The **"The more things change, the more they stay the same": Historicising mobility: Reading the Refugee Reception Crisis since 2015 through the Albanian Immigrant experience of 1991-2001**

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"THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME." HISTORICISING MOBILITY: READING THE REFUGEE RECEPTION CRISIS SINCE 2015 THROUGH THE ALBANIAN IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE OF 1991−2001

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ABSTRACT: This article challenges the dominant perception of the 2015 refugee crisis in Greece as an unprecedented event by contextualising it within the country's broader history of migration. Through a comparative analysis of two key episodes, the mass arrival of Albanian migrants in the 1990s and the post-2015 refugee presence, it demonstrates the continuities in state responses, public discourse and integration policies. Drawing on legal, historical and sociopolitical perspectives, the study reveals how narratives of temporariness and "nonintegrability" have been consistently applied to newcomers, regardless of their background. While Albanian migrants were once vilified and later viewed as "successfully integrated", today's refugees are framed as transient and incompatible. The article critiques the failure of both national and EU policies to develop sustainable integration strategies, highlighting instead a shift towards exclusion and containment. It argues for the need to historicise mobility to understand contemporary migration beyond emergency framings.

In the summer of 2015, approximately one million refugees – primarily Syrians, though not exclusively – crossed the Aegean Sea. Their disembarkation on the Greek islands marked their entry into the European Union and signalled the dynamic emergence of the "refugee question" in European politics. The convergence of these developments renewed academic interest in refugee policies, particularly with a focus on Greece. The country's pivotal geographical location, the implications of the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 and the containment

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of refugees following the closure of the Balkan borders have together rendered Greece a prominent case study in refugee and migration studies.

Despite their contributions, many of these academic works share a paradox: they often frame the 2015 refugee arrivals as "unprecedented", neglecting the long and complex history of population movements in the southeastern Mediterranean – and especially in Greece. This interpretation is not limited to scholarly accounts. The UNHCR, for example, describes the presence of approximately 100,000 refugees and 60,000 asylum seekers in Greece as a "novel" and "serious" challenge for the Greek state.[1] Within this framework, the issue of integration is frequently marginalised, replaced by a narrative that either portrays Greece as lacking the capacity to integrate refugees or assumes that refugees themselves are merely transient, with no desire to settle in the country. A 2020 public opinion survey found that 83.6 percent of respondents believed that "refugees want to leave the country".[2] Such perceptions reflect a conscious denial of reality – as refugees have, in fact, already been residing in Greece for extended periods – and they contribute to a persistent state of in-betweenness, leaving refugees in a legal and social limbo.

This article challenges the notion that 2015 was a singular or exceptional event by situating it within the broader historical context of population mobility in twentieth-century Greece. Our central argument is that 2015 should be regarded as a significant moment within a longer continuum marked by successive waves of migration and shifting policies of integration and exclusion. The first section of the article provides an overview of key population movements, from the forced exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s to the arrival of refugees from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s. By historicising migratory and refugee movements, we question the premise of "unprecedentedness" and propose a reconceptualisation of current phenomena in light of previous historical experiences.

The second and third sections of the article place in dialogue two episodes that have rarely been examined within a unified analytical framework: the Albanian migration of the 1990s and the post-2015 refugee presence. By juxtaposing these two highly visible and recent instances of population movement to Greece, we highlight that this was not the first time Greek society has perceived newcomers as temporary visitors who either cannot or do not wish to integrate. In the 1990s, the dominant rhetoric presented Greece's transition from a country of emigration

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[1] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Greece Bi-annual Factsheet, September 2021," 13 October 2021, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/89121.

[2] Dianeosis, *Έρευνες 2020* (Athens: Dianeosis, 2021), 262–81.

to one of immigration as a sudden transformation, reinforcing the idea of the state's incapacity to manage such flows. Today, the Albanian migration is often retrospectively framed as a straightforward story of successful integration. This article emphasises the historical proximity between the final phases of Albanian integration and the arrival of post-2015 refugees in order to explore the continuities and ruptures in the Greek state's approach to integration. It also critiques the tendency to retroactively construct a narrative of integration "success" and argues that the persistence of the "unprecedented" framework serves as a powerful barrier to necessary discussions on the potential and challenges of refugee integration.

A Country in Motion: Historicising Mobility

The twentieth century in Greece is defined by successive and overlapping episodes of human mobility, each of which reshaped social, economic and political norms. While historians have explored various case studies of migration and displacement in great detail, the field often focuses on specific temporalities or isolated instances. While these historiographical contributions are invaluable, what remains lacking is a comprehensive history of human mobility throughout the twentieth century – one that encompasses the ruptures and continuities in migrant and refugee flows, state policies and the involvement of transnational actors.[3] This gap in the literature has led to the perception that the 2015 refugee crisis was an unprecedented event in modern Greek history. However, as this article will argue below, this view overlooks a longer history of mass population movements. The Greek state has faced similar questions about migration and integration in the past, though, of course, this does not suggest that nothing changed during the twentieth century or that the answers to these challenges have remained the same. A historical survey of Greece as a "country in motion" highlights the limitations of viewing the 2015 refugee arrivals as an isolated event, instead situating them within a continuum of earlier population movements and state responses.[4]

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Greece found itself on the periphery of a massive wave of transatlantic immigration, with tens of thousands of

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[3] For such an example, see Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For a noticeable effort in Greek historiography, see Nikolaos Andriotis, *Πρόσφυγες στην Ελλάδα, 1821–1940: Άφιξη, περίθαλψη και αποκατάσταση* (Athens: Hellenic Parliament Institute for Parliamentarism and Democracy, 2020).

[4] Kostis Karpozilos and Dimitris Christopoulos, "Η Ελλάδα, μια χώρα σε κίνηση," in *Διλήμματα και συμφραζόμενα του προσφυγικού ζητήματος: Ιδέες, αξίες, ιστορία, πολιτικές*, ed. Pavlos Sourlas (Athens: Hellenic Parliament Institute for Parliamentarism and Democracy, 2019), 1–13.

Greeks departing annually for the United States and, to a lesser extent, Latin America.[5] The integration of Greece into broader southern European migration patterns had a profound impact on its society, sparking heated debates about the "advantages" or "disadvantages" of sending large numbers of rural workers in search of a better life in the New World. This discussion coincided with the geographical expansion of the Greek state following the Balkan Wars and its involvement in World War I. As the boundaries of Greece and other Balkan countries changed, the forced expulsions of minorities altered the demographics of the area with Orthodox Greeks from Bulgaria and Eastern Thrace arriving in Greece and others, Bulgarians and Muslims, leaving for their perceived "homelands".[6] The fall of the Ottoman and Russian empires further complicated the situation, resulting in a second wave of refugees. These included victims of the Russian Civil War, who passed through Greek islands on their way to the West, as well as Greeks from areas directly affected by the Russian conflict and Ottoman collapse who sought refuge in Greek islands and recently annexed Macedonia.[7] The human mobility in the southeastern Mediterranean and Black Sea regions transformed Greece into a testing ground for the development of international agencies concerned with the growing "refugee question".

The end of the Greek-Turkish War in 1922 and the Lausanne Treaty that followed marked a significant reshuffling of populations. Greece and the newly established Turkish Republic, under the supervision of the League of Nations, implemented a policy of compulsory population exchange based solely on religion, leading to the mass migration of Orthodox Greeks from Turkey and Muslims from Greece.[8] This policy appeared as a novel solution to the postimperial question of minorities, and its legacy remains central to discussions of state-driven ethnic segregation in the modern era.[9] The legal framework of the treaty extended beyond the simple exchange of populations: it sought to address the broader reality of population movements and border shifts in the wake of the Balkan Wars, World

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[5] Alexander Kitroeff, "Η υπερατλαντική μετανάστευση," in *Ιστορία της Ελλάδος του 20ου αιώνα*, vol. 1.1, *Οι απαρχές (1900–1922)*, ed. Christos Hadziiossif (Athens: Vivliorama, 1999), 123–73.

[6] Tasos Kostopoulos, "How the North was Won: Ethnic Cleansing, Population Exchange and Settlement Policy in Greek Macedonia," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 12 (2011), https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.4437.

[7] Lena Divani, "The Russian Refugees in Greece: A First Attempt to Register," *Balkan Studies* 35, no. 1 (1994): 47–69.

[8] Gatrell, *Making of the Modern Refugee*, 62–72.

[9] Aslı Iğsız, *Humanism in Ruins: Entangled Legacies of the Greek-Turkish Population Exchange* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

War I, the Russian Civil War and the Greek-Turkish War. A central feature of this framework was the political integration of refugees, with both exchangees and prior migrants – those who had travelled from one country to another before the treaty – immediately receiving citizenship rights in their respective homelands.[10]

The impact of these movements is reflected in the first major attempt by the Greek state to document its population through the 1928 census, which recorded over one million citizens with a refugee background.[11] The data from this census reveals the profound transformation of the Greek polity, reflecting the reshaping of the national demographic landscape. Faced with a large influx of impoverished refugees, the "refugee question" became synonymous with the "social question" in a country already burdened by military defeat, political instability and deep social divisions. The state's response came through a nexus of national and international actors focused on the rehabilitation (*αποκατάσταση*) of refugees. This term encapsulated the ambitious goal of providing housing and employment to refugees, often through international loans and the work of agencies such as the Refugee Settlement Commission (RSC).[12] These efforts reflected the central role of the state in managing national-scale social policies, including the large-scale confiscation of agrarian estates, the development of new settlements and the relocation of refugees to Greek Macedonia and Thrace. The interwar period exemplified the belief that integration was a state responsibility during exceptional times of crisis, with the government required to overcome financial obstacles, legal constraints and political opposition to the inclusion of refugees into the Greek political system. The goal of an inclusionary Greek political identity was seen as a strategy of reconstruction after what was considered a "national catastrophe".

However, the success of these efforts was tempered by the persistence of poverty and exclusion among some refugee communities. The "refugee question" proved resilient, as makeshift settlements on the outskirts of urban centres served as constant reminders of ongoing challenges. Political tensions also persisted, as refugees were often viewed with suspicion, particularly for their perceived association with the communist movement. In the broader context of modern

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[10] Konstantinos Tsitselikis, ed., *Η ελληνοτουρκική ανταλλαγή πληθυσμών: Πτυχές μιας εθνικής σύγκρουσης* (Athens: Kritiki, 2006).

[11] George T. Mavrogordatos, *Μετά το 1922: Η παράταση του διχασμού* (Athens: Pataki, 2017), 155–57.

[12] Alkis Kapokakis, Eleni Kyramargiou, Olga Lafazani and Thanasis Tyrovolas, "The Urban Settlement of Refugees, 1923–1930: An Assessment of the Objectives and Policies of the Refugee Settlement Commission (RSC)," *Historical Review/La Revue Historique* 20 (2023): 31–58; Jamie Martin, *The Meddlers: Sovereignty, Empire, and the Birth of Global Economic Governance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022): 134–56.

Greek history, refugees were frequently considered as dangerous for the existing political order, contributing to the social marginalisation of their communities. The spatial segregation and exclusion from social services perpetuated divisions between "locals" and "refugees", further fuelling tensions. These dynamics played a significant role in shaping Greek political and social life in the interwar period, where racist rhetoric and violent local incidents challenged the notion of a homogeneous national identity. This paradox was evident: while the Greek state worked to integrate refugees, it simultaneously created new forms of exclusion and marginalisation. It was only in the postwar setting that this paradox seemed to have reached a conclusion: urban growth and development projects led to the disappearance of the last makeshift settlements, the post-1974 democratisation marked the overall decline of cultural divisions and the homogenisation of experiences over time blurred pre-existing tensions and divisions. The resilience, though, of the "refugee question" challenges the omnipresent perception that the Greek state has limited experience when it comes to the handling of human mobility. Quite the contrary. The Greek state for decades was concerned with the social, political and cultural handling of those who arrived in the 1920s and their families.

In the aftermath of World War II and the Greek Civil War, Greece continued to experience significant shifts in population movements, driven by policies of ethnic cleansing, expulsion and the redrawing of political borders. During the occupation, Greece witnessed refugee flows within its borders, while the Nazi-orchestrated expulsion of Jewish communities was followed by the violent expulsion of minority groups – as in the case of Albanian Chams – that were accused of collaborating with the occupying forces.[13] The end of the civil war in 1949 saw the forced exile of communist fighters and their families, creating a distinct migratory flow from the political "West" to the political "East" during the early Cold War.[14] Meanwhile, the postwar reconstruction period led to organised migration to countries such as Australia and Canada, while a bilateral agreement with West Germany in the early 1950s facilitated labour migration to the industrial north.[15]

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[13] Mark Mazower, *Στην Ελλάδα του Χίτλερ: Η εμπειρία της Κατοχής* (Athens: Alexandria, 1994), 263–90; Lambros Baltsiotis, "The Muslim Chams of Northwestern Greece: The Grounds for the Expulsion of a "Non-existent" Minority Community," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 12 (2011), https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.4444.

[14] Kostis Karpozilos, "1949: The Making of a Diasporic Greek Popular Republic," *Diasporas* 40 (2022): 175–78.

[15] Lina Venturas, ed., *International "Migration Management" in the Early Cold War: The Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration* (Corinth: University of the Peloponnese, 2015).

Concurrently, Greece became a destination for diaspora Greeks originating from traditional centres like Istanbul and Alexandria. Even though these episodes have been discussed as moments of crisis for traditional diasporic communities, their arrival in Greece has not been addressed as a case-study of postwar "repatriation". The Greeks from Istanbul, forced to leave the city following a mass pogrom in 1955, and the Greeks from Egypt fleeing the country in the context of the rising anticolonial policies of Nasser the following year, challenge the perception that the "refugee question" is confined to the interwar episode of the Greek-Turkish exchange of populations.[16] Additionally, Greece hosted refugees from the communist bloc – for instance, Romanian refugees in Lavrio – and small numbers of Greek political refugees were allowed to return from Eastern Europe during the 1960s. The issue of repatriation was formally resolved in the 1980s with the passage of the 1982 law granting the right of repatriation, although exceptions remained for those defined as "Macedonian" refugees. This policy represented a decisive step in healing the divisions of the civil war. The final chapter in the episodes of "repatriation" came at the end of the Cold War when a considerable number of ethnic Greeks from the former Soviet Union fled to Greece as *ομογενείς*.[17] The concept of *παλιννόστηση* (repatriation) used by the authorities functioned as an ideological narrative underlying the unity of the Greek ethnicity, as these people had never left Greece in order to return there. These experiences of migration and repatriation challenge the conventional view that Greece first encountered "foreigners" in the 1990s. In fact, the country's history of receiving migrants and refugees stretches back much earlier. The expansion of Greek capitalism in the 1960s attracted small numbers of unskilled Asian workers, while the 1980s saw an influx of female domestic workers from the Philippines. This period also marked a more liberal asylum policy for political refugees, particularly from Turkey and the Kurdish regions. Students from Palestine also enrolled in Greek universities under preferential terms. While the scale of these movements was smaller compared to later decades, they nonetheless highlight the early presence of immigrant communities in Greek urban centres.

In conclusion, this survey of human mobility from the early twentieth century to the end of the Cold War challenges the perception of Greece as a country that only began grappling with migration issues in the 1990s. The refugee experiences of the 1920s, the various waves of "repatriations" and political refugee flows,

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[16] Angelos Dalachanis, *The Greek Exodus from Egypt: Diaspora Politics and Emigration, 1937–1962* (New York: Berghahn, 2020).

[17] Eftihia Voutira, "Ethnic Greeks from the Former Soviet Union as 'Privileged Return Migrants'," *Espace, Populations, Societes* 3 (2004): 533–44.

and the arrival of migrant workers all point to a more complex and nuanced history of human mobility. These movements, and the questions of political and social integration they raised, reveal a continuous history of migration that defies the notion of the 1990s and 2015 as exceptional periods. Understanding this broader historical context allows us to reconsider the "unprecedented" framing often applied to modern refugee crises, providing a more comprehensive and historically grounded approach to the study of human mobility in Greece.

Albanian Migration: The Path to Integration

The Greek language does not distinguish between emigrants and immigrants. The term *μετανάστης* ("migrant") is used to refer to both. Until the 1990s, the term "migrant" in public discourse specifically referred to Greek emigrants, members of the Greek diaspora, overlooking foreign workers residing in Greece. The arrival of Albanian migrants signalled a radical shift. Although solid data is lacking, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), between 1989 and 2001, approximately 710,000 Albanians – equivalent to 20 percent of Albania's total population at the time – were living abroad. By the end of the twentieth century, Greece had become the EU country with the highest increase in its foreign-born population. According to the 2001 national census, nearly 800,000 third-country nationals were officially registered, with Albanians comprising more than half (55.5 percent) of that number. This figure does not include the significant, though undocumented, number of individuals who did not register.[18] As of 2018, 353,826 Albanians held residence permits in Greece, making up 67.56 percent of the total migrant population.[19]

Post-Cold War Albanian migration to Greece introduced a new image of the migrant. It was no longer the heroic Greek fleeing their country out of necessity, but rather a poor, unskilled foreigner. In the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Albanian economy in 1991, and particularly in 1997, Albanian migration was framed as "economic refugeehood".[20] Throughout the 1990s, Albanian migration was considered temporary and mainly consisted of semi-skilled and unskilled workers, most of whom were employed irregularly.[21] These migrants typically

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[18] Miltos Pavlou and Dimitris Christopoulos, eds., *Η Ελλάδα της μετανάστευσης: Κοινωνική συμμετοχή, δικαιώματα και ιδιότητα του πολίτη* (Athens: Kritiki, 2004).

[19] Migration Ministry, "Εθνική Στρατηγική για την ένταξη," June 2019, https://www.bit.ly/30wXUAU.

[20] Anna Triantafyllidou and Eda Gemi, *Rethinking Migration and Return in Southeastern Europe: Albanian Mobilities to and from Italy and Greece* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

[21] Ifigeneia Kokkali, "Albanian Migration in Greece: Understanding Irregularity in a Time of Crisis," *European Journal of Migration and Law* 19, no. 1 (2017): 12–33.

found seasonal or temporary jobs in agriculture and construction, while women were predominantly employed as caregivers and domestic workers.[22]

Until 1991, migration was governed by Law 4310/1929. For Greek standards, a law lasting over 60 years was a rare achievement. In 1991, the Greek state's response was to introduce a new migration regulation – Law 1975/1991 – characterised by strict and repressive measures aimed at curbing migration.[23] The law prohibited entry into Greek territory for migrants, while up until 1998 the official priority of Greek migration policy was the expulsion of unwanted Albanians. Border police forces were set up to perform documentation checks and deport individuals back to Albania.[24] The goal was to prevent foreign nationals from settling in Greece or to force them to leave. Obtaining a residency permit was directly tied to securing employment or an education permit. For nearly a decade, the state was reluctant to take institutional measures to manage migration, leaving irregular migrants in a state of uncertainty.[25] It is estimated that between 1990 and 1998, over 1.4 million Albanians were deported, though this figure includes repeated deportations.[26] Deportation became a routine practice in these migrants' lives, as it did not prevent their return to Greece illegally, whenever possible.

The intensity of the population flows, their increasing permanence in the country and mounting pressure from migrant movements led to the establishment of legalisation procedures in 1998, seven years after the first Albanians had arrived.[27] This shift in the legal framework was a response to the informal integration already taking place. Albanian migration was reshaping the Greek labour market during a period of rapid economic growth and Greece's transition to the core of the emerging eurozone. Albanian migrant labour played a pivotal role in sectors ranging from agriculture to large-scale construction projects that contributed to Greece's modernisation, exemplified by the 2004

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[22] Ifigeneia Kokkali, "From Scapegoats to 'Good' Immigrants? Albanians' Supposedly 'Successful' Integration to Greece," *Quaderni del Circolo Rosselli* 3 (2011): 161–73.

[23] Dimitris Christopoulos, *Αν το προσφυγικό ήταν πρόβλημα, θα είχε λύση* (Athens: Polis, 2020).

[24] Jonathnan Swarts and Neovi M. Karakatsanis, "Challenges to Desecuritizing Migration in Greece," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 15, no. 1 (2013): 97–120.

[25] Christopoulos, *Αν το προσφυγικό*.

[26] Emilio Reyneri, "Migrants in Irregular Employment in the Mediterranean Countries of the European Union," International Migration Papers No. 41 (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2001).

[27] Thanos Maroukis and Eda Gemi, "Circular Migration between Albania and Greece: A Case Study," Metoikos (Florence: Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, 2011), 11, https://hdl.handle.net/1814/19717.

Olympic Games. This labour integration, though marked by exploitation, allowed informal access to services and housing. Thus, Albanian migration represents a case study of "bottom-up" integration, with the legalisation processes that followed in 1998 reflecting efforts to formalise this reality.

The adoption of presidential decrees 358/97 and 359/97 marked the first time the state attempted to address undocumented immigration in a manner beyond repression. These successive legalisation campaigns, implemented in 1998, 2000 and 2005, were similar to other southern European "amnesty" programmes in countries like Spain, Portugal and Italy. The first legalisation programme in 1998 was the largest of its kind in Europe at the time, with nearly 372,000 unauthorised migrants participating who could prove that they were legally employed.[28] Legalisation procedures continued until 2007; since then, however, Greece has lacked a regular mechanism for the legalisation of undocumented migrants. This is despite the fact that, during the recent economic crisis, a significant percentage of the migrant population lost their legal status due to unemployment. The only option available to regain legal residency has been through the "extraordinary reasons" mechanism (Law 4521/2014, art. 19). The very label "extraordinary reasons" highlights the perception that regular migration to Greece has ceased, and thus only exceptional cases should be addressed. This law was passed less than a year before the summer of 2015, when Greece was caught completely unprepared for the peak of migration flows into Europe. This situation mirrors the one in 1991, when a law that de jure prohibited migration was passed, yet nearly one million people entered Greece over the following five years. The main difference is that in 2015 it was the entry point to a route – the Balkan corridor – that allowed the majority of incomers to cross the country.

With a few exceptions, Greek public opinion, the press and the state initially viewed migrants – Albanians in particular – with suspicion and hostility. The prevailing narrative of an "unprecedented" migration flow was accompanied by the belief that these people would not remain in Greece but would move elsewhere or return to their home countries. This perception framed the experience of migration as an accident, marked by explicit xenophobia and racism. Albanian migrants were often depicted as "animals" and "criminals", and subjected to curfews and discriminatory practices, such as municipal bans on their entry to certain areas and shop owners refusing them service.[29] An empirical study conducted among first-year law students at the Democritus University of Thrace

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[28] Jennifer Cavounidis, "Migration to Greece from the Balkans," *South-Eastern Europe Journal of Economics* 2, no. 2 (2004): 35–59.

[29] Vasilis Nitsiakos, *Μαρτυρίες Αλβανών μεταναστών* (Athens: Odysseas, 2003).

in February 1996 revealed a high prevalence of stereotypical perceptions towards migrants. Using a structured questionnaire distributed to 150 students during criminology exams, the research explored themes such as personal contact with migrants, perceptions of criminality and the influence of the media. The findings indicated a strong internalisation of dominant societal stereotypes, especially towards Albanian migrants, who were primarily associated with criminality, illegality and violence. The figure of the "Albanian illegal immigrant" emerged as a symbol of the dangerous "other" in the collective social imagination. Although the limited and specialised sample constrains generalisability, the study offered valuable insight into how legal professionals in training perceived migration and crime.[30] The media often perpetuated these stereotypes, with headlines such as "Albanian terror" and "The Albanians are a plague all over Western Macedonia and Epirus".[31]

From the mid-2000s onwards, the perception of Albanians began to shift.[32] Albanian migration began to be seen as neutral or even positive, with Albanians portrayed as hard-working and easily integrated, in contrast to migrants from other regions, such as Asia or Africa. Albanians came to be seen as the "good" migrants, those who were easy to integrate.[33] This shift in perception coincided with a broader change in the relationship between the Albanian migrant community and Greek society based on the realisation of a permanent – and not temporary – experience of migration that went hand-in-hand with the integration process of everyday life. By 2010, during Greece's economic crisis, the anti-Albanian discourse of the 1990s had become a source of discomfort for both Greeks and Albanians, with both sides reluctant to revisit the past.

The integration of Albanians in Greek society was facilitated by their social and economic assimilation, including changes in religion and names. Many Albanians adopted Greek names and converted to Christianity as a way to fit in and erase characteristics that "sounded" or seemed foreign.[34] These strategies, dictated by the external pressure of racism, proved to be successful in creating a stereotype of a positive contribution to Greek society: Albanians

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[30] Vasilis Karydis, *Η εγκληματικότητα των μεταναστών στην Ελλάδα: Ζητήματα θεωρίας και αντεγκληματικής πολιτικής* (Athens: Papazisis, 1996).

[31] Kokkali, "From Scapegoats to 'Good' Immigrants?"

[32] Adam Adamczyk, "Albanian Immigrants in Greece: From Unwanted to Tolerated?," *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2016): 49–59.

[33] Vassilis Papastergiou and Eleni Takou, *Migration in Greece: Eleven Myths and Even More Truths* (Athens: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung–Office in Greece, 2014).

[34] Nitsiakos, *Μαρτυρίες*.

were seen as "whites", not distinct in terms of religion, and family-oriented individuals dedicated to the ideals of hard work and entrepreneurial success. This positive stereotype was constructed in juxtaposition with the negative stereotypes surrounding the novel waves of migrant workers from Asia and Africa. The growing presence of African and Asian migrants shifted perceptions of Albanians, who were now viewed as less threatening, and even as part of the social fabric of the country. While it is too early to speak of "Albanophilia" in Greece, Albanophobia has significantly diminished in the public sphere. The new enemy of the nation was different: the refugee, the migrant, the outsider coming from the East.

Greece as a European "Shield": Refugees as the Threatening Face of Otherness

Since 2015, a new "paralegal" order has been established both at the European Union and national levels to address the new refugee reality. In the aftermath of 2015 and following the launch of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, Greece experienced a surge in asylum legislation aimed at facilitating returns from the Greek islands to Turkey under the statement.[35] Since the deal, the Greek Parliament has passed seven reforms to asylum legislation: laws 4375/2016, 4399/2016, 4461/2017, 4540/2018, 4636/2019, 4686/2020 and 4825/2021, all focusing on deportations and returns. The most recent law (4825/2021) introduced provisions allowing the denial of refugee status to applicants deemed a threat to national security or public safety, adding grounds for exclusion from international protection, thereby distancing Greece from the 1951 Geneva Convention. This move reflects a broader trend of eroding asylum standards in the domestic legal framework since 2015, accompanied by the prolonged confinement in degrading conditions on the Greek islands. However, this should not be viewed as a Greek exception to European human rights standards but rather as an example of the new EU-wide approach, where the Geneva Convention is increasingly seen as outdated, though still formally inviolable. The European Court of Human Rights is reviewing numerous cases related to reception conditions on the eastern Aegean islands and potential human rights violations.

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[35] Refugee Support Aegean and Stiftung Pro Asyl, "EU-Turkey Deal: 5 Years of Shame: Rule of Law Capture by a Statement," March 2021, https://rsaegean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/RSA_PROASYL_EU-TR_RoL_Capture.pdf.

The EU-Turkey Statement was framed as a "temporary and extraordinary measure necessary to end human suffering and restore public order".[36] Yet, despite the sharp decrease in arrivals, it continues to be implemented, with discussions ongoing about reforming it to align with the current migration situation. The continuous reform of Greek asylum law over the past six years, prompted by the statement, has raised concerns over the erosion of safeguards and procedural guarantees in the asylum system. The most notable example is the de facto suspension of the Geneva Convention for one month in February 2020 at the Evros border during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. In response to a surge of arrivals following Turkey's border opening, Greek authorities suspended asylum procedures for all new arrivals for one month, a move that was not authorised by either national or EU law and was in direct contradiction of the Geneva Convention.

Among the many amendments to asylum legislation, certain measures effectively serve as a blueprint for undermining refugee protection. One such measure is the "geographical restriction", which confines asylum seekers subject to the EU-Turkey Statement to the islands until their asylum process is completed. This policy has led to severe overcrowding and a deterioration of living conditions.[37] On 7 June 2021, a joint ministerial decision issued by the Foreign and Migration and Asylum ministries designated Turkey as a "safe third country" for asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Somalia. Consequently, applications from these nationalities can be rejected as "inadmissible", without being assessed on their merits. The joint ministerial decision is estimated to affect the majority of asylum applicants in Greece. However, despite final inadmissibility decisions, rejected applicants are not returned to Turkey due to the suspension of returns under the EU-Turkey Statement. As a result, they are left in a state of protracted legal limbo. This decision was annulled by the Greek Council of State, following a judicial review initiated by civil society organisations, on the grounds that the legal criteria for such a designation had not been properly assessed, particularly with regard to the situation in Turkey. Despite the annulment, and even before the Council of State's ruling was officially published, the same ministries issued a new joint ministerial decision on 9 April 2025, redesignating Turkey as a "safe third country" for applicants from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan

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[36] European Council, "EU-Turkey Statement, 18 March 2016," 18 March 2016, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/.

[37] Dimitris Christopoulos and Georgia Spyropoulou, "Buffer States," in *Greece and Turkey in Conflict and Cooperation: From Europeanization to De-Europeanization*, ed. Alexis Heraclides and Gizem Alioglu Çakmak (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019): 271–85.

and Bangladesh.[38] This move has been widely criticised as a violation of the principles of legality and legal certainty, as well as a direct breach of Article 95(5) of the Greek Constitution, which obliges the administration to comply with judicial decisions. The Council of State and the Court of Justice of the European Union have both clarified that, due to the suspension of returns to Turkey since March 2020, asylum applications from individuals covered by the "safe third country" concept cannot be rejected as inadmissible. This legal position remains valid today. Therefore, while the legal framework continues to allow for the rejection of such applications as inadmissible, in practice, no returns to Turkey are taking place. As a result, asylum seekers affected by this policy remain in a state of protracted legal limbo, rejected, but not removed, deprived of access to protection and reception conditions.

Regarding integration, the situation has not improved. Social integration is often viewed as a "pull factor", and efforts to integrate refugees are seen as likely to exacerbate migration flows. This perspective is widespread across most EU member states, including Greece. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, in March 2020, echoed this sentiment, stating, "This border is not only a Greek border; it is also a European border … I thank Greece for being our European *aspida* [shield] in these times," framing the border as a defence measure, not an opportunity for integration. The refugee crisis of 2015 marked a turning point in integration policies, as resources, policies and funding have predominantly focused on managing newly arrived populations. This has turned integration policies into mere reception policies. Despite having an institutional framework that allows asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection to access the Greek labour market, the reality is that most refugees stay in camps, with only a few vulnerable individuals housed in alternative structures.[39]

Although Greece formally established its first National Strategy for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals in 2013, it was not until 2019 that the government presented a revised strategy. This new strategy addresses education, labour market integration, racism and xenophobia, among other issues. However, both current and former strategies primarily outline a roadmap for integration rather than a binding policy framework. The integration measures

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[38] Ministry of Migration and Asylum, "Η Τουρκία παραμένει ασφαλής τρίτη χώρα για τους αιτούντες άσυλο," 9 April 2025, https://migration.gov.gr/i-toyrkia-paramenei-asfalis-triti-chora-gia-toys-aitoyntes-asylo/.

[39] Nikos Kourachanis, "From Camps to Social Integration: Social Housing Interventions for Asylum Seekers in Greece," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 39, no. 1 (2018): 221–34.

that have been implemented are largely project-based, with no long-term sustainability beyond the project cycle.[40] Public sector inefficiencies also hinder the strategy's coherent implementation, while novel provisions make the integration of refugees residing in the country almost impossible. The National Integration Programme Helios, initiated in July 2019 and run by the IOM and other partners, is the only significant ongoing integration programme for beneficiaries of international protection. While it aims to help refugees integrate through language courses, accommodation and employability support, access remains challenging due to bureaucratic hurdles.[41] A March 2020 amendment to asylum legislation mandated that beneficiaries of international protection must leave accommodation centres within 30 days of their status being granted. This has led to a risk of homelessness and destitution, as there is insufficient alternative housing. Additionally, as of 1 July 2021, a ministerial decision excluded self-accommodated asylum seekers from receiving cash assistance from the UNHCR,[42] further exacerbating their precarious situation.

The lack of a cohesive integration system is highlighted by two subsequent German court rulings. On 21 January 2021, the Higher Administrative Court of North Rhine-Westphalia ruled that a recognised Eritrean refugee could not be returned to Greece, citing the unlikelihood of the applicant securing decent accommodation or employment, or accessing social benefits: "it would be unlikely for the applicant to find decent accommodation and gainful employment in Greece. Moreover, it also noted that he would not have access to social benefits and therefore would not be in a position to reasonably secure the minimum level of subsistence".[43] Similarly, on 19 April 2021, the Higher Administrative Court of Lower Saxony ruled that two recognised refugees from Greece could not be returned, as their most basic needs could not be met in Greece.[44]

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[40] Nadina Leivadit, Evangelia Papatzani, Aggelos Ilias and Electra Petracou, "Integration: Policy, Practices and Experiences. Greece Country Report," Respond Working Papers, Global Migration: Consequences and Responses, 2020/53, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3886992.

[41] Asylum Information Database (AIDA)/Greek Council for Refugees, "Country Report: Greece 2020. 2020 Update," June 2021, https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AIDA-GR_2020update.pdf.

[42] No. 115220/2021, *Εφημερίς της Κυβερνήσεως* (*ΦΕΚ*), no. 3322B, 26 July 2021.

[43] European Database of Asylum Law (EDAL), "Germany: Higher Administrative Court Cancels Removal of International Protection Beneficiary to Greece," 21 January 2021, https://www.asylumlawdatabase.eu/en/content/germany-higher-administrative-court-cancels-removal-international-protection-beneficiary.

[44] European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), "Greece: While the Designation of Turkey as Safe Country and Pushbacks Undermine Protection in Greece, the Country is Criticised for not Preventing Secondary Movement," 11 June 2021, https://ecre.org/greece-

At the EU level, the legislative response to integration has been equally prolific. The European Commission set out a European Agenda for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals in 2011, followed by an action plan in 2016.[45] In November 2020, the commission released a new Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, replacing the 2016 plan.[46] However, the implementation of these plans in Greece has been limited, with many integration policies appearing disconnected from the realities on the ground. The EU's attempt to reconcile "hotspots" with integration policies seems more like wishful thinking than a practical solution. History has shown that true integration cannot be achieved through the isolation of refugees in hotspots. On 13 May 2015, the European Commission proposed the European Agenda on Migration, a strategy to manage migration flows effectively.[47] In October 2015, the commission introduced the hotspot approach in Italy and Greece, where EU agencies (European Union Agency for Asylum, Frontex, Europol) worked with Greek authorities to manage migration arrivals. Between 2016 and 2020, the commission presented proposals for reforming the Common European Asylum System, but these efforts have yet to yield significant results.[48]

Overall, the post-2015 setting is defined by a policy – on a national and European Union level – aiming to regulate population movement with the ultimate aim of deterring it. If the 1990s were defined by lack of regulation, evident in the belated adoption of legislation measures, here we can witness a paradigm shift in the direction of overlegislation with the sole aim of putting an end to the arrival of newcomers to Europe – and therefore Greece. In this process, the state – and international actors – have acquired a novel role in implementing harsh

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while-the-designation-of-turkey-as-safe-country-and-pushbacks-undermine-protection-in-greece-the-country-is-criticised-for-not-preventing-secondary-movement/.

[45] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), "Integration of Young Refugees in the EU: Good Practices and Challenges," 2019, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2019-integration-young-refugees_en.pdf.

[46] European Commission, Commission staff working document accompanying the document 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, 24 November 2020, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52020SC0290.

[47] European Commission, "The EC Reveals its new Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, 2021–2027," 24 November 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20250124072535/https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/news/ec-reveals-its-new-action-plan-integration-and-inclusion-2021-2027_en.

[48] Violeta Moreno-Lax, Jennifer Allsopp, Evangelia Tsourdi and Philippe De Bruycker, "The EU Approach on Migration in the Mediterranean," June 2021, European Parliament, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU(2021)694413.

measures on the borders (such as pushbacks), creating multiple buffer zones that make integration impossible and constructing a legal framework that confines and segregates refugees both symbolically and actually. The irony of history here is that this policy is facilitated by vast expenditure directed primarily on measures and practices that segregate refugees in camps and enclosed structures, thus barring any potential dynamics of integration. The realities of the Greek economy during the years of the crisis played an additional role here, as informal labour – the path to integration in the 1990s – was not really an option for newcomers. This did not change significantly in the postcrisis years, as the rise of a right-wing government with strong positions on the refugee question led to a further strengthening of exclusionary measures and the political hegemony of antirefugee rhetoric. The idea that Greece is under attack – exemplified in the Evros events in 2020 – and the dismantling of the few and weak procedures of active integration that were in place illustrate a paradoxical situation in which the approximately 60,000 refugees of the 2015 crisis residing in Greece in 2020 were still seen as individuals who were here for a temporary stay – when all empirical data suggested otherwise.

Conclusion: The More Things Change, the More they Stay the Same?

Migration, from the very beginning, often results in trauma – for both newcomers and host communities. With time, however, pain eases and, depending on the capacity of the community for integration, oblivion acts as the ultimate mechanism of rehabilitation for all involved. It took a century to overcome the trauma of the 1922–1924 wave of refugees who arrived in Greece following the population exchange with Turkey. These *τουρκόσποροι* ("Turkish seeds") eventually became the prototype of the hard-working, resilient Greek – someone who would do whatever it took to survive. In contrast, it took only about 25 years for the experiences of Albanian migrants to fade from public memory. Today, Albanians are seen as the "good" migrants – "like us" – eager to integrate and work hard to succeed in Greece. The Albanophobia of the 1990s is now largely confined to marginal, extremist political circles. When refugees began crossing the Aegean Sea in 2015, Greek society responded in a variety of ways, from solidarity to xenophobia. However, one thing remained absent from the discourse: comparisons with the post-1990 experience. This lack of comparison reveals how societies treat migration: as an unprecedented event, an isolated occurrence with no historical precedent. The lesson here is clear: past migrations are framed as success stories, while current migration is seen as a threat – despite being perceived in the same way when those earlier waves arrived.

The Greek position on migration today is often framed as follows: the refugee crisis is a unique phenomenon in modern history, and Greece's responsibility is to

help newcomers continue their journey, as they do not wish to stay. However, this narrative began to unravel the moment the borders were closed. Official statistics show that approximately 100,000 refugees resided in Greece in May 2025.[49] This reality – a diverse community within Greece's borders – requires a re-examination of integration policies. Public discourse remains trapped in the mindset of the 2015 crisis, continuing to view Greece as merely a transitory space – a temporary stop on the way to other destinations. This view, rooted in the open Balkan route of the past, remains persistent even after the EU-Turkey deal and the closure of borders.[50] What we have observed is the perpetuation of a conceptual fallacy – a mantra repeated by politicians, media and public figures, suggesting that refugees are destabilising forces. In an effort to avoid accusations of racism, this narrative insists that refugees do not want to integrate, thus shifting the blame onto them. Strikingly, this perspective often ignores the voices of the refugees themselves, projecting assumptions about their desires and needs without listening to them.

The public discourse surrounding migration in Greece was formed and shaped between 2015 and 2019, as the country dealt with refugees primarily from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. This narrative is contrasted with the earlier "success" stories of Albanian migration, which took place in the postcommunist era. Our research highlights two key presuppositions: that refugees do not want to stay in Greece, as it is not a destination country, and that they cannot be integrated, unlike the Albanians who seemingly did. However, this narrative fails to account for the reality, both past and present. Refugees and asylum seekers have been residing in Greece for over five years, since the closure of the Balkan route in 2016. Even if refugees did not initially intend to stay, many have now been here for years. Moreover, the belief that refugees cannot integrate – especially due to their Muslim identity – is rooted in a deep-seated Islamophobia. While historically rooted in anti-Turkish sentiment, this Islamophobia has gradually evolved to mirror broader European trends.

In Greece, as in other EU countries, mainstream political figures and media often portray refugees as potential sources of instability. In trying to avoid charges of racism, the narrative insists that refugees do not want to integrate, again putting the blame on them. This view disregards the voices of refugees themselves and, in a paternalistic manner, imposes a narrative of exclusion. We

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[49] According to official statistics published by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum for May 2025, the number of active International Protection Applicant Cards (ADETs) stands at 90,174. Ministry of Migration and Asylum, Τυπικές Στατιστικές – International Protection and Migration Statistics, May 2025, https://shorturl.at/dTYCi.

[50] Andreas Takis, *Refugee Crisis 2015: Chronicle of a Foretold Crisis* (Brussels: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2015).

argue that this repetition is a deliberate strategy of nonintegration and a denial of Greece's role as both a transit and destination country. Looking back to the early 1990s, Greek policies towards migrants – particularly Albanians – were characterised by discrimination and segregation. For years, Albanians were vital to Greece's economic development but treated as undesirable. It was only in 2005, with the introduction of Law 3386/2005, that a comprehensive framework for the social integration of third-country nationals was proposed. The idea of migration as a temporary experience was consolidated during the summer of 2015, when the "Balkan corridor" remained open and most migrants continued on to their final destination. However, this narrative has proven particularly resilient and has persisted, even after 2015. Today, however, this idea that refugees do not want to stay in Greece is no longer valid. Seven years later, most of those once considered newcomers have become long-term residents. Regardless of their initial intentions, they remain in Greece, and this reality presents its own dynamics for integration. The perpetuation of the belief that "these people are not like former migrants because they do not want to integrate" not only constitutes a fallacy but poses a threat to social cohesion in the country.

In conclusion, the narrative of migration as a temporary experience is obsolete in Greece. Migration is not a linear process guided by rational strategies from origin to destination; it is fluid and often unpredictable. Today, Greece – and other southern European countries – find themselves caught in a new reality, one in which they serve as buffer zones within the EU. Despite the challenges this brings, the Greek state has yet to recognise its role fully. Accepting the position of a buffer state requires a shift in perception: refugees will stay in Greece, and thus, policies of integration must be implemented. The ongoing refusal to confront this reality only exacerbates the marginalisation of the integration question, reinforcing the idea that "refugees and migrants do not want to stay in this country". To paraphrase Zygmunt Bauman, Greek society "produces its own kind of strangers, and produces them in its own inimitable way", but these "strangers" become nonstrangers as time passes and the dynamics of integration change the picture.[51] Societies tend to forget how they once perceived those they considered outsiders. Migrants who have already established themselves are now seen as the success stories, while new arrivals are still viewed with suspicion. Yet, time has a way of absorbing tensions and, in the future, it is likely that the 2015 migration crisis will be remembered as part of Greece's long, complex history of migration. In the end, migration is never truly a new event – only a continuation of a cycle that has shaped and reshaped societies over time.

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[51] Zygmunt Bauman, "Making and Unmaking of Strangers," *Thesis Eleven*, no. 43 (1995): 1.