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Asylum seekers and refugees in Greece:

Can we talk about integration?

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Integration is considered the most durable solution for participation refugees in Europe and it is understood as the end product of a dynamic and multifaceted two-way process with three interrelated dimensions: a legal, an economic and a social-cultural dimension.' The EU Common Basic Principles, adopted in 2004, define integration as "a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of Member States," and include reference to the importance of employment, education, civic and community, as well as of cultural and religious diversity.

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Moreover, according to the Migrant Integration Policy Index, or MIPEX, “when migrants feel secure, confident and welcome, they are able to invest in their new country of residence and make valued contributions to society”. MIPEX measures policies to integrate migrants in all EU Member States and engages key policy actors, training them in the use of indicators to improve integration governance and policy effectiveness. Particularly, a successful integration rests on within 8 policy areas: 1) Access to Nationality, 2) Anti-discrimination, 3) Education, 4) Family Reunion, 5) Health, 6) Labour Market Mobility, 7) Permanent Residence, 8) Political participation.²

In this context, and bearing in mind that nowadays much of the focus on integration has shifted to asylum-seekers and refugees, these 8 policy areas can be applied and used as an indicative tool for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe, and in Greece especially. At this point, it is worth mentioning that in many European countries, Greece included (90%), asylum applicants wait for more than a year to receive a decision on their application, since half of Europe's 2015-16 asylum applicants had decisions still pending at the end of 2016.³

Moreover, on a European level, in June 2016, the European Commission launched the Action Plan for the Integration of Third Country Nationals, in order to develop migrant integration policies and also in order to address the specific challenges faced by refugees. This Integration Action plan consists of different tools, such as pre-departure and pre-arrival measures, education, employment and vocational training, access to basic services, such as housing and healthcare, active participation and social inclusion.⁴

On a national level, on July 27th 2017 Europe launched a new humanitarian programme for the integration and accommodation of refugees in Greece, worth €209 million. This includes the launch of the flagship 'Emergency Support To Integration & Accommodation' (ESTIA) programme to help refugees and their families rent urban accommodation and provide them with cash assistance. The ESTIA programme has a budget of €151 million and is composed of: rented accommodation for up to 30,000 people and of cash assistance to enable refugees to meet basic needs. UNHCR is actively involved in the ESTIA programme, in order to set up large scale rental projects for refugees and to provide them with pre-defined monthly cash allocations through a dedicated card.⁵

Moreover, on September 7th 2017, Migration Minister Yiannis Mouzalas stated that the authorities are drafting measures to integrate between 25,000-30,000 asylum seekers who are not entitled to relocation under the existing European Union program, which involves a new registration process and the issuing of tax identification and social security numbers; school enrolment for children; and access to the local labor market.⁶

Given that the legal and institutional approach is taking form, this could be considered as the starting point of a successful integration process in Europe, both in the short-term – such as the present refugee crisis– and the longer term. In this context, and while some important steps in Greece have been taken concerning integration, such as accommodation, access to Greek schools and the cash distribution programme, the long-term perspective (Anti-discrimination, Family Reunion, Health, Labour Market Mobility, Permanent Residence, Political participation and others) is still lacking.

Greece is one of the most homogeneous European countries, where religion - mainly the Christian Orthodox Dogma - has a significant role on social and political level. Thus, illegal immigration from Muslim countries, as well as refugees and asylum applicants from Muslim countries are often seen as a threat to ethnic homogeneity and to the Greek national identity.⁷

According to Barry Buzan, cofounder of the Copenhagen School's Securitization Theory, “societal security is about the threats and vulnerabilities that affect patterns of communal identity and culture”. He also argues that “migration threatens communal identity and culture by directly altering the ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic composition of the population”.⁸

In this context, survival for a state, whose safety is the primary function of security forces, means sovereignty, and survival for a society means identity. Given that identity has a conservative nature, a change of identity may be seen as a threat, because of statements such as “we will never be us” and

“no longer the way we were”.⁹ Thus, according to Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, immigrants from a different, cultural, religious and political background may be seen as an existential threat to the homogeneity of indigenous people. On the other hand, far-right, and anti-immigrant parties become more attractive to citizens, who blame immigrants for the rise of criminality, as well as for the high unemployment rates in their countries.¹⁰

Golden Dawn is one of Europe’s most anti-immigrant parties, favoring the detention and expulsion of all illegal immigrants. Moreover, the party is linked to the dramatic increase in the number of incidents of racist violence in recent years, including the assassination of the Pakistani immigrant Shehzad Luqman, 27 years old, on January, 17th, 2013 and the assassination on September 18th of the same year, of a Greek anti-fascist activist and musician Pavlos Fyssas (34 years of age).

In general, the Greek society mistrusts Muslim immigrants, and this is due, among other things, to the identification of Islam with the Turkish dominance or threat. This relevantly recent past, still vivid in the collective conscience of Greek society, served as a deterrent factor for the construction of a central Mosque in Athens, leaving the city as the only European capital without an official Mosque. At this juncture, it is worth mentioning that the issue of the construction of a Central Mosque in Athens constitutes a major political issue that is directly linked with security issues; this issue goes back over two decades, causing considerable criticism by many countries.

It is essential then, to reverse the wrong perception that many Greeks have about the refugees and asylum applicants, in general and in relation to Muslims in particular. Undoubtedly, significant efforts have been made in Greece, particularly on a small-scale basis, such as the example of the island of Tilos, which “has a population of only about 500, but it now hosts over 50 refugees, 100 over the course of this year so far – 20% of the population”. What is more, thanks to a few simple initiatives, the refugees have been integrated and are making a positive social and financial contribution to the island”¹¹. “The first stage is to get the local population to accept the refugees. The second is to organize Greek classes to provide basic language skills; and the third, and most crucial is to get the refugees employment”¹².

In conclusion, one could say that there subsists somewhat of a paradox concerning integration, as a debate is ongoing for at least the last 30 years, but “successful” integration policies are lacking (see: the assimilation approach in France and to the multicultural approach in the Netherlands). Today, mainly due to the European institutional and financial support, it is possible to change this paradox, with Greece as a starting point, which suddenly became a destination country for people with completely different cultural and religious backgrounds.

Therefore, the answer concerning the question whether one can talk about integration in Greece can be a positive one. In order to address the integration issue within Greek society, a series of measures should be taken, with the first being, the approach of the local societies and the reversal of the wrong perceptions about the refugees and the asylum applicants. Secondly, asylum seekers should not only be settled in the border regions and big cities, where they initially arrive, but instead dispersal mechanisms should be applied to ensure a more even distribution across the country, following the examples of other European countries, such as Germany. Germany established the “Königstein key”, which distributes asylum seekers to the states based on a formula that takes into account the state’s tax raising capacity (66%) and population size (33%).¹³ Thirdly, an adjustment of integration-related policy areas should be applied, according to the demands and the characteristics of each specific national group, both on the short and on the long term, with the acceptance of local communities and municipalities.

In order to avoid the marginalization and the isolation of the refugees, they must fully participate in the host society, through a reciprocal integration process, given that, unlike other social groups, refugees cannot return home.

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