

ERSA 2022

61st European Congress of the European Regional Science
Association



'Refugee Integration in Greece post Covid-19: Prospects and challenges'

22-26 August 2022

Hungary & virtually

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Abstract

Since the start of 2020, glaring headlines have called attention to the situation at Greece's borders. For years, Greece has hosted large numbers of asylum seekers and refugees fleeing conflict and poverty. In 2015, it was the main entry point for the more than 1 million people who sought safety in the European Union that year. Most individuals reach Greece from Turkey, risking their lives in dangerous sea crossings to Greek islands in the northern Aegean Sea. Although the number of arrivals has fallen significantly since the height of Europe's so-called "refugee crisis," thousands of people continue to arrive in Greece. Today, Greece has become something like a holding pen for people seeking asylum. The 50,000-plus refugees in Greece can no longer legally travel deeper into Europe; most will likely remain in the country. Integration is key to ensuring that they build successful lives in what is their new home, a challenging task in any country but exacerbated in Greece because of its ongoing financial difficulties. The COVID-19 pandemic has set back years of progress in advancing children's health, education, and protection. These and other socioeconomic impacts have stretched country capacities to sustain and respond to the humanitarian needs of refugees and migrants. People who have been awarded refugee status in Greece are forced to stay in refugee camps because the lack of substantial integration support means they have no way to make a living or rent their own accommodation. Withholding support to refugees, especially without providing measures to guarantee their basic needs are met and they can access services, is unlawful and undermines integration. Examining Greece's response to the coronavirus pandemic and specifically the way their integration and settlement is handled, is essential to understanding the government's approach to asylum and migration and to assessing the integration focused measures that are being taken regarding the below-mentioned categories. This research aspires to provide an outline of the approaches for and challenges to integration of international protection beneficiaries and applicants in Greece. It is based on emerging research findings and focuses on three policy areas, which are key to social and economic integration: 1. labour market, 2. healthcare and social welfare services, 3. education and training.

Introduction

As a primary entry point to the European Union (EU) for people seeking refuge, Greece has been the epicenter of asylum and migration matters in Europe since 2015. It has received billions in EU and international funding to address the needs of displaced people, even while drawing widespread criticism over camp conditions. At the end of 2021, the UN Refugee Agency estimated that Greece was hosting 125,000 refugees and 62,450 asylum seekers.¹

¹ [Greece \(unhcr.org\)](https://www.unhcr.org)

For years now the public debate and policy making in relation to the management of refugee and migrant's flows are blatantly ignoring one of the most complicated aspects: what happens with those who are found to fulfil the requirements to stay in Greece as beneficiaries of international protection.

In the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for the period 2021-2027,² the European Commission recommends that Member States ensure the timely support of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection in the integration process. Similarly, the Greek National Integration Strategy, which was put for public consultation in January 2022 and which, although only partially, seems to adopt the recommendations of the above-mentioned EU Action Plan, refers to a number of essential aspirations and actions, which should be implemented immediately.

1. Labour Market

Working is the most direct way for refugees to integrate into the receiving society.³ According to Greek law, asylum seekers have the right to access employment, six months after filing an application for international protection. In practice, however, access to the labour market is characterized by challenges starting from the reception stage and continuing after the acquisition of international protection status.⁴ Beneficiaries of international protection have the right to employment and similar insurance and employment rights and obligations, as Greek citizens.

For refugees, access to the labour market is the means to regain their autonomy and rebuild their lives in dignity and security. At the same time, their successful access to the labour market, as an integral part of their social inclusion, has multiple long-term benefits for the receiving society. It strengthens the national economy and contributes to the sustainability of fiscal policies (e.g. through contributions to the national pension system), and, consequently, can enhance national prosperity.⁵

However, high unemployment rates and further obstacles that might be posed by competition with Greek-speaking employees, prevent the integration of beneficiaries into the labour market. Third-country nationals remain over-represented in the relevant unemployment statistical data. As found in research from 2018 “[t]hose few who manage to find a job are usually employed in the informal economy, which deprives them of access to social security, and subjects them to further precariousness and vulnerability. Henceforth, the vast majority of international protection beneficiaries and applicants rely on food, non-food item and financial assistance distributions to meet their basic needs. This often forces them into dangerous income generating activities,

² European Commission, November 2020, <https://bit.ly/36mHYni>

³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, December 2021, Inter-agency participatory assessment in Greece, Available: <https://bit.ly/34V7Xlo>

⁴ Article 53 L. 4636/2019

⁵ For instance, European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, November 2020: <https://bit.ly/36mHYni>, p.3; and European Commission, An Economic Take on the Refugee Crisis: A Macroeconomic Assessment for the EU, July 2016: [https:// bit.ly/3LBA0qO](https://bit.ly/3LBA0qO), p. 4, 18.

and extends the need for emergency services, increases the risk of exploitation, and hinders their integration prospects.”⁶

The National Integration Strategy provides for several actions to improve access to employment for beneficiaries of international protection. These include a pilot vocational training program for 8,000 recognized refugees in Attica and Central Macedonia in collaboration with the Ministry of Labor and an employment program in the agricultural sector for 8,000 refugees in collaboration with the Ministry of Agricultural Development. However, these actions have yet to be implemented.

There is a lack of information on the employment of beneficiaries of international protection. A recent research found that only 14 out of 64 beneficiaries of international protection were working at the time of the research and only 23 out of 64 were able to work during the last six months.⁷

From a sample of 183 questionnaires created by Diotima, GCR and the IRC, the following obstacles are identified as the most important:

- Lack of language skills
- Lack of necessary documents
- Difficulty in opening a bank account
- Absence of a social network
- Inability to prove and recognize existing education & training qualifications

While great progress has been made in the legislative and policy framework in Greece, robust efforts are still needed to integrate refugees in the country. Currently, asylum seekers and refugees have limited access to opportunities to make their integration in Greece possible in practice. They face difficulties navigating complex, bureaucratic procedures.

They also have limited access to information on how to enroll in Greek language classes, or educational and vocational programmes.

2. Healthcare and social welfare services

The Greek state currently faces the major challenges of a generally overwhelmed and underfunded health system, and the curtailment of social welfare provisions within the context of financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures.

⁶ ELIAMEP, *Refugee Integration in Mainland Greece: Prospects and Challenges*, March 2018

⁷ Information gathered through a joint questionnaire prepared by GCR, Diotima Centre and IRC, under the joint project “Do the human right thing—Raising our Voice for Refugee Rights”. The project is implemented under the Active citizens fund program, which is supported through a € 12m grant from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway as part of the EEA Grants 2014 -2021, and is operated in Greece by the Bodossaki Foundation in consortium with SolidarityNow. As of the time of writing, the data is based on a total of 188 questionnaires, out of which 64 were filled by beneficiaries of international protection residing in Greece.

Free access to health care for beneficiaries of international protection is provided under the same conditions as for nationals, pursuant to L 4368/2016. The new International Protection Act has not changed the relevant provisions. Despite the favourable legal framework, actual access to health care services is hindered in practice by significant shortages of resources and capacity for both foreigners and the local population, as a result of the austerity policies followed in Greece, as well as the lack of adequate cultural mediators. Lastly, in a positive development in November 2021, a procedure for issuing a temporary AMKA (social security number) for accessing vaccines was introduced for people in vulnerable conditions (e.g. homeless) that lack any type of social security number, irrespective of their legal status, albeit the extent to which undocumented people have been able to issue the PAMKA and get vaccinated are unavailable as far as GCR is aware.⁸

As regards COVID-19 vaccination, beneficiaries of international protection are entitled to vaccines similarly to Greek citizen, provided that they have a social security number (AMKA) and that they are registered into the Greek tax statement system (TAXISNET). There are no statistics available on the number of beneficiaries of international protection that have been vaccinated so far.⁹

3. Education and Training

Asylum-seeking children are required to attend primary and secondary school under the public education system under similar conditions as Greek nationals. Contrary to the previous provision, the IPA does not mention education as a right but as an obligation. Facilitation is provided in case of incomplete documentation, as long as no removal measure against minors or their parents is actually enforced. Access to secondary education shall not be withheld for the sole reason that the child has reached the age of maturity. Registration is to take place no longer than 3 months from the identification of the child, while non-compliance on behalf of the applicants, on account of a potential “*unwillingness to be included in the education system*” is subject to the reduction of material reception conditions and to the imposition of the administrative sanctions foreseen for Greek citizens to the adult members of the minor’s family.

A Ministerial Decision issued in September 2016, which was repealed in October 2016 by a Joint Ministerial Decision, established a programme of afternoon preparatory classes (*Δομές Υποδοχής και Εκπαίδευσης Προσφύγων*, DYEP) for all school-aged children aged 4 to 15. The programme is implemented in public schools neighbouring camps or places of residence, with the location and operationalization of the afternoon preparatory classes being subject to the yearly issuance of a Joint Ministerial Decision (exceptionally a Decision by the Minister of Education and as of 2019 a Decision by the Deputy Minister of Education).

⁸ [Health care - Asylum Information Database | European Council on Refugees and Exiles \(asylumineurope.org\)](https://asylumineurope.org/)

“Although significant progress has been recorded with respect to the integration of refugee children in Greek schools, some obstacles still persist. Despite the fact that separate preparatory reception classes in public schools were introduced as a temporary solution, they have ended up running in parallel with formal education options such as regular morning and Zones of Educational Priority (ZEP) schools. This hinders, rather than facilitates, the social integration of refugee children in schools. Furthermore, limited number of places in public schools, lack of supporting documentation to enroll children, children’s health problems, considerable divergences in literacy levels, and the co-existence of numerous linguistic backgrounds constitute additional practical barriers to the integration of refugee children in the Greek education system.”¹⁰

“Although in 2020, children’s’ access to education was further challenged by a number of factors, also related to the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to record levels of exclusion of refugee children from the Greek system of education¹¹, the school year 2021-2022 was marked by improvements, with 95% of all refugee children being enrolled to school, as per data issued by the Ministry of Education. As highlighted by UNICEF in April 2022, 16,417 children with a refugee and migrant background were included in the country’s system of education in the school year 2021-2022, marking a 35% increase compared to the previous year. Of these, however, only 75% (12,285) were actually attending school in March 2022,¹² highlighting a concerning degree of drop outs, which was exacerbated due to the difficult living conditions of refugee children and the gap that was created after the transition of the ESTIA cash-based assistance programme to the state. As noted in a joint GCR-Save the Children briefing in March 2022, “[m]any children, especially those in secondary school, drop out of school to find work (mostly in agriculture) and support their families, or they had to take care of their younger siblings for the parents to be able to find work. In addition, rejections of asylum applications are creating despair and a lack of hope for a better future, leading to families deprioritizing schooling”.¹³

Conclusions – Suggestions

National systems (for healthcare, education, promotion to employment, social welfare) are open to the inclusion of beneficiaries of international protection on conditions similar to those for Greek citizens. At least in theory, because in practice there are several obstacles, often proven insurmountable. The objective of those systems is not to eternally link their beneficiaries with social welfare benefits but to cover basic needs

¹⁰ Skleparis, Dimitris. 2018, March. “Refugee Integration in Mainland Greece: Prospects and Challenges”. Policy Brief, 02, Yasar University UNESCO Chair on International Migration (ISSN: 2619-9440)

¹¹ RSA, *Excluded and segregated: the vanishing education of refugee children in Greece*, 13 April 2021, available at: <https://bit.ly/3ozTZuY>.

¹² Kathimerini, “Schools: More refugee students this year”, 5 April 2022, available (Greek): <https://bit.ly/3EzQxZk>.

¹³ GCR & Save the Children, *Greece: Children on the move (January-March 2022 update)*, 31 March 2022, available at: <https://bit.ly/3EUST5a>, 10.

arising from vulnerabilities and to support persons concerned in their effort ‘to stand on their own feet’.

It is imperative that a frank public debate be conducted, away from exaggerations and utopic agendas, with solid arguments and realistic proposals for some key critical questions, even for those raised in bad faith: Is the funding of national systems enough to cover the cost of access for this population group? If not, how can additional funding be secured? Does integration support attract more refugee and migrant flows or is it essential for the broader social cohesion? How does inclusion and the integration process create added value and offset benefits for the host society and contribute to sustainable development?¹⁴

The IRC¹⁵ believes that “integration of refugees is a pathway that, in order to be successful, should begin as soon as possible. This means offering core integration support, such as access to interpretation, case management services, cultural orientation classes, intensive survival language classes as well as support to obtain the documents and services required in order to access accommodation, employment, education and healthcare to asylum-seekers while they await a decision on their claim. Given the length of asylum procedures, withholding integration support until status determination could set people on a path towards social exclusion and deterioration of mental health and is clearly counterproductive for the individuals seeking protection and local communities alike. Even if people ultimately leave, there are clear and immediate benefits to newcomers being engaged in activities and involved in local communities, as soon as possible. Whilst all refugees and asylum-seekers face a range of challenges associated in navigating and adapting to their new communities, refugee and asylum-seeking women face additional barriers. Concrete obstacles include the possible absence of affordable child care, gender-based violence, pre-arrival disadvantages in education and digital skills, as well as a lack of employment history. Therefore, targeted measures are needed in order to cater for their strengths and needs.

The Greek strategy should include:

- An action plan with specific targets and indicators to measure the success of the National Strategy, as well as annual progress reports;
- Specific programmes for integration support at the reception stage, such as provision of interpretation, case management, survival language and cultural orientation classes to all asylum seekers, irrespective of nationality, as soon as possible upon arrival;
- Measures to effectively include asylum seekers and refugees in national services, such as the provision of a social security and a tax number, as well as a bank account, which would in turn allow them to access all their legal rights: gainful employment, safe shelter, healthcare, education opportunities, integration support and benefits;

¹⁴ <https://www.unhcr.org/gr/en/14703-integration-the-forgotten-dimension-of-refugee-flows.html>

- Targeted measures that cater to refugee and asylum –seeking women’s strengths and needs, such as childcare options during classes and specially-designed language vocational courses, including digital skills courses;
- Case management mechanisms for socioeconomic inclusion, taking into account individual needs; and
- Continuous and long-term support for socioeconomic inclusion¹⁶

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¹⁶ [IRC_TheTimeisNow_Greece_ENG_final.pdf \(rescue.org\)](https://www.rescue.org/publication/irc-the-time-is-now-greece-eng-final)

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