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The Absence of a Rationalized Migration Data Policy in Greece and the Discontinuity of Greek Migration Policy: A Glance at the First Results of the PreMiGro Project^{1,2}

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the first findings of a funded project (PreMiGro) that concerns the development of a start-up pilot prediction model of short and long-term migration flows in Greece using machine-learning tools. During the first phase of the project, which focused on the examination of data regarding historical number of immigrants to Greece associated with country of origin and its political status for the period 1990-2022 through a range of primary and secondary sources, a vital finding surfaced. The discontinuity of the Greek migration policy seems to be related, among others, to the absence of a consistent data policy on migration, ever since Greece became a host country of migrants in the 1990s up to 2022 when Greece had already witnessed major transformations in its migration policy domain. A first reading of PreMiGro's initial research outcomes sheds some light on the peculiarity of the Greek migration policy. Indeed, the securitization of migration in Greece, the (at times negative) perception of migrants and refugees from parts of the Greek Society and Public Sphere and the fragmented Greek migration policy per se, could be explained through the lens of the absence of a rationalized migration data policy in Greece, among other things.

Keywords: PreMiGro Project, Greek Migration Policy, Discontinuity, Data Policy.

Introduction

The migration issue is a dominant topic in the political scene Europe-wide, transforming the equilibrium between change and political stability in an unprecedented manner (Thiele et al, 2023). This situation poses the challenge to provide reliable prediction of future trends of migration flows to politicians in order for them to comprehend migration dynamics and orient their decisions and related legislation towards optimum solutions to manage the flows and the population of immigrants, leading to a political culture of consensus. Greece is at the center of this necessity due to – mainly – two reasons. First, its geopolitical location as a ‘first step’ country for migrants and second due to its

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– proven – inability to handle massive migration flows as a result of its fragmented migration policy (Papadakis & Dimari, 2023).

In this sense, the present paper concerns the presentation of the first results derived by a funded project which is called *Managing Migration in Greece: Construction of a Start-Up Pilot Prediction Model for Migration Flows and Development of Policy Scenarios for the Greek Migration Policy* (PreMiGro)). The project revolves around the development of a start-up pilot prediction model of short and long term migration flows in Greece using machine-learning tools and is funded by the University of Crete.

The model, which is of an experimental character, is currently being constructed on the basis of a multi-parametric data set, concerning historical number of immigrants to Greece associated with country of origin and its political status. The framework of the model regards a properly trained scheme based on state-of-the-art machine learning models. The end result of the project is expected to be an evidence-based policy tool that will lead to policy scenarios that in turn will tackle societal challenges that affect the ‘politicalness’ of everyday lives.

The main aspect explored here is the discontinuity of the migration policy in Greece in terms of migrant and refugee arrivals for the period 1990-2022, and its relation with the political culture as regards the Greek migration policy making as well as the perception of the migration issue from the Greek people. The analysis conducted is related to the processing of the previously mentioned multi-parametric data set that regards historical number of migrants’ and refugee arrivals to Greece for the period 1990 to 2022, associated with country of origin and its political status. The paper zooms at the sources that provide these data.

Methodology

Triangulation of data was deemed the most suitable method for this kind of research. And this is so, because triangulation concerns the combination of research methods so as to grasp more thoroughly the phenomena that are being examined (Papadakis et al, 2016). The first part concerns data extracted by a thorough literature review on the Greek migration policy for the period under examination (1990-2022) and secondary quantitative analysis. A range of policy documents in tandem with national and international literature on the Greek migration policy was conducted. A central focus of the literature review concerned the official sources of the United Nations, the European Union and Greece.

Secondary quantitative analysis refers to the review of quantitative data already collected either in international and national official databases, or in a previous study, by a different researcher who aspires to find answers to new questions (Johnston, 2014). The secondary quantitative sources that

were used to find the exact number of the arrival of migrants/refugees, their ethnicity, sex, age, entry point, political condition and returns have been the Ministry of Migration and Asylum of Greece, the Operational Data Portal (ODP) Refugee Situations which was set up in 2011 from the UNHCR in order to monitor migrant/refugee arrivals mainly in the Mediterranean, and the Greek Statistical Authority.

State of the art

During 2015, over one million people arrived in Europe by sea (UNHCR, 2020). As an outcome, migration topped the EU agenda in the summer and autumn of 2015, and the media focused on the situation on Europe's southern borders (Guiraudon, 2017) and in particular on Greece, which eventually became a place of reception of huge migratory/refugee flows, mainly due to the lack of a coherent EU migration response. This situation posed a major challenge to Greek political authorities as regards the management of migration and the (ongoing) refugee-migration crisis (Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 2023).

As a consequence, a new migration policy began to emerge and take shape in Greece which began to systematically transform the core of Greece's migration policy landscape to mostly fragmented attempts to manage migration in the context of the five nodes of the transformation of the Greek Migration Policy: the European Migration Agenda signed in May 2015, the EU-Turkey Joint Statement of 18 March 2016, the Instrumentalization of the Refugee Issue by Turkey in February 2020, the arrival of the Corona Virus Pandemic (Covid-19) and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum signed in September 2020 (Papadakis & Dimari, 2023).

When faced with the refugee crisis of 2015, Greece proved totally unprepared to handle and manage this situation. And this is so, not only because Greece did not have the means to accommodate such a big number of people that were crossing its sea borders in terms of hosting policy. The state had also to deal with the perception of the crisis it dealt with by Greek people. This 'double trouble' surely surfaced the inability of the Greek policy to effectively implement migration policy. The reason for this is that Greece, at that point, lacked a coherent migration policy framework. This is the case today and this was the case in the past. The Greek migration policy is widely fragmented, leading, among many other things, to ineffectiveness when action is taken.

Many reasons account for this, such as the lack of a national long term strategy on migration, the securitization of migration in Greece, the inability to walk along the lines of the European migration policy and the incapacity of EU policy makers to practically induce mandatory solidarity in the 'burden' sharing among members that are not at the so-called front line of migration management.

Another very important reason, which seems neglected, is the lack of a rationalized data policy on the issue of migration, ever since Greece became an importing country of migrants. This argument is supported by evidence presented in this paper and that pertain to the whole timeframe of Greece being a host country of migrants and refugees, from the 1990s, when the Soviet Union dissolved and many people from the SEE sought safe heavens in Greece or migrated for a better standard of life, up to this point (November 2023). As it will be shown in the next sections, ever since the 1990s, there is not a coherent, reliable and rationalized migration data policy in Greece.

Analysis of results: The discontinuity of the migration policy in Greece for the period 1990-2022

The following table (1) depicts the discontinuity of the Greek migration policy in terms of data policy, and provides a quite clear picture on the reasons (some of the many) Greece has not managed to draw a successful and long-term migration policy.

Table 1: Depiction of migrant arrivals in Greece for the period 1990-2022⁸

Year	Number of Migrants (Annual)	Sources regarding arrivals that were granted asylum	Operational Data Portal Refugee Situations Sea and Land Arrivals
1992	271.000, <u>184.00 out of them undocumented</u>	Polyzos, S. (2006)	SEA AND LAND ARRIVALS
2001	762,000	Census, 2001, ELSTAT	
2005	432,030	Triantafyllidou (2012)	
2006	540,839	Triantafyllidou (2012)	
2007	34,648	Triantafyllidou (2012)	
2008	589,796	Triantafyllidou (2012)	
2009	602,797	Triantafyllidou (2012)	
2010	553,916	Triantafyllidou (2012)	
2011	912, 000	Census, 2011, ELSTAT	
2012	440, 118	Triantafyllidou (2013)	
2013	3,486		

⁸ The data used here were compiled and edited by the authors according to the sources mentioned

2014	8, 542	MINISTRY OF MIGRATION AND ASYLUM	43.318
2015	10, 356		861.630
2016	28, 332		177.234
2017	34, 648		36.310
2018	45, 363		50.508
2019	71, 894		74.613
2020	10, 296		15696
2021	6, 939		9157
	9, 423		18780
2022	(Total number of migrants 754.862)	Ministry of Migration and Asylum; Census, 2023 ELSTAT	

Table 1 is divided in four columns. The first column concerns the date of the arrival, the second the number of migrants/refugees, the third concerns sources regarding arrivals that were granted asylum, whereas the last columns concerns data provided by the Operational Data Portal of the UNHCR (ODP) which provides information on ‘Refugee Situations’.

Let us now begin our analysis from the first year presented in the table. Before proceeding as such though, it should be noted that the decade of 1990s is a peculiar one, as there is not a single official Greek authority providing data on migrants and refugees’ arrivals. So, for the year 1992, according to Polyzos (2006), which is a secondary source, there resided 271.000 migrants in Greece, out of which, 184.00 were undocumented. Several secondary sources provide some data on the 1990s, citing several authorities, such as the (former) Ministry of Public Order, which, nevertheless, cannot be found any more. One such example is the study of Chletsos (in Polyzos, 2006) who claims that in 1994 the number of illegal immigrants amounted to 350,000, while according to other estimates the total number in the years 1995-1996 was 500 to 600 thousand, without providing though number for people that were granted asylum.

Interesting insights on the illegal migrants of the 1990s are provided by the Clandestino study that was conducted in 2008. According to the study,

“the study by Kanellopoulos et al. (2006) argues that there were 400,000 illegal immigrants in Greece in 2001 – a number that is falling at 230,000-330,000 in 2004 according to the estimate of Zografakis, Konti & Mitrakou (2007). For the same year, Maroukis' study within the CLANDESTINO research program estimates that the population of of informal immigrants ranges between 260-300,000. Whereas according to the evaluation of the Greek study of CLANDESTINO in 2007, illegal migrants were found to be 205,000 in Greece in 2007. For the same year the study by Lianos,

Kanellopoulos et al. (IMEPO 2008) finds 172,000-209,000 foreigners residing unofficially in the country” (Eliamep, 2008, 2).

The previous paragraph clearly shows the discrepancies in the number of illegal migrants.

The next period is quite interesting in terms of sources and arrivals as well. In 2001, there was conducted the first official census after the massive inflows of the 1990s. According to ELSTAT⁹ (2001), the number of legal migrants in Greece in 2001 was 762,000. It is estimated, though, that their actual number ranges between 800,000 and 1,000,000, while the total population in Greece was almost 10 million. Despite this number though provided by the official statistical authority of Greece, Polyzos (2006, 86) in his research claims that:

“According to the 2001 National Census, registered immigrants in Greece amounted to 391,674, while to this number should be added a significant number who were not registered due to their illegal stay and not being included in the legalization program or their reluctance to be registered considering that in this way they would secure work more easily or avoid paying the insurance funds (Lianos, 2003). With the information available to date, the exact number of immigrants in the country, or the number of each immigrant group separately, is not known, however, according to some rough estimates it should be around 600,000–1,000,000”.

This is peculiar as the aforementioned numbers that were provided by Polyzos (2006) do not agree with the findings of ELSTAT. Polyzos (2006) himself, in this study, does not provide an accurate source for his finding, leading researchers to question his estimations on the 1990s arrivals. The same happens with Triantafyllidou (2013) who in her study mentions that:

“According to the last census of the National Statistical Service of Greece (ESYE), that has taken place in 2001, there were 797,091 foreign residents in Greece at that time. Of those, 750,000 were citizens from outside the EU-15 countries. If we also include the population of repatriated Greeks from the former Soviet Union who migrated to Greece predominantly during the 1990s, which, according to a census carried out by the General Secretariat of Repatriated Co Ethnics in 2000, numbered 155,319 people (General Secretariat of Repatriated Co Ethnics, 2000), the actual number of migrants in Greece in 2001 raises up to 900,000 approximately.”

The reliability of the data provided by several authors, is argued here, is due to the multiplicity of sources and institutions gathering several types of data that have not been unified through the years to provide us with a clear picture on migration in Greece.

⁹ Sheet M4_Economically active and inactive population of foreigners by gender and nationality.

Regarding the years of the 2000s decade separately, Triantafyllidou (2012) provides some reliable data obtained by the then Ministry of Interior and particularly by the database of valid stay permits, that nevertheless were not possible for the researchers to access at this point and that concern years 2005 to 2011. According to Triantafyllidou (2012) in 2005 there resided in Greece 432,030 migrants, in 2006 540,839, in 2007 585,585, in 2008 589,796, in 2009 602,797, in 2010 553,916 and in 2011 447,658.¹⁰

The next timeframe concerns the landmark year 2011, where the next census was conducted by ELSTAT. According to ELSTAT's (2011) estimates, the number of migrants and refugees that resided in Greece in 2011 were 912,000. This is a quite different number from the one provided by Triantafyllidou (2012). An explanation for this is given in the previous paragraphs.

From the next year on, that is from 2012, we begin to have a more systematic view on migrant and refugee arrivals as the Ministry of Migration and Asylum starts recording annual and monthly arrivals. More in particular, despite the fact that for the year 2012 we have a secondary source (Triantafyllidou, 2013) providing us with data on migrant arrivals (440,118), nevertheless, from 2013 the Ministry of Migration and Asylum commences the unification of data on migrants on its website. More specifically the Ministry provides monthly data that concern Unaccompanied Minors, Records by age group, Logs by vulnerability category, Records per month, Records by recording site 2013, Records by Nationality, Records by gender and Referrals (Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 2023). All these data concern people that have been granted asylum though, not everyone that sets foot in Greek territory. Speaking in numbers, according to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum of Greece, in 2013 Greece had 3,486 arrivals, in 2014 it had 8,542 arrivals, in 2015 it had 10,356 arrivals, in 2016 it had 28,332 arrivals, in 2017 it had 34,648 arrivals, in 2018 it had 45,363 arrivals, in 2019 it had 71,894 arrivals, in 2020 it had 10,296 arrivals, in 2021 it had 6,939 arrivals and in 2022 it had 9,423 arrivals.

According now to the last census conducted by ELSTAT in 2023, in 2022 there were legally residing 754.862 legal migrants in Greece. What is crucial and very particular, is that the ODP gives a rather different picture on arrivals of migrants and refugees in Greece as it gives numbers of arrivals on a daily basis of every person that sets foot in Greek territory, either it is granted asylum or not. This is a turning point in terms of data provision on migration, which, nevertheless come from the UNHCR and not from Greek authorities.

¹⁰ This number also differs from the one provided by the census conducted by ELSTAT in 2011. See next paragraph.

Speaking in numbers again, according to the ODP, in 2014 there were 43.318 arrivals of migrants and refugees in Greece, in 2015 (given the onset of the refugee-crisis) there were 861.630 arrivals, in 2016 there were 177.234, in 2017 there were 36.310, in 2018 there 50.508, in 2019 there were 74.613 arrivals whereas in 2020 there were 15696 arrivals. Last, in 2021 Greece had 9157 (a significant decrease) and in 2022 it had 18780 arrivals (ODP, 2023).

Conclusions

One quick glance at the above numbers along with the *problematique* that the lack of a data policy on migration brings forward, clearly explains the fragmentation of the Greek migration policy which is sustained by an *ad hoc* ingredient that renders it, at the end of the day, ineffective. Indeed, all estimates of formal as well as of informal migration are based on problematic databases that do not agree between them. Those that appear from time to time in the national and international literature, seem to be unreliable.

This ineffectiveness, in turn, can be linked with a triple impact in the Greek case as regards migration. First, the political Culture of Greece in relation to migration is mainly characterized by the securitization of migration (Karyotis, 2012; Stivas, 2023). Second, the reception of migrants from Greeks is negative in several occasions and there have been recorded some cases of xenophobia (mainly towards Islam) (Swarts & Karakatsanis, 2012; Galariotis et al, 2017; Karyotis, 2012). Last, but not least, the Greek migration policy, per se, as already stated, is fragmented (and inevitably *ad hoc* in some cases due to geopolitical challenges) and it is not coherent, while it is highly affected by the persistent and evident incapacity of the EU to make a consistent and ‘fair’ (based on actual solidarity and “allocations clauses”) common migration policy in line with the rest of the EU M-S and especially the ones that are at the forefront of reception of flows (see analytically Papadakis & Dimari 2023: 102- 119). The absence of unified data and subsequently the lack of a consistent data policy have inevitably affected the Greek migration policy landscape, even impacting (at some extent) on the precarity of people seeking refuge in Greece (Dimari, 2022).

This is very big issue to analyze, that nevertheless that does not fall into the scopes of this paper. What is important, is that the PreMiGro Project aspires to tackle these issues through, the concentration and unification of existent data on migration and through the articulation of future predictions, based on the numerical and general data obtained, so as to contribute innovatively in the rationalization of the migration data policy in Greece and in turn in the rationalization of the Greek migration policy overall.

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