

Historically, Greece has been one of the main points of entry into the EU for refugees. Now, in the context of the war in Ukraine, Lazaros Petromelidis, Director at the Greek Council for Refugees, reflects on the conditions that refugees and asylum seekers endure in Greece and explains how the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine shows that Greece and the EU can do a lot more to provide a dignified living situation for those seeking refuge.

SEEKING ASYLUM IN GREECE: THE MARATHON OF THE INVISIBLE



By **Lazaros Petromelidis**, Director, Greek Council for Refugees

The war in Ukraine has shaken Europe and not only financially...it has reminded all EU citizens of one of the most devastating consequences of war: the forced movement of people...millions of people moved in a very short period, most of them women, children and elderly, fleeing to save their lives. A massive movement of almost 5 million people is said to have left Ukraine to seek refuge mostly in the neighbouring countries while 8 more million are said to have moved internally. The war in Ukraine is not the only war on the globe but it is the one closest to our homes. However, there are several conflicts, such as the one in Yemen, Syria, Congo, Somalia and so on, that are currently taking place around the world and are not as talked about as the one in Ukraine. These wars are also forcing people to seek refuge in the aging Europe, quite far from their homes.

Greece, along with other countries at the Southern borders of Europe, is historically considered one of the main entry points for refugees and migrants, those who are fleeing their homes in other parts of the world, such as the Balkans, the Middle East, Asia and Africa, due to fear of prosecution or extreme poverty. In 2015, the increased influx of refugees mobilised a significant number of resources at international level to support Greece in coping with it. It was the first time that we have seen rapid responses that were supposed to be temporary: rescue programmes at the sea borders; fast-track asylum procedures, dividing those in need of international protection by their arrival date; creation of the camps on the islands and of the Eleonas refugee camp in the centre of Athens. Gradually, a total number of 26 temporary accommodation shelters that have had different names over the course of the years have been created all over Greece. They very often brought shame to Greece for the way people were treated: people have to endure disgraceful living conditions, are geographically isolated and cut off from any means of public transport. UNCHR designed a programme, ESTIA, that, until September 2021, hosted hundreds of thousands of refugees in apartments providing dignified living conditions and

a set of services that supported the integration process. The ESTIA programme in its total capacity reached 26.000 places scattered in the cities all over Greece involving both non-governmental organisations and municipalities as implementing partners. From June 2020, a handover period from UNCHR to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum started that was officially completed in September 2021 in reduced capacity of less than 15,000 places. At the same time, the camps were overwhelmed with people of different statuses: unregistered, asylum seekers, recognised refugees and rejected. Different statuses imply access to different rights and visibility in the systems of health, housing and labour. If people are unregistered and rejected, they get no visibility in the system and no access to anything.

In 2021, the reduced influx of people in combination with greater numbers leaving the country, regularly or irregularly, resulted in reduced numbers of refugees according to the national statistics. This has been considered a great success and a result of the proper management of the current government. The current plan is to close the ESTIA programme by the end of December 2022. All the remaining people in the programme who are living in apartments are supposed to move to camps, behind the walls that were supposedly built for their own protection. This plan practically implies that the people are forced, once again, to abandon whatever life they have built somewhere in Greece in order to move to an isolated area (camps, temporary accommodations, etc.) where they will need to start all over again. In the summer of 2021, three-meter walls were built around the camps for the “people’s protection”, clearly separating the area from the rest of its physical environment and, at the same time, improving the life inside the camps: less congestion, better living conditions. This is celebrated as the proper way to manage the refugee population: islands are decongested, and the cities as well will be gradually “emptied” of the refugees.

Today, entering Greece irregularly is considered an invasion by most of the mass media, and those supporting these people are accused of espionage. But apart from the Ukrainians, who have been publicly acknowledged to be the “real” refugees, the rest have no other way to enter the country but irregularly. Those who are still managing to reach the islands or the northern borders of Greece will need to stay in Reception Centres imprisoned for at least some days or weeks until they get their papers. Those who manage to walk to a major city or town in the mainland will need to return to the borders to apply for asylum. Once they manage to apply for asylum, they will be allocated to a camp and start from there again. They will also be eligible for a cash assistance programme and food distribution that does not take into consideration any of their preferences. Ever since the government took over the responsibility of managing the process, cash assistance has been cut by almost 50%, currently reaching 75€ for a single adult. This is also publicly acknowledged as the success of proper management by the mass media and the government. Medical needs are said to be covered inside the camps. However, the medical programme PHILOS II is under transition too; due to the uncertainty of its continuity, employees have resigned and have not been replaced. There is a severe lack of human resources and medical items to adequately cover existing needs.

Those who are rejected for international protection are cut off immediately from access to medical care, among other things, since the unique PAYPPA number that is providing their visibility to the health system is connected to their legal status and is automatically cancelled when they are rejected. This practically means that refugees suffering, for example, from chronic diseases are not able to continue their treatment unless they pay 100% of its cost. However, they are not able to cover the cost since they are not officially able to work and receive an income and the existing cash assistance programme can barely cover their transport needs to any medical facilities outside the camp. They are supposed to leave the country by their own means

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that they are officially not allowed to earn as they are not allowed to work or exist in the country. That way, they are all forced to work without permission or contract, to keep moving irregularly and feed the exploitation systems to survive.

The war in Ukraine and the management of the refugees coming from there clearly prove that both Greece and the EU can do better when it comes to the international protection and the implementation of the Geneva Convention’s articles. It has, once again, divided those in need of international protection, this time by nationality. However, it has also made it crystal clear that supporting refugees is all a matter of political will and understanding.