24/r-topanad-eis.pdf>

⁷ According to the then government, this participation is part of an asset integration policy aimed at creating a social osmosis among immigrants and local host communities and highlights the essential role of local government in implementation of a model of a democratic and open society in provoking difference,

<http://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/2f026f42-950c-4efc-b950-340c4fb76a24/SMETAGEN-EIS.pdf>

⁸ <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/144.htm>

⁹ The Stockholm Program provides in point 6.1.4. that an 'active policy integration should aim to recognize [third-country nationals] rights and obligations corresponding to those of the citizens of the Union. That should remain as a goal of the common immigration policy and to be implemented as soon as possible and by 2014 at the latest ".

¹⁰ According to article 78 "in the above councils foreign members who may have been elected are obligatorily appointed as members ".



The establishment of the Migrant Integration Councils (MICs) since 2010 became the first local government body specifically aimed to this end. With all their weaknesses and limitations, the formation of the MIC in a municipality signals its intention to promote integration. They also established a forum where migrant associations can communicate their concerns and interact with other interested actors in the city. Greek municipalities can do so a) through the way in which they implement general policies, and how actively they seek to reach and bring in TCNs so that they equally benefit from general policies that target the population at large (i.e. such as social policy, education and urban regeneration, among others), and b) through projects, programs and initiatives that are specifically designed for and target TCNs, and which often have to secure national or European funding outside of the municipal budget.

The MIC is an advisory body at the municipal level which is composed by the decision of the municipal council in order to assume a triple role.¹¹ First, recording and investigating the problems faced by migrants living permanently and legally in the region of the municipality concerned and which impede the integration migrants in the local community and their contact with public authorities. Second, formulating recommendations and proposals to the municipal council for the development of local actions to promote the smooth social integration of migrants and to resolve obstacles they face. Third, creating structures so that dialogue is not random and informal, but specific and targeted.¹²

According to article 78 of the Law 3852/2010, MICs (MICs in Greek) consist of five to eleven members which are appointed by the relevant municipal council. Their involvement towards strengthening social inclusion of legal migrants is allegedly ensured through their composition. The members are appointed municipal councillors, representatives of migrant organisations,¹³ whose seat is located within the administrative boundaries of the municipality concerned, or representatives who are selected by the migrant community residing permanently in the municipality concerned, according to on the terms provided by a relevant regulation issued by the court of first instance. At the same time, social representatives should be included in the composition, actors who develop within the administrative district of the municipality activities related to addressing problems of migrants. The Council chairman, one of the elected councillors, is elected by the same decision appointing the members, while in the case that a foreigner councillor has been elected his appointment to the Council becomes mandatory. The participation of the members in the Council is honorary and unpaid,¹⁴ while for its formation no a deadline is set by law.

¹¹ There is no deadline by law for the formation of the council, see, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Eng. No. 59 74896 / 30.12.10: Institutional changes of the "Kallikratis" Programme.

¹² It should be noted that this is not the first time that local government bodies have been called to cooperate with migrants on issues of local interest of the municipality. The Law 3463/2006, also known as the Code of Municipalities and Communities, in article 214 provided for the obligation of municipal and community authorities to 'consult with residents in their areas, collective social actors and stakeholders' population both during the preparation of the action plans and regulatory acts, as well as when making decisions of general interest ", Government Gazette vol. 114 / 08.06.2006.

¹³ The representative of the participating migrant organizations is not required to be a citizen of a specific municipality, Ministry of Foreign Affairs No. 59 AP house 74896 / 30.12.10: "Institutional changes of "Kallikratis" Programme.

¹⁴ For a draft regulation of the operation of SEMs prepared by EETAA see http://www.eetaa.gr:8080/kallikratis/support/Kanonismoi/d_symvoulio_entaxis_metanastwn.pdf



The catalytic role of the relevant municipal council (MC) in the establishment of the MIC, since the latter's formation is left to the MC discretion. Further, the regulation of the MICs operation is an exclusive task of the relevant municipal council, which implies that there may be differences in the mode of operation between the MICs. From the two above-mentioned remarks and from the description of Article 78 follows that the legal framework appears very loose, since in fact it is more a guiding principle (Afouxenidis et al., 2012). The logic of the legislator is that each municipality has its own peculiarities, its own problems and advantages, different proportion of native and foreign population, while the members of the latter have in each locality a different composition. Therefore, each municipal authority, within the axes that the law sets, has the option to adapt the institution to its realities and form its specific priorities. This flexibility is supposed to facilitate the longevity (?) of the institution and the success of his work. The MICs' composition, operation and results of the work, in the very few municipalities where they have been formed, are related to endogenous and exogenous factors. These factors are related to the will of the municipal authority to "wheel" the new institution, the number of immigrants and its composition, the activity or non-local immigration organisations, local geomorphism, local economy and the implemented immigration policy of the Central Administration.

There are municipalities that have set up and operate MICs. However, this is the exception and is found mainly in some large urban centers.¹⁵ There are many reasons why the overall operating is negative. First, in municipalities where MICs have not been formed, the municipal authorities consider the issue this as a formal obligation and not as an essential step in strengthening the whole of the local society. Even more, a formal obligation with a high risk and potential political cost given the racist and xenophobic narratives and attitudes in the general public sphere. In addition, the municipalities are understaffed, burdened with a multitude of responsibilities and without resources. Municipal authorities are reluctant to support administratively and financially such an institution while experiencing a persistent fear that any action in the field of migration will make them accountable to citizens who bear xenophobic attitudes.

In February 2013 the Council of State (CoC) by decision of the Plenary (S.T.E., 2013) considered, inter alia, the provisions of articles 14 to 21 of Law 3838/2010 as unconstitutional, particularly on the right of participation of foreign nationals of third countries as regards the bodies of the Local Self-Government Organisations of the first degree. The highest administrative court considered that these provisions are contrary to Articles 1, 5 and 102 of the Greek Constitution which recognises that the political right to vote and to be elected belongs exclusively to Greek citizens.¹⁶

¹⁵ Examples are Athens, Patras, Korydallos, Heraklion, Thessaloniki

¹⁶ On 5 August 2010, an application for annulment was lodged by a private individual against a) of no. Φ.130181 / 23198 / 30.4.2010 decision of the Minister of Interior, Decentralization and E-Government (Government Gazette B'562) entitled "Determination of supporting documents to accompany the declaration and application for registration in the Municipal Register due to birth or study in a school in Greece, in accordance with the provisions of article 1 A of the Greek Code Citizenship "and b) the 6th Circular of the same with protocol number 24592 / 7-5-2010 Of the Minister entitled "Exercise of the right to vote and to be elected by expatriates and legally residing third-country nationals for the promotion of elected bodies of the primary local government ", in the part that refers only to the provision rights to vote and to be elected to third-country nationals. On the 1st of February 2011, the 4th Department of the Council of State with decision 350/2011, ruled that exercise of the right to vote, as well as the exercise of the right to vote for the promotion of the organs of local self-government is reserved only to the Greeks citizens and cannot be extended to those who do not have this status without revision of the relevant



1.6. Main migrant organisations in the country

Since 2010, municipal authorities in Greece have been at the forefront in dealing with the social dislocations stemming from the economic crisis. They have also directly been confronted with local reactions and pressures that in large urban centers like Athens find expression in the political extremism of the Golden Dawn and occasionally of other political parties. Some city administrations worked together with local volunteers, NGOs, religious organisations and local companies who provided immediate assistance and spontaneously organised support for the integration of the newcomers.

The organisation primarily responsible for the needs of refugees and asylum seekers until 2021 has been the United Nations, through its operational branches: UNHCR and the IOM. The UNHCR (as of May 2021) is represented by a liaison in Crete, who aids local administrators in planning integration policies, while a lawyer conducts appointments with beneficiaries and helps with their cases through a collaboration with the Greek Council for Refugees. From mid-2018 to August 2019 though the UN had assigned two protection case workers who lived in Heraklion and moved around Crete for the needs of the program, providing invaluable services; however, due to organisation cutbacks, the protection workers were either reassigned or laid off. Part of the agreement between the Greek State, the UNHCR, and the local municipalities in 2017 was that the organisations responsible for the realization of relocation and integration programs would be local actors and local chapters of international organisations instead of NGOs, as is often the case in mainland Greece and the borderland islands. As a result of this agreement, an already existing co-operative non-profit organisation comprised of municipalities and local organisations undertook the task of organizing until recently the ESTIA program in Crete: Anaptyxiaki Kritis and Ploigos. The two organisations were originally interconnected, but in 2020 they separated to increase their State funding and operational capacity. Their operations are funded by the Regional Government of Crete and European Union funds, with each of their programs and projects receiving separate funding; in this case ESTIA is funded by UNHCR and the EU. Anaptyxiaki and Ploigos had ESTIA offices in Heraklion, and local partners in Chania, and Sitia, where social scientists, interpreters, and administrative assistants are employed, tasked with the organisation's mandate.

IOM also has had a presence in Heraklion since 2014, with its primary mandate until 2020 being the voluntary return relocation program, which includes two hundred euros, a return ticket, and travel documents for those willing to travel back to their countries of origin. However, in mainland Greece in 2019, and in Crete in 2020, IOM is also tasked with realizing the HELIOS integration program, the plan that is implemented after ESTIA, funded by the General Directorate of the European Commission for Migration and Internal Affairs. HELIOS is a pilot program that aims to support the recipients of international assistance (refugees and the beneficiaries of subsidiary assistance), so they can integrate into the Greek society. The program, according to a leaflet shared with stakeholders during its inaugural presentation, offers services aimed at the promotion of independent living, including rent allowance, language, and culture classes (capacity is currently twenty people per semester), employment support, and integration supervision. The

provision of the Constitution. The case was referred by the 4th Department to Plenary session of the Council of State.



classes and the workshops for HELIOS take place in Gazi, a suburb of Heraklion where access is possible only via public transportation and/or cars, which presents a problem, as bus tickets are expensive¹⁷ for most refugees living in the city center and its neighborhoods. HELIOS also offers preschool activities for children while their parent(s) attend classes and workshops. The exact time that beneficiaries of HELIOS can remain in the program and receive the allowance has not been clarified, with six to twelve (6-12) months being an estimation.¹⁸

Andrea and Maria Kalokairinou Foundations

An important local organisation dealing with the homeless, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers / international protection, but also unregistered are the Andreas and Maria Kalokairinou Charities. The role of the Institutions is particularly crucial for those beneficiaries who are in the "gap" between services. The social workers of the Foundation are often called upon to carry out social research, interventions in services, but also to support bureaucratic procedures of beneficiaries (tax return, applications to the State, allowances, etc.). The Foundation's meals are distributed over two hundred (200) portions of food per day, while the Greek program Agalide of the Foundation (2018-2020) was the largest and most comprehensive in the city, as it contained the element of social intervention and the first steps in integration of displaced people in the city.¹⁹ The food program and the Greek language classes are the two programs most appealing to displaced populations in the Foundation, as they would participate in large numbers. The education program quickly became popular with the various actors in the city and expanded; during 2019-2020 the program had a total of six instructor-volunteers, offering a total 16 hours of classes a week, for more than sixty adult and young adult students. The meal program the Foundation runs relies on European Union funds, and its initial goal was to serve 'Greek people [citizens] in need,' however according to the Foundation statistics (which regularly fluctuate), the majority of the meals' beneficiaries are non-Greeks (a hundred and eighteen displaced persons from Asian countries, twenty-two Europeans, in contrast to seventy-one Greek citizens in 2020). The Foundation often finds itself under scrutiny from local council members and anti-immigrant groups, who believe the food programs and services should only be available to Greeks. However, contrary to what conservative anti-immigrant politicians and activists argue, this form of food assistance responds to current needs and shifts in the demographics. Nevertheless, the food program itself often presents challenges and causes confusion to the beneficiaries, underlining the precarity of food access for those most in need in Heraklion. The administration of the Foundation's meal program does not have a consistent policy outlining why families are removed from the daily meal provision. As to cash distribution, problems started in early 2020, when UNHCR ultimately sent in its place an affiliated NGO, an action that enraged the administration of the Foundation who stood to gain nothing from this collaboration and decided to refuse the free use of its space. There was great uncertainty as to when and where the cash disbursements would

¹⁷ Greece does not have a central bus company system, with each region and city having either State/municipally-funded or private companies providing transportation options. Iraklion is one of the most expensive Greek cities in terms of urban transportation with buses. The company here does not have a socially aware policy, as it does not provide any unemployed citizens with a bus pass, or even a discount. Only people with disabilities, military personnel, and students get discounts. However, students do not get discounts outside their school hours, which is often a point of conflict between drivers and students, causing multiple complaints from the latter.

¹⁸ Interviews, April 2022

¹⁹ Interviews, April 2022



take place again, even though the UN would notify beneficiaries of the meeting location with text messages a few days in advance. Notably, the cash assistance and distribution service turned into a bimonthly operation since March 2020, and its operation moved to a location outside the city. Due to its charity work and the classes it offered pre-pandemic, the Foundation has often been a place that displaced people frequent. This has created tension with neighbours, who feel the daily presence of people with dark complexion negatively affects their business and clientele. The COVID-19 pandemic also caused significant complications. The pandemic led to a sharp decrease in the Foundation's community programs: the administration decided to terminate all educational programs, including the non-formal school for displaced adults.

Thalassa-Sea of Solidarity

The Sea of Solidarity is the only Non-Governmental Organisation of its kind in the city, a relatively new organisation of people with knowledge of the field and intense activism. From when he started their presence in the city, the Sea has helped families and individuals without distinction of ethnicity, origin, sexual orientation, etc. The Sea offers sewing workshops with simultaneous experiential teaching Greek, English classes, and IT. The Sea is not funded by any organisation, and accepts donations that are then directed to the beneficiaries who provide assistance. During the pandemic, the Sea suspended its classes and workshops, but played a key role in providing basic necessities to families and individuals without access to basic necessities.

SOS Children's Villages

SOS Children's Villages play an important role in the city of Heraklion, actively supporting activities and organizing activities for families and young children, but also offering housing to those children who need it, deinstitutionalization programs, and advocacy. In Heraklion, SOS Children's Villages have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Municipality of Heraklion since July 2020, pledging to provide support in matters relating to the support of families facing issues that affect their functionality and family relationships, through a system of referrals to cases of families with minor children who face domestic issues and are in a state of poverty. At the same time, SOS Children's Villages provide support programs, know-how exchanges, and family empowerment services. SOS Children's Villages have building facilities in Finikia, Heraklion, and a Learning and Pedagogical Support Center (KEMPY) in the city center²⁰ which operates in collaboration with Heraklion Development and mainly concerns the provision of remedial education to children of refugees, immigrants and other vulnerable families. At the same time, SOS Children's Villages actively support vulnerable refugee families with donations of items such as school, baby and children's equipment and food in collaboration with Heraklion Development.

Heraklion Development AAE OTA

Heraklion Development is a development company that operates mainly in the Regional Unit of Heraklion of the Region of Crete, with many years of experience in designing and implementing development programs at local, national and international level. The Region of Crete, the Regional Union of Municipalities of Crete, all the municipalities of the Regional Unit of Heraklion, the Pancretan Cooperative Bank, the Chamber of Heraklion and some agricultural cooperatives participate in its shareholding composition.

²⁰ <https://sos-villages.gr/kentra-mathisiakis/>



The Local Government Organisations (OTA) of A and B degree hold most of the share capital. From 2017 onwards the AN.H. implements support programs for asylum seekers implemented in Crete in collaboration with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2017-2020) and the Ministry of Immigration and Asylum (2021). From December 2020, AN.H. has also co-signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the Municipality of Heraklion and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees with the main focus of supporting actions and initiatives for the integration of asylum seekers and recognized refugees, the support of the KEM and the communities and the employment of the target population. At the same time, as a coordinating partner, it implements a SWITCH-ASIA program in the countries of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, which concerns the development of sustainable tourism and the transfer of know-how to these areas outside the major investment programs (public and private investments) in the hinterland.

NAVIGATOR Educational Development

Educational Development Navigator is a development company with educational and development programs that operates mainly in the Prefecture of Heraklion, Region of Crete. Its shareholder structure includes institutions, cooperatives, associations, and chambers of Crete. The NAVIGATOR participates in the implementation of programs for the support of asylum seekers (ESTIA) and recognized refugees (HELIOS) as well as in training, education and entrepreneurship support programs.

The ESTIA relocation program²¹

The ESTIA Program with a decision of P.E.D. of Crete is implemented by the "Development of Heraklion SA OTA" and the "Educational-Development Navigator." In this context, the Municipality of Heraklion, as well as other Municipalities of the island (Municipality of Malevizi, Municipality of Sitia and Municipality of Chania), cooperates with the Development of Heraklion and the NAVIGATOR for the implementation of the Program of the Ministry of Immigration and Asylum "ESTIA - Homeless " According to data from the two bodies in the Municipality of Heraklion and the neighbouring Municipality of Malevizi, (Dec. 2021) about 350 people have been accommodated in autonomous living houses with available accommodation amounts to 800. The low occupancy rate has resulted from the management of referrals from the competent ministry as the percentages of filling positions in the UN High Commissioner for Refugees exceeded 90%.

The Program has been implemented from April 2017 until spring/summer 2022 and included:

- Housing of asylum seekers in fully equipped homes within the urban fabric with access to health services, education, work, etc.
- Interventions and interconnection with the community
- Psychosocial support of beneficiaries with specialized scientific staff
- Integration of children and adolescents in the education system
- Support for access to all levels of the National Health System
- Support in complex bureaucratic procedures (Asylum Service, issuance of VAT, AMA, bank account, etc.)

²¹ <http://estia.unhcr.gr/en/home/>



- Interpretation and escort in services and procedures (vaccination, inventory, hospitals, schools, etc.)

The financial support program, now stopped, has been connected to the ESTIA program as it concerns the beneficiaries who live either in the specific program or in mass temporary structures of temporary accommodation type camps. In its original form managed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, it also concerned the self-accommodated and then the distribution and management took place through regular delegations on the island. The program has been implemented by the Ministry of Immigration and Asylum, where they are observed with typical delays in the disbursement of the financial aid.

HELIOS programme

In collaboration with national authorities and experienced operators - partners (NAVIGATOR), through the HELIOS of the Migration and Asylum Ministry, IOM aims to promote the integration of beneficiaries of international protection in the Greek society, residing in temporary accommodation facilities (camps and ESTIA program), through the following actions:

- Integration courses: Conduct integration courses in Educational Integration Centres throughout the country. Each course lasts 6 months and includes modules related to learning the Greek language, cultural orientation, degree of readiness for work and other skills.
- Housing support: Support for beneficiaries for independent housing in apartments with rent in their name, providing them with allowance for rent and relocation expenses and networking with apartment owners.
- Employment Support: Providing for individual employment opportunities and enhancing job readiness through the provision of counselling services, access to job-related certifications and networking with potential employers.
- Monitoring the integration process: Regular evaluation of the integration progress of the beneficiaries, to ensure that they can negotiate successfully with the Greek public services after the completion of the HELIOS program and that they will be able to live independently in Greece.
- Awareness of the host communities: Organizing workshops, activities, events and conducting a nationwide information campaign, to create opportunities for interaction between the guests and the host society, emphasizing the importance of the integration of refugees and immigrants in Greek society.

Council for the Integration of Immigrants and Refugees (excerpt from the Plan for the Integration of Refugees and Immigrants of the Municipality of Heraklion)

In 2012, the Municipality of Heraklion, in accordance with article 78 of law 3852/2010 / (bill "Kallikratis"), establishes the Council for the Integration of Immigrants and Refugees (S.E.M.P.).

In 2019, according to Law 4555/2018 "Reform of the institutional framework of Local Government Deepening of the Republic Strengthening the Participation Improving the economic and development operation of the Local Authorities. - Program "CLOSED I" and especially its article 79, is renamed the Council for the Integration of Immigrants and Refugees (S.E.M.P.), operates as



an advisory body by decision of the Municipal Council and with the main purpose of strengthening the integration of immigrants and refugees in the local community.

The objectives of S.E.M.P. are²²:

- recording and investigating problems of immigrants & refugees, in terms of their integration into the local community, their contact with public authorities, the municipal authority and other services.
- The submission of suggestions to the Municipal Council for the development of local actions to promote the smooth social integration of immigrants and refugees
- The development of awareness actions for the smooth integration of the immigrant and refugee population and the smooth coexistence with the local population.
- During the operation of S.E.M.P. From 2012-2019, qualitative studies were conducted in the form of focus groups, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, on the needs, difficulties and expectations of immigrants / refugees and services related to the issues of interest of this population. During the systematization of the views of both parties (representatives of the population and the services-structures) issues arise concerning the sectors: health, education and training and sports-culture.

In particular, the following emerged²³:

- Need to preserve the mother tongue of immigrants and refugees
- Need for the fulfilment of their religious duties and request for the creation of a burial ground for Muslims / non-Muslims.
- Need to inform legal issues of the immigrant and refugee population
- Need for information on issues related to their access to health and social services
- Need for satisfaction of housing, food, clothing, health issues related to the integration of refugees / asylum seekers / economic migrants, who are not included in housing programs.
- Need for more frequent and organized contact of the services with the representatives of the immigration / refugee Associations of the Municipality of Heraklion
- Need for training of employees of services serving immigrants and refugees
- Need to create a network of cooperation of services related to the issues of the population in question (communication, acquaintance, contact points, support, exchange of ideas and practices).

Immigrants' expectations are for the improvement of their living conditions both for themselves and for their children, who are the second generation. For these reasons, they want a future with fewer difficulties and more opportunities in their education, training and subsequent

²² More details of the actions of SEMP at: <https://www.heraklion.gr/mliament/sem-drasesis/sem13217.html>.

²³ Interviews and focus group discussions, April 2022



employment. There is a trend where several immigrant families (mainly from Balkan countries) invest primarily in their children's education.

The families of refugees / asylum seekers, especially those who do not benefit from housing schemes, expect to soon feel secure about their integration plan. They participate less in the social life of the city while many face serious issues such as finances, health, etc.

The relations that take place between the locals, the immigrants and the refugees have a positive sign in the Municipality of Heraklion. The same seems to be true of immigrants and refugees. The shared experiences and the plan to integrate them into some of these groups have a common point of contact, which positively affects their relationship and interaction.

Local Action Plan for Social Integration of Refugees & Immigrants of the Municipality of Heraklion

To strengthen the collaborations between the local bodies and the cities / members of the City Network, the Local Plan for the Social Integration of Refugees & Immigrants was prepared²⁴, which was consultation between Members & Associates of Immigration & refugee integration Council (18 to S.E.M.P. / 09.30.2020 Plenum).

The Local Action Plan of the Municipality of Heraklion is a collective effort between Services & Structures of the Municipality of Heraklion (Deputy Mayor of Social Services / Directorate of Social Development) and between the Municipality of Heraklion and collaborating Bodies (Development of Heraklion). The Local Action Plan was put into consultation between the Members of the Immigrant & Refugee Integration Council and its Collaborating Bodies. With the Action Plan, the Municipality of Heraklion forms the framework for the integration of immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers in the city and in Greek society in general, respecting diversity and recognizing their rights and obligations.

To achieve the objectives of the Action Plan, the axes of the Plan are outlined:

- Development of tools for integration, coordination and cooperation
- Empowerment and education of immigrants, asylum seekers & beneficiaries of international protection
- Employment of immigrants, asylum seekers & beneficiaries of international protection
- Information and awareness actions of the local community
- Strengthening of existing municipal structures
- Strengthening municipal structures with new services
- Mechanism for dealing with emergencies of vulnerable groups

Heraklion Municipal Integration Council

The members of the MIC comprise locally elected representatives of the city council, representatives of the migrants' communities and associations, and representatives from the other local bodies, with which the MIC cooperates. According to its internal regulation, the regular members of the MIC in the Municipality of Heraklion are nine, while the

²⁴ The entire Plan is available at the following link:
https://www.heraklion.gr/files/items/7/75408/topiko_shedio_koinonikis_entaxis_d._Heraklioy.pdf



alternate members are from nine to thirteen.²⁵ In the term following the 2014 local elections, the MIC had eleven regular members and sixteen alternates, while numbers fluctuate according to availability as years pass.²⁶ Non-Greeks who are members of the City Council participate directly in the MIC. There are three regular members of the MIC who are representatives of migrants' associations (including 3-5 alternate members).²⁷ Since 2014, to enhance the participation of migrants at the local level, the MIC members from migrant associations were increased from three to four (and the alternate members to five). The members from the migrants' associations who participate in the MIC should have under the current legislation their residence authorization documents and they must reside in the city of Heraklion at least for the last two years.²⁸

Apart from the elected representatives and the migrants' communities who participate in the MIC, its members have over the years included representatives from the Bar Association of Heraklion, the Medical Association of Heraklion, the Labour Centre of Heraklion, the Hellenic Red Cross, the 'Oasis' Association for child, the Association of Women of Heraklion, representative from the International Union of Police of the prefecture of Heraklion and representatives from the Environmental Organisation 'Agia Triada'.²⁹ The wide local network of member and partner organisations that are engaged with the Heraklion MIC reflects the way in which integration is understood as a multi-faceted social process.

The members of the MIC are appointed with a decision of the City Council. The president and the vice president are elected representatives of the City Council and they are appointed by the same decision of the City Council which also defines the members of the MIC.³⁰ In each new term, a public call to the migrants' communities of Heraklion is issued, inviting them to participate in the MIC. The participation in the MIC is honorary and unpaid and the members are people who are involved in activities related to migrants' integration and the protection of human rights. The term of the Migrant Integration Council is two years and ends with the election of the new Board.³¹

According to its internal regulation (Article 3), the Heraklion MIC aims to record and investigate the needs of migrants who reside in the municipality, address issues relating to

²⁵ See City Council decisions 23 / 8-9-2011, 327 / 27-3-2014, available at

<http://www.heraklion.gr/municipality/sem-kanonismos/sem-kanonismos.html>

²⁶ See City Council decision 215/11 –2016. Available at <http://www.heraklion.gr/municipality/sem-melh/sem-melh.html>. According to the internal regulation (City Council decisions 23 / 8-9-2011, 327 / 27-3-2014), the elected representatives of the City Council who are regular members of the MIC are four, and the alternate members are 4-5. See <http://www.heraklion.gr/municipality/sem-kanonismos/sem-kanonismos.html>

²⁷ Website of the Municipality of Heraklion, available at : <http://www.heraklion.gr/municipality/sem-kanonismos/sem-kanonismos.html>

²⁸ Website of the Municipality of Heraklion, available at: <http://www.heraklion.gr/municipality/sem-kanonismos/sem-kanonismos.html>

²⁹ Website of the Municipality of Heraklion, available at: <http://www.heraklion.gr/municipality/sem-melh/sem-melh.html>

³⁰ Website of the Municipality of Heraklion, available at :<http://www.heraklion.gr/municipality/sem-kanonismos/sem-kanonismos.html>

³¹ Website of the Municipality of Heraklion, available at: <http://www.heraklion.gr/municipality/sem-kanonismos/sem-kanonismos.html>



their integration in and interaction with the local community and the municipal and other public services. The MIC can submit recommendations to the City Council, to organize actions to promote the smooth integration of migrants. In cooperation with the municipal authorities or other stakeholders, it can also organize events and actions to facilitate the interaction of migrants with the public authorities and services, to solve specific problems, to raise public awareness about multiculturalism, to promote social interaction of local residents with different cultural identities, to combat xenophobia and racism and to strengthen social cohesion at the local level.³² The Heraklion MIC is supposed to convene at least once a month (yet since 2018 less regularly), but is entitled to meet also more regularly, if there are urgent matters to be discussed and tackled with. Its role in relation to the City Council is primarily advisory.

Since 2011, to respond to the changes brought about with the “Kallikratis” administrative reform, but also to the rapidly deteriorating conditions of the socio-economic crisis, the Municipal authority of Heraklion, redesigned the social services that it provides. The Directorate of Social Development of the municipality is composed of five departments: Community Care (former KAPI), the Department of Social Policy, Innovative Actions of Public Health and Gender Equality, the department of Social Benefits, and the administrative department. The department of Community Care was established in 2011 and provides primary health care services – primarily information, counselling, and prevention – to the city’s residents. The department’s staff comprises doctors, occupational therapists, a midwife, social workers, sociologists, nurses, physiotherapists, psychologists and domestic assistants for elderly. There are ten centres in the Municipality of Heraklion that cover the needs of every Municipal and Local Community. The municipal health services operate as the interconnection of the health facilities at the local and regional level. The department also has the responsibility to aid residents with economic difficulties, depending on the need and the priority.³³ It grants social allowances to handicapped people, licenses to care and preschool education units, and certificates to those below poverty line. Legal migrants and their families have equal access with Greek citizens to the provided services. The Department of Social Policy, Innovate Actions of Public Health and Gender Equality functions as a network between the migrants’ communities and the local social institutions. The Social workers of the department are not members of the MIC but participate in the Council and they have supported the MIC from its beginning. They assist the MIC to organise its members and they propose the implementation of integration actions, which they often organise jointly to extend their reach into the local community. Since 2017 the role of the Development Agency of Heraklion Municipality has also increased and now leads the work on migrants and refugees.³⁴

The Department of Social Policy can handle most cases and effectively provide social services to the beneficiaries though its connection with other municipal services and local stakeholders.³⁵

³² Website of the Municipality of Heraklion, available at : <http://www.heraklion.gr/municipality/sem-kanonismos/sem-kanonismos.html>

³³ Interview with the Vice Mayor on Social Policy, competent for the MIC as well, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

³⁴ Interview with the President and the International relations Officer of the Development Agency, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

³⁵ Website of the Municipality of Heraklion, available at: <http://www.heraklion.gr/municipality/epidomatikh-politikh/epidomatikh-politikh-kai-pronoiaka-epidomata.html>



The Department of Social Policy also provides services to migrants and their families who live permanently to the local community. The social workers from the Social Policy Department point out that “the interaction between the migrants and the municipal services varies”.³⁶ The beneficiaries of the services provided of the Municipality of Heraklion are citizens, Greek citizens, citizens of EU Member States, Third Country Nationals (TCNs) citizens with legal residence, TCN who have not been able to renew their residence permit, asylum seekers and irregular migrants (undocumented).

The Municipality of Heraklion provides day care services through the Municipal Organisation for Early Childhood Education, Care and Mass Sports. Its purpose is to provide day care to babies, infants and children for the balanced growth of their personality. It also raises awareness and provides information about education, psychological issues and issues concerning the relationship between children and parents.³⁷ The purpose of the department is the implementation of policies and the participation in activities and programs that are aimed to support vulnerable groups by providing a variety of health services and counselling.³⁸ Most migrants’ children in several kindergartens in the Municipality of Heraklion are from Albania and increasingly from refugee communities. In addition, there are many children from Bulgaria, Russian speaking countries and Romania, and children from Arabic countries.²⁴⁰ Insufficient knowledge of Greek language surfaces as the main obstacle in migrants’ access to municipal day care services. The Organisation for Early Childhood Education does not provide translations of the required documents and the staff tries to help migrants to complete the application form.

Heraklion stands out in Greece as the city where migrants and refugees can find work and can be remunerated for it. A comparison of earnings of 5 euros per day for example in Ioannina with 40-50 euros per day in Heraklion is indicative. In 2007-2013 the EC funded TOPEKO programmes (Local actions for the social integration of vulnerable groups) involved several actions that were designed and managed by the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Welfare. Their purpose was the activation and mobilization of local actors to create jobs for the unemployment and vulnerable groups find employment.

2. Evaluation of the One-To-One Interviews

2.1. Migrants’ needs

According to official statistics, there are a little over thirty thousand (30,000) regular migrants and around a thousand refugees and asylum seekers currently in Crete, and approximately 60% of those live in Heraklion.³⁹ However, the official numbers are grossly inaccurate. However, given the reality of displaced people in the country with or without legal documents, the number is

³⁶ Interview, Department of Social Policy, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

³⁷ Website of Dimotikos Organismos Prosxolikis Agogis, Frontidas Kai Mazikis Athlisis Herakliou , available at: <http://www.dopafmai.gr/prosxoliki-agogi>

³⁸ Website Dimotikos Organismos Prosxolikis Agogis , Frontidas Kai Mazikis Athlisis Heraklionu , available at: <http://www.dopafmai.gr/prosxoliki-agogi>

³⁹ https://www.efsyn.gr/efkriti/koinonia/174091_kriti-32535-oi-metanastes-poy-zoyn-sto-nisi



much higher, probably three times higher. The people that do not appear in the official State numbers live invisible lives: many do not have social security numbers, rent homes without official contracts, or share a home with many others under one name, and rarely visit hospitals if they get injured at work because their labour is also undocumented and could implicate their employers, usually Greek farmers.

Despite the numbers of foreign nationals⁴⁰ in Crete and the position of the island which often makes it a stop for drug and human trafficking from northern Africa and the west coast of Asia, as well as the many different communities of non-Greeks that live at the island (including a Hindu and a Syrian community in Rethymnon, Afghani, Pakistani, Albanian, Russian and Kurdish communities in Heraklion), Crete only got its own Asylum Service Office in late 2017, in light of the 2015 refugee crisis. Up until that point, all asylum applications and interviews were conducted in Athens, which required a six (6)-hour boat trip or a flight for the applicant. Now applicants can apply in Heraklion, and their interviews are currently conducted via Skype due to the volume of applications and pandemic measures.

The largest percentage of migrants who live in the municipality of Heraklion are from Albania (almost 75% of the total population), followed by migrants from Georgia, Russia, Armenia, Ukraine, Moldavia, and Syria. The 2015 “refugee crisis” and the different reactions and attitude changes it has caused in the Greek society have produced visible changes to Crete’s relationship with migration. The tensions between different migration waves have not been systematically studied as of yet, however they slowly have become noticeable. In everyday conversations, beneficiaries of the A&M Kalokairinos Foundation⁴¹ often complained to the social workers about the asylum seekers’ “benefits” in comparison to the lack of State and private support they received now or in the past. Heraklion has been part of the ESTIA program of temporary relocation for recognized refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, and asylum seekers, to apartments and other types of residences, which has ended in 2022.

Most migrants’ children in several kindergartens in the Municipality of Heraklion are from Albania and increasingly from refugee communities. In addition, there are many children from Bulgaria, Russian speaking countries and Romania, and children from Arabic countries.²⁴⁰ Insufficient knowledge of Greek language surfaces as the main obstacle in migrants’ access to municipal day care services. The Organisation for Early Childhood Education does not provide translations of the required documents and the staff tries to help migrants to complete the application form.

Courses to teach Greek to TCNs, an important tool for the integration of foreigners and immigrants to Greek society, for employment and social inclusion, during the period 2008-2011, took place within the Educational Project Odysseys “Education of migrants in the Greek language, the Greek history and Greek culture” in several cities and towns across the country. The “Odysseus” involved the teaching of the Greek language as a second language, as well as the teaching of Greek history and culture, to Europeans and to TCNs over the age of 16 with legal residence permits.⁴² The program aimed at providing the language skills, as well as

⁴⁰ [The data of this section come from the operational program of the Municipality of Heraklion [2015-2019]

⁴¹ Interview during visit in Crete, April 2022

⁴² Geniki Gramateia Dia Biou Mathisis website, available at: <http://www.gsae.edu.gr/en/press/275--lr-l-r>



the social and intercultural competences required for the social inclusion of the participants and their families.⁴³ The program was also implemented in the Municipality of Heraklion. These types of programmes were abandoned following the arrival of refugee populations, when all notions of and efforts on integration were replaced by reception, the responsibilities of the state were transferred to UN agencies and international humanitarian organisations, and EC funding channels changed without any regard for sustainability or ownership of processes. The Municipalities were bereaved of their capacities and often mandates and were left to join the queues of actors begging donors for funding.

Municipal and State agencies in Greece do not have dedicated translators and interpreters, despite the increased numbers of people who do not speak Greek (or English). In many cases said State and municipal services count on the presence of interpreters from the ESTIA program and other NGOs to provide their services to displaced people. However, the number of beneficiaries in the reception programs is small in comparison to the non-Greek beneficiaries that do not belong in any refugee reception program. There are thus many possible non-Greek beneficiaries of the social, civil, and medical services outside the mandate of ESTIA and HELIOS that cannot receive assistance. It is solidarity initiatives by citizens and private entities that attempt to cover this communication and services gap. The “Community Centre,” a City of Heraklion service funded mostly by the EU, hosts several services for Roma and migrants, offering legal, psychological, and social work assistance. The “Center for Migrants’ Integration” (CMI), a component of the Community Centre, works with a system of referrals to relevant services and organisations, which are suggestions; the language gap though often leads beneficiaries to believe the referral is compulsory or connected to State benefits. The Community Centre has recently hired an Arabic speaking cultural mediator to help with its operations. The CMI is housed at facilities that need renovation, and it is understaffed and overworked: the staff does its best to social services yet cannot be often effective as the numbers of beneficiaries have been steadily on the rise.

The municipality of Heraklion, through its Lifelong Education initiatives, also organized intensive short-term (8 weeks, 40 hours) Greek language and Culture programs for adult refugees and migrants with very limited capacity, offering only evening classes. The City of Heraklion also has a Council for the Integration of Refugees and Migrants, however its function and activities are not often made public and their presence and activities are difficult to find online.

2.2. Migrants’ readiness to politically participate/engage

The Migrant Integration Council (MIC) in the Municipality of Heraklion was established in 2012, and it engages in actions that are related to migrants’ integration and the protection of human rights (yet the Vice Mayor responsible could not differentiate between the MIC and the Centre for Migrants’ Integration, a municipal service).⁴⁴ It is supervised by the Deputy Mayor of Social Policy, and it is supported by the Department of Social Policy, Innovative Actions, Public Health and Gender Equality (Directorate of Social Development in the Municipality of Heraklion). The Department of Social Work (Institute of Intercultural Education and Action) of

⁴³ Youth & Lifelong Learning Foundation website, available at: <https://www.inedivim.gr/προγράμματα/“odysseus-education-immigrants-greek-language-greek-history-and-greek-culture?lang=en>

⁴⁴ Interview, Migrants Integration Council, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.



the School of Health and Welfare Services, Technological Educational Institute of Crete is an associate of the MIC and is supposed to act as an expert on integration of the MIC. The Council also cooperates with a number of other local social entities, such as the Heraklion Bar Association, the Association of Physicians, and the Labour Centre of Heraklion, and several other social actors (some described below).⁴⁵

In the Municipality of Heraklion there are organised migrants' associations with statutes adopted: the Albanian Association and the Russian-Speaking Association of Heraklion. Additionally, there are other migrants' communities that are organized on an informal basis, such as the Filipino Club and the Syrian community.⁴⁶ The Syrian community is a small community that is present in the city of Heraklion for many years, well before the war that broke out in Syria a few years ago. Nowadays, with the wave of the new refugees, the number of the Syrian, as well as Afghani, refugees and migrants has increased. Since the invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, there have been splits in the Russian speaking association of migrants, which started already with the first war in 2014.

The Heraklion MIC has not formulated an integration strategy at the local level. The integration actions that the Council has organised are primarily information dissemination sessions in the local districts of Heraklion on legal issues related to migration and migrant rights, cultural events and various events to raise awareness about racism and ethnic diversity at the local level.⁴⁷ Another important action that it had been organised was an information event in the Albanian Community regarding recent legal changes on residence permits in 2014, and other such events subsequently. Several associations in the past few years organise events on their own, as the MIC umbrella seems irrelevant to migrants and refugees.⁴⁸

The overall appraisal of the MIC of the Heraklion Municipality is positive, yet it is described as distant and not sufficiently active. Its main contribution acknowledged by our interviewees is that it promotes a degree of inclusion of, as well as cooperation and civic engagement among migrant communities at the local level. As members of the MIC state, "the members of the migrant communities who participate in the MIC are involved in actions and events, yet as bystanders."⁴⁹ The president of the Russian-speaking Association points out that "in the MIC all the migrants' communities are united. Through the MIC we used to be able to invite every migrant community at any time and we can easily disseminate information. We should reactivate this practice."⁵⁰

The Municipal Authority in Heraklion aims to explicitly apply the principle of non-discrimination and equal opportunities regardless of nationality, ethnic origin, and religion. The Vice Mayor on Social Policy stresses, "Racism and discrimination have no place in the municipality of Heraklion."⁵¹ In the municipal administration of Heraklion, behaviours that can be recorded as racist have rarely been noted. This does not mean that racism is not present

⁴⁵ Interview, Migrants Integration Council, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

⁴⁶ Interview, Development Agency of Heraklion, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

⁴⁷ Interviews, Development Agency and MIC, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

⁴⁸ Interviews, Development Agency and MIC, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

⁴⁹ Interviews, Development Agency and MIC, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

⁵⁰ Interviews, Development Agency and MIC, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

⁵¹ Interview with the Vice Mayor on Social Policy, competent for the MIC as well, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.



among the local society at large. There are people who disagree not only with the integration but also with the presence of migrants in the city, as the members of the MIC mention.⁵²

2.3. The main obstacles for migrants' participation/engagement (as they perceive it)

A significant limitation in the degree of migrants' civic engagement through the MIC is the low level of organisation among most migrant communities. This was confirmed by the president of the Albanian Association who stated that "the majority of migrants do not participate in the local social and political structures. When you have to travel in a foreign country and to find a job, you do not have enough time to participate and get involved in public life. Even though migrants from Albania are living in the Municipality of Heraklion the last 30 years, we established our own association only in 2013. Albanians who get wealthy are not interested any more.⁵³ Despite the MIC's limitations, not least of which is the low level of migrants' organisation, the MIC is still regarded as a positive structure, in so far as it functions as a network among migrants and other social institutions in the Municipality of Heraklion. Through the MIC, the migrants have been able to find information about the social services of the Municipality and to meet other local social bodies such as the International Organisation for Migration, the Bar association, the Medical Association, and others. Yet now, this function has subsided for three main reasons: those migrants that came a significant time before have learned the city well, the Centre for Migrants' Integration has been established, and most importantly, the newcomers, the refugees who arrived in Heraklion since 2016 are not allowed/welcomed to participate in civic life, nor in the MIC.

Migrant public participation is a taboo for Greek society and the conflict with this entrenched perception implies politics costs that mayors are reluctant to pay. Secondly, there are no migrant organisations in all municipalities. Even if there are, there are often problems of representativeness as most migrants do not participate. Often migrants' organisations interests are conflicting. Third, there are municipalities that firmly believe that there are no problems of social inclusion and cohesion in their region and any operation of the new institution would be discriminatory. Fourth, unemployment does not affect all parts of the country with the same intensity. In areas where there is employment the phenomena of social discrimination are not that intense. Fifth, most importantly migrants have no incentive to participate in the MIC, an institution they perceive as unable to improve their daily lives. They do not believe in the benefits of its operation and distrust the intentions of the Local Government.

In all municipalities most of the time there is no action to follow up programming, there are no specific targets and indicators. In addition, there is no funding for specific initiatives that will promote or strengthen fruitful coexistence. There are no municipal employees working for MICs, on the contrary employees consider dealing with MIC obligations as an additional workload.

Despite the large number of violently displaced people in Crete and the existence of communities in various cities, (Sikh and Syrian community in Rethymno, Arab community in Chania, Albanian, Russian, Arabic, Kurdish, Egyptian and Pakistani community in Pakistan) its own Regional Asylum

⁵² Interviews, Development Agency and MIC, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

⁵³ Interview, Development Agency and MIC, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.



Office in 2017. Until then, asylum applications were made only in Athens with consequent problems and delays.

A particularly important problem in the field concerns the fact that the municipal and public services in Greece do not have translators and interpreters, despite the increased number of third-country nationals who do not speak Greek or English. In many cases, the services seek the help of interpreters of ESTIA / HELIOS programs for everyday cases, but they are not enough to meet the needs of an extensive network of services (hospitals, schools, courts, police, etc.) for a population that are not part of the beneficiary population they serve. The number of beneficiaries included in housing programs is small compared to those living on the same means. There is therefore a large population that is largely excluded from social and health services. This gap is filled by civil society initiatives, bottom-up solidarity actions, and (limited) liaison.

2.4. Conclusions

In an era of anxiety about migratory flows to Greece, the intersection of refugee reception, migration and work finds its way on the news in different ways. Following the tension at the Greek borders in early 2020 for example, a group of workers travelling from mainland Greece to Crete in February 2020 to find work at its numerous olive groves was mistaken for refugees by a local racist group who were part of a relocation program, creating confusion and causing the mobilization of police authorities.⁵⁴ However problematic, such incidents are not as many or frequent in Crete as they are on a national scale in the mainland and the border islands. For example, Golden Dawn, the neo-Nazi party responsible for organizing racist attacks and pogroms which had a strong presence in the rest of Greece, did not have a consistent presence in Crete, and since early 2019 does not have offices in Heraklion anymore. This might be partially explained by the different ways Crete has approached refugee relocation, Crete's economy that heavily relies on the labour of migrant persons, as well as the island's antifascist and progressive history.

Heraklion, as the administrative center of Crete, often sets the example for integration policies, and a successful implementation would mean that it could be set as a reproducible example for other Cretan cities and even in mainland. The "Local Integration Plan for Migrants and Refugees" is a document authored by an experienced social worker that worked in ESTIA and modified by the Refugees and Migrants Integration Council members. The debates in the Committee were often procedural, most of the members had not read the plan during the designated debate sessions.⁵⁵ The document mentions the ESTIA (UNHCR and Greek State) and HELIOS (IOM) programs, the aforementioned "Refugees and Migrants Integration Council," the Regional Asylum Office, socio-medical Services largely present at all Greek cities, "access to education," and the "possibility to absorb migrants, asylum seekers, and international protection beneficiaries in the workforce in the agricultural and tourism sectors." What stands out in the document, which makes the Heraklion case unique, is the "political will to integrate," which translates into the support for the housing programs that the City of Heraklion manages.

The "Integration Plan" identifies several difficulties and shortcomings for Heraklion, all of which are corroborated by the present research. For example, all the services and programs in place are

⁵⁴ Tvxs.gr, "Far-right amok."

⁵⁵ Interview discussion, April 2022.



of limited reach, face difficulties in their implementation, and are all characterized by the lack of access to their intended recipients. The ESTIA and HELIOS programs only served asylum seekers and recognized refugees respectively, while the socio/hygienic services lack the necessary personnel to provide services to speakers of languages other than Greek, some basic English, and/or rarely Arabic. Both have now ended. Their workload also severely hinders their ability to accommodate the numbers of people needing them now. In many of the guesthouses, Offices, and Centers, the paperwork required excludes displaced populations that either do not have identifying paperwork or do not know how to obtain it: they are often unaware about their rights to use those services. Finally, access to education has been limited, with the number of integration classes fluctuating annually despite the population of displaced remaining steady or rising; volunteering initiatives being vulnerable because there are no guarantees for their viability other than the tireless work of the participating teachers and social workers.

3. Evaluation of the Focus groups Discussions

3.1. Motivation and Issue Raising

Crete, with a robust economy that was largely unaffected by the economic crisis of 2010 and geographically positioned in the southern part of Greece, has not been a stranger to multiculturalism, with a long history of population exchanges, empires, and civilizations that have left a mark on Crete's geography and culture. Crete's economy is primarily based on tourism, hosting over three and a half (3,5) million tourists annually. Construction, agriculture, and tourism in Crete require large numbers of seasonal workers and laborers. As tourism (and tourism-related construction) became a prosperous sector after the 1980s, along with economic developments in the field of agriculture (with the opening of new export markets as the European Union formed), increased labour needs have been covered by the migration of foreign workers to the island, at first from the Eastern Balkans (primarily Albania and Bulgaria), Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia) and later from the Middle East (Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria). Male workers from the Balkans arrived first, later bringing their families with them. The Olympic Games of 2004, and the prosperity Greece had from the mid-90s until 2010 worked to the benefit of those Balkan populations' assimilation, with second generation migrants attending Greek schools, taking the Greek nationality, joining the army, and often adopting Greek names and customs. For laborers from the Middle East, the situation has been different; most have come alone, leaving their families back in their countries, sending remittances through wire transfers whenever possible. In the agricultural southern Crete, particularly in Heraklion and Lasithi regions, many laborers rent houses they share with as many people as possible to cut down costs, often in difficult conditions; the laborers face intense scrutiny and racist behaviors from locals, leading them to only rent houses that are old and/or in dire need of renovations.

The department of Community Care was established in 2011 and provides primary health care services – primarily information, counseling, and prevention – to the city's residents. The department's staff comprises doctors, occupational therapists, a midwife, social workers, sociologists, nurses, physiotherapists, psychologists and domestic assistants for elderly. There are ten centres in the Municipality of Heraklion that cover the needs of every Municipal and Local Community. The municipal health services operate as the interconnection of the health



facilities at the local and regional level. The department also has the responsibility to aid residents with economic difficulties, depending on the need and the priority.⁵⁶ It grants social allowances to handicapped people, licenses to care and preschool education units, and certificates to those below poverty line. Legal migrants and their families have equal access with Greek citizens to the provided services. The Department of Social Policy, Innovate Actions of Public Health and Gender Equality functions as a network between the migrants' communities and the local social institutions. The Social workers of the department are not members of the MIC but participate in the Council and they have supported the MIC from its beginning. They assist the MIC to organise its members and they propose the implementation of integration actions, which they often organise jointly to extend their reach into the local community. Since 2017 the role of the Development Agency of Heraklion Municipality has also increased and now leads the work on migrants and refugees.⁵⁷

The Department of Social Policy provides services to migrants and their families who live permanently to the local community. The social workers from the Social Policy Department point out that "the interaction between the migrants and the municipal services varies".⁵⁸ The beneficiaries of the services provided of the Municipality of Heraklion are citizens, Greek citizens, citizens of EU Member States, Third Country Nationals (TCNs) citizens with legal residence, TCN who have not been able to renew their residence permit, asylum seekers and irregular migrants (undocumented).⁵⁹

Heraklion stands out in Greece as the city where migrants and refugees can find work and can be remunerated for it. A comparison of earnings of 5 euros per day for example in Ioannina with 40-50 euros per day in Heraklion is indicative. In 2007-2013 the EC funded TOPEKO programmes (Local actions for the social integration of vulnerable groups) involved several actions that were designed and managed by the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Welfare. Their purpose was the activation and mobilization of local actors to create jobs for the unemployment and vulnerable groups find employment.

The waves of internal migration towards the urban centers of the island have left many Cretan villages scarcely populated; in some, the abandoned houses are bought by Balkan migrant families that renovate them and make them their new homes in the 1990s. Nowadays, the different generations of persons with refugee and migrant origin co-exist in the cities; working from agriculture to tourism; their lives and experiences in Crete have been largely underrepresented in public discourse. A simple Google search reveals ample information online for example about the Sikh community in Rethymnon, which numbers around 1000 members. The Sikh community members all live in rural areas around the city, having migrated to Greece through an international agreement with the State of India to work for a local meat processing factory. Around the time when there is an annual festival organized by the community, they are usually featured in the local press where they are described as a "model minority" that has quickly adapted to Cretan

⁵⁶ Focus group with the Vice Mayor on Social Policy, competent for the MIC as well, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

⁵⁷ Focus group with the President and the International relations Officer of the Development Agency, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

⁵⁸ Focus group, Department of Social Policy, Municipality of Heraklion, Heraklion, April 2022.

⁵⁹ Website of Dimotikos Organismos Prosxolikis Agogis, Frontidas Kai Mazikis Athlisis Herakliou, available at: <http://www.dopafmai.gr/prosxoliki-agogi>



ways. Other cultural organisations representing significantly larger demographics though, including Albanians (68% of the island’s migrant population) have little to no public presence online or the press. In contrast, Western expats that have bought property in Crete or are engaged in entrepreneurial activities are regularly featured talking about Cretan hospitality and making a new home in the island; often they are at the center of tourism/information campaigns organized by Crete’s prefecture. The choice of (re)presenting who lives in Crete has cultural and socioeconomic motivations, leaving out experiences crucial in understanding the unique case of the island as a reception place in Greece.⁶⁰ When the tourist season is over and winter comes, the population of the island is less diverse, comprising mostly of permanent residents: Cretan-Greeks are the majority, but there is also a significant and rising number of Balkan migrants who have chosen Crete as a place to work and raise families. The workers from the Middle East, primarily Pakistan and Afghanistan, are mostly single men.

Racism and discrimination in Crete are present, right along the island’s perceived welcoming atmosphere, two co-existing and seemingly contrasting cultural behaviors; one that is performed often ritualistically towards well-off visitors, and the other omnipresent against those perceived as culturally inferior, even if the latter have lived in Crete for years. The socioeconomic stratification of Cretan society and the strategies followed by the organisations tasked with refugees have provided an excellent opportunity to local governance to organize in ways that will benefit all those that have come before and face tremendous difficulties in their everyday activities. It is on the neighbourhood level in Crete that we see integration occur, often by chance and with the help of benevolent neighbours.

Racist incidents, often classified as “minor” when discussed later, include comments from other Greeks at social services, interactions with other patients and/or a few members of the personnel at health services, paired with navigating the maze of bureaucracy, which becomes even more difficult for speakers of other languages without interpreters. In more than a few cases State services employees even refuse to implement the Greek law in the cases of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. Nevertheless, reporting discriminatory behaviors rarely occurs.⁶¹ The reasons are related with maintaining social relations among community members with whom they routinely interact and co-exist in multiple social environments. Crete’s administrative lack of experience with refugee issues and social integration means that, on a municipal and regional level, the island lacks the tools to promote a social integration agenda.

3.2. Inclusion of Migrant Voices in Policymaking

All organisations in Heraklion report as positive the strategy of urban placement of the refugee population through the above housing programs, as it has reduced to a minimum social reaction related to the reception of refugees. The challenge in Heraklion mainly concerned the integration of the migrant and refugee populations, who live outside the programmes and are deprived of equal access to services and benefits. Invisible people live lives that are on the margins of Greek society: they have no insurance, work in precarious conditions, rent houses without contracts and rarely visit hospitals in the event of an accident at work. The Heraklion Labour Centre has shown a strong interest in supporting employees and helping them to be informed about their rights to

⁶⁰ Focus group discussion, April 2022

⁶¹ Focus group discussion, April 2022.



combat undeclared work and exploitation and has sought cooperation with the Development of Heraklion for co-organisation of relevant actions and publication of information material.⁶²

A positive development in the context of the services provided to the target population, presents the "Community Center" of the Municipality of Heraklion, which offers legal, consulting, social services. Although the level of services provided is relatively high, it is judged to be understaffed and often unable to manage the volume of beneficiaries. By strengthening its human resources, the Community Center could expand its services and operate with less pressure and better results. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the Center for the Integration of Immigrants and Refugees (a branch of the Community Center) is the only service of the Municipality that has an Arabic and Urdu interpreter. The Municipality of Heraklion through Lifelong Learning programs also organised intensive Greek lessons of short duration (8 weeks, 40 hours), which in the midst of a pandemic took place through e-learning. The classes were in the afternoon, and were attended mainly by immigrants, with a few beneficiaries of refugee reception, housing and integration programs. The demand for Greek courses is very high.

The question that arose, as a result of the disastrous decision 460/2013 of the Council of State regarding the unconstitutionality of Law 3838/2010, is whether this unconstitutionality jeopardised the operation of the MIC, which is not the case. Undoubtedly, however, the definition of MICs as a mixed body serving the needs of the whole local community has been called into question. Moreover, if migrants who have developed for decades life relations in a given locality, pay taxes, get married and buried in a municipality, have no right to vote and be elected, if citizenship acquisition and renewal of residence permits becomes a nightmare, then MICs stand no chance. The absence of a central policy aimed at ensuring continuity in the development and implementation of a social inclusion policy has tormented the MICs in Greece since their inception. The inability of the Greek state to come to terms with migration and the changes this impacts on the homogeneity of the population is detrimental to the exercise of democratic processes and rule of law.⁶³

In 2017, local authorities proposed to the Greek government to host in all interested Cretan cities a temporary relocation program for asylum seekers and recognized refugees with the cooperation of the United Nations High Committee for Refugees (UNHCR). In contrast to mainland Greece where, in tandem with housing programs run by NGOs and UNHCR, several refugee camps operate, often in locations previously used as barracks by the Greek army, in Crete there are not multiple relocation programs. The presence of refugees and asylum seekers is spread across the city of Heraklion; displaced persons that have lived in Heraklion for the past thirty years never formed neighborhoods with a prevailing ethnic character, nor were there any significant city council policies contributing to ghettoization.

The spread of asylum seekers and refugee families throughout the city of Heraklion is not wholly positive. The distance between the homes makes the forming of a community difficult, though for many that see Heraklion as another stop towards the European North, building a community is not necessarily a priority. There are shops and stores owned by non-Greeks in Heraklion, however they are usually owned by displaced persons that have been here for a while, often a decade or more: a few convenience stores and kiosks, and hairdressers' establishments are the

⁶² Focus group discussioj, April 2022

⁶³ Focus group discussion, April 2022



most notable mentions. The location of displaced owners' stores, along with the strategic placement of refugees and asylum seekers affect not only the visibility of the displaced populations in the city, but also the places they choose to hang out and their transportation habits. As a result, displaced persons are quite often required to use public transportation, or walk for a while to reach many of their desired locations.

In Heraklion there are multiple organisations that help refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, even if it is not part of their formal mandate. Many of the organisations were created or (re)activated after 2015 to deal with the emergency of the "refugee crisis." However, as several organisation employees have admitted, the administrators soon found that the beneficiaries of their services are not limited to people that came to Crete in the previous five years. While most refugees and asylum seekers leave after a year or two of their arrival in Crete, other migrants come to the island for the chance to make a living, appear to be planning to stay in Crete for longer, and immediately attempt to find connections that will help them navigate the new reality they enter.

3.3. Obstacles for Structural Participation

If we consider the MIC as the central pillar of local integration policies, the extent to which local government authorities pursue the latter varies across the Greek municipalities. The views and commitments of the elected mayor and the support that these enjoy among the city's municipal council bear a decisive influence and make a difference. It is entirely up to the elected municipal authority to establish a MIC, and to pursue an explicit and active migrant integration policy. In Greece cities found it particularly difficult to coordinate their efforts with national level governments. Municipalities do not have de jure competencies in the area of migrants' integration. However, they strongly shape the local environment within which it takes place, promoting or conversely undermining the prospects of integration.⁶⁴

Greece remains a country that completely lacks an integration program for its non-Greek communities. The management strategy of the Greek State and most organisations involved in the process begin with the assumption that displaced persons in Greece have a temporary presence in the local societies. This approach, while successful in the first years of the people passing through Greece en masse, now proves to be inefficient due to the strict border controls and the delays in the asylum application process. The humanitarian management falls on the shoulders of municipal services and NGOs, which follow the same trope of temporary relief and perpetuate the sense of "waiting" for their beneficiaries, effectively excluding displaced people that arrived with previous migration waves.

HELIOS has been the first programme that specifically talks about displaced people's integration to Greek society, however it is not a fundamentally Greek State initiative, as it is organized by IOM, hence it lacks long term planning and commitment from the State. ESTIA, despite being a program primarily concerned with short-term accommodation of asylum seekers and recognized refugees, often became the primary agent of integration, through initiatives organized by its employees and administrators, operating outside the program's mandate.

⁶⁴ Focus group discussion, April 2022



The island provides ample blue-collar jobs for migrant people interested in them (whether legal work or under the table), while it has local politicians that recognize that the best management of displaced populations does not include isolation or the creation of “ghettos,” but the support of programs that provide housing in Greek neighborhoods and opportunities for socializing with locals. To that end, and recognizing the pressing needs for more accommodations, the Cretan ESTIA-involved organisations have repeatedly requested to increase the number of beneficiaries that can be served by the organisation on the island, but their request has been denied by the conservative New Democracy administration, as it would be perceived as contrary to the deterrent policy it enacts. The limited number of openly racist protests and attacks (in relation to the rest of Greece) shows that the Cretan culture is hostile to open and systemic acts of racism. In April and May 2020 there was a number of racist, anti-refugee protests, fueled by rumors that the Greek State decided to nominate Crete as a safe harbor for intercepted displaced populations sailing from Northern Africa.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the antifascist sentiment remains strong; on June 4th 2021, more than two and a half thousand people marched in the city center against fascism and racism, while also showing solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA in light of George Floyd’s murder by police authorities. Even though there are significant numbers of invisible displaced persons who have been working for years in Crete, there are often calls against the implementation of urban housing programs from racist cells in Crete. The protests rarely find significant sympathy from the local officials or the wider Cretan community, although the anti-refugee discourse gradually leaves its mark on local media and public opinion. The “Refugees and Migrants Integration Council,” the municipal committee with a mandate to help networking among humanitarian organisations and promote sustainable integration strategies rarely met in 2020, with several elected council people choosing to abstain or never attend. Its deliberations had very few produced outcomes, and several public officials did not know the agenda or consult the documents to be discussed; there was a constant urgency to incorporate matters loosely related to the committee’s mandate, while more than often there was no representation from organisations or initiatives representing displaced communities.⁶⁶

With Crete’s economy based on the agricultural sector, tourism, and construction, some communities are male-dominated (Pakistani), while others are more gender-balanced because over time they have brought their families with them and have gradually started assimilating, such as Albanian and Armenian communities. The Arab-speaking communities in Chania, Rethymnon, and Heraklion have been a pull factor for Arab speakers. In Crete there are thousands of displaced people (particularly from the Middle East) living in areas where very limited research has been conducted.

Humanitarian workers and officials often discussed the needs of minors beyond the reception stage. Accommodation and education of minors are two of the emerging needs that must be covered as soon as possible after moving asylum seekers and recognized refugees out of the refugee camps in the borderlands. When it comes to education, the administration quickly assigned that responsibility to regional education directors and administrators that oversaw the process of creating reception classes at schools that would help acclimate the students so they

⁶⁵ More information for operation “Irimi” can be found at the operation’s website, while the rumors for Crete’s involvement made it to national and local press through a Guardian article; Wintour, “Libya fighting.”

⁶⁶ Focus group discussion, April 2022



could later fully integrate into the general classrooms and follow Greek curricula. The assigned Regional refugees' education administrator at first, in 2017, did not have direct contact with parents and children. However, in the second year of the reception class program implementation (2018), social workers and education administrators organized house visits at refugees' residences to conduct mediations and explain the benefits of school enrollment in the Greek system to parents and children.

Mobility of beneficiaries is not limited to moving students to friendlier schools; humanitarian workers also move adults and families around to make more effective use of Greek services and avoid tensions. The inconsistency of the implementation of Greek laws and regulations regarding social and health services has led to a strategy of identifying cooperative State employees within different branches of the same services and directing displaced individuals to those more helpful workers, even if that means going to a different city to complete a bureaucratic process such as getting a social security number (AMKA). Even in cases when a certain service becomes unattainable because of a racist employee or systemic exclusion of beneficiaries, workers report that solidarity movements and employees themselves, often outside their mandate and against their service policies, find a way, off the books, to provide the most needed services, mainly concerning health; in one case an ESTIA official paid out of their own pocket for a beneficiary's utility bill, because bureaucracy would take too long.

The development of strategies to deal with State Services is often connected with a lack of a comprehensive framework that dictates the rules of conduct for displaced people in Greece. The respondents note that occasionally, in their interaction with State employees, there is a lack of communication with their supervisors and the ministries responsible, the legal framework is unclear, or in the cases when information is available, it has not trickled down through the chain of command. The example of child protection is characteristic of the systemic dysfunction. Eva frustratingly explains how her service must contact the district attorney in the case of abuse, but after the child is removed from its family environment there would be no service that would take responsibility for the child's safety. The lack of child protection services in Heraklion, in combination with the lack of interpreters, often means that the child would end up in a hospital in accordance to the district attorney's guidelines. However, the hospital does not usually have the means to take care of said child, and any private entities that deal with child protection refuse to take responsibility for its caring, creating a legal vacuum that only further traumatizes the victim of abuse. The situation is even more complex with unaccompanied minors; in one case a couple of humanitarian workers adopted a young refugee to ensure he could have the supportive environment he needed.

3.4. Conclusions

"Integration" has often been the topic in political fora and local authorities' briefings, but a look at the participants in those proceedings reveals that there is little interest to consult the displaced themselves and their needs. In deliberations on formal committees in Crete there is limited participation of the people directly affected by integration policies. Like most organisations in Greece that take initiatives to integrate people to local societies, the initiatives usually proceed without any consultation or coordination with other actors in the field. The lack of coordination and the omission of the beneficiaries in the design and implementation of integration policies



results in low participation of beneficiaries. UNHCR, as the most recognizable actor in the field of refugee and migrant sector, often shares videos of refugees and migrants who have successfully integrated, or are in the process of integrating. Several details though of their integration process, including systemic obstacles the refugees had to overcome, or the solidarity networks in place that were more helpful than the services provided, are silenced in the name of the systemic humanitarian work of the UN chapter.

The City of Heraklion seems to distance itself from this national policy, signing a memorandum with UNHCR in late 2020. The memorandum focused on “searching for new ways to deal with challenges that concern prosfygiko [refugee crisis] to the benefit of asylum seekers and the local community.”⁶⁷ The document should be read carefully, as it only focuses on the “asylum seekers,” leaving out other categories of displaced persons, who also constitute the majority of displaced populations on the island. In the public announcement of the MoU, the case of an asylum seeker that found a job and has started integrating is showcased as an example of the success of the program. Through research on the case of the showcased asylum seeker, it became clear that the UNHCR and partnering organisations in Heraklion have had little to do with his family’s integration process.

The humanitarian workers representing the Greek State and civil society recognize the shortcomings, voicing their criticism.⁶⁸ They often feel like they are cogs in the machine of the humanitarian regime in place that justifies its existence by the services it provides to the displaced and the funding it receives from European and national sources. The shift of services from immediate relief and reception to integration must recognize first that the process of integration requires cooperative and willing participants. Educating the displaced persons and teaching them the “European ways” becomes part of what integration is about; the focus is currently on short term relief, with mental health services cognizant that they are working as a buffer to Northern European countries, who get to choose who they want to receive. The humanitarian workers are tired, and many of them are disappointed and pessimistic about the relief programs in place and their viability. They recognize the need for integration programs, acknowledging that the current conservative administration only sets obstacles to any such process, even attempting to disrupt many of them in process. Failure to comply would mean that a person is to be cut off from State monetary assistance and prone to detainment and/or deportation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made all the shortcomings in the management of displaced populations worse than they already were. The current administration has imposed severe restrictions on movement in and out of camps since March 2020, for almost a year. Social workers and interpreters working at relief organisations (both State- and private-sponsored) rarely accompany their beneficiaries to their medical appointments, and many appointments with social and medical services have been postponed indefinitely, unless they are deemed absolutely urgent. This exclusive focus on just short-term responses to only the most immediate crisis contributed to another long-term crisis of mental health: in turn, this requires immediate, short-term responses of its own. Regarding COVID-19 vaccinations, displaced populations in detention camps have not been prioritized as vulnerable populations, instead following the age group

⁶⁷ UNHCR Greece, “The City of Iraklion, UNHCR, and Anaptyxiaki.”

⁶⁸ Focus group discussion, April 2022



grouping the administration has imposed, raising protests from civil society organisations as the living conditions in refugee camps are horrific, often inhumane.

In the end of 2021 within 48 hours 31 persons drowned in shipwrecks close to Crete as smuggling routes have changed⁶⁹, with not even one official statement on changing policy on forced displacement neither at the European nor the national level. The question begs as to the role of the local, particularly since institutionalization of migrants' and refugees' integration requires that these people survive and are safe, namely the implementation of rule of law and international conventions.

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5. Interviews and Focus groups Data



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Driane Dediaj, Albanian Union of Herakleion

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Abdalaziz Bayazid, Representative of the Arab speaking Syrian Community of Herakleion

Michalis C. Markodimitrakis, UNHCR Associate Liaison Expert | Iraklion, Crete

Woman from Russia 1

Woman from Russia 2

Woman from Ukraine 1

Woman from Ukraine 1

Woman from Belorussia 1

Focus group discussions

Social actors

Municipality Officials and Staff

Migrants' organisations