

Continuities between the Financial and Refugee Crisis: Management and Resistance.

Notes from Athens

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Abstract

When social phenomena are characterized as "crises," they are described—not only in public discourse but also in academic literature—as unique, unprecedented, and extreme events, occurring solely in an emergent present and disconnected from wider social, political, economic, spatial, and historical relations. Especially for those of us residing in Athens or other Greek cities, our temporal and spatial proximity and active involvement in grassroots movements, lead us to view these events as two distinct and intense periods. Nonetheless, with a time distance, we can rethink the potential relations among the two (see also Samaddar 2016). This paper examines the often-overlooked continuities between the financial crisis and the refugee crisis in Greece focusing mainly on two aspects: (a) the ways these crises were framed and managed “from above” and (b) the resistances and grassroots movements that emerged “from below”.

Introduction

The onset of the economic recession in Greece became apparent between 2007 and 2009, driven by the global financial crisis of 2007-08, structural deficiencies, and limitations imposed by Eurozone regulations (Lapavitsas 2019). The crisis escalated in 2010 with the signing of the first Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Greek Government and the Troika—the European Union, International Monetary Fund, and European Central Bank. Since then a rupture has occurred in the lives of the vast majority of people in Greece, with salaries and pensions severely cut, taxes increasing, unemployment rising to unprecedented levels, and social provisions, including health care and education, failing. This MoU imposed “the hardest austerity measures ever seen in modern Europe” (Douzinas 2010, p.285), marking at the same time the largest IMF intervention in EU soil up to then.

The austerity policies met strong social and political resistance by a very big part of the society. Huge demonstrations, strikes, riots, the indignados movement in the squares led to major changes in the established political balances favoring the Left. In parallel, grassroots structures of solidarity were created providing support to the ones who couldn't make ends meet under austerity: local social centers, social clinics and pharmacies were popping up in almost every neighborhood.

From 2009 and onwards, in order to impose Troika supervision and austerity policies, the Greek state was increasingly portrayed as an inept state, unproductive and overly dependent on the public service sector, while the economic development of the previous years was now characterized as a ‘bubble’. The ‘bitter truth’ was revealed and moralising arguments were used to describe Greeks and the Greek system as

embroiled in tax evasion, clientelism and corruption (for more, see Mylonas, 2014). As such, harsh austerity policies were now presented by the dominant EU discourses and the mainstream media as a 'forced landing' and a 'painful salvation' (Leandros et al., 2011). This narrative accelerated in 2015 with Syriza – a coalition of the Syriza party coming from the Left and ANEL party coming from the Right- came to power.

On 5th July 2015, the Syriza government called for a referendum on whether the country should accept the bailout conditions imposed by the Troika. Although 62.4% of the people voted against accepting the Troika terms, the government entered a long negotiation process that summer.

In August 2015, the first massive arrivals of refugees by boats to the islands of the North Aegean signaled what was later framed as a "refugee crisis."

The first section of this chapter revolves around a central argument: the management of the financial crisis paved the way—in terms of practices, logics, discourses, and infrastructures—to both frame the arrival of refugees as a "crisis" and to manage it, following a neoliberal and colonial logic.

From August 2015 and within only a few months, more than a million refugees, mainly from Syria and Afghanistan, arrived in Greece, most of them in transit towards Northern Europe. In these initial months, there was no coordinated response from the EU or the Greek state. Various International Organizations and (I)NGOs that arrived in Greece were using their own means and funds. However, it was probably the autonomous solidarity groups and local grassroots initiatives that played the most important role in these first months of mass refugee arrivals.

The second section of this paper argues that the significant social mobilizations and grassroots structures that emerged during the financial crisis paved the way—in terms of networks, knowledge, infrastructures, and confidence—for a grassroots immediate response during the period of the "refugee crisis."

1. Framing and managing the "refugee crisis"

"If this refugee crisis has happened in Sweden, well, the European commission wouldn't be there to supervise"

Interview with high ranked EU representative in Greece, May 2023

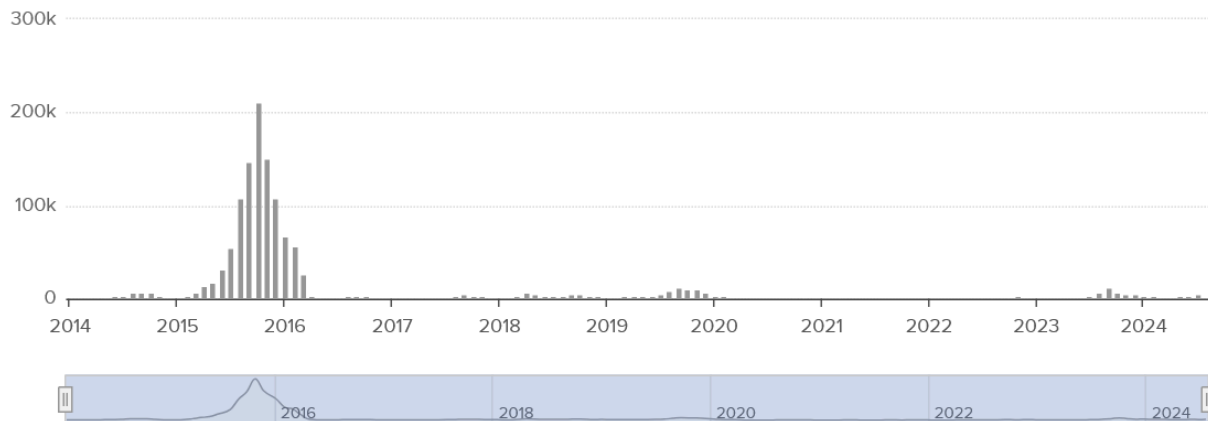
Let us start from an unexpected place: redo the math. Since the summer of 2015, approximately 1,200,000 refugees, mainly from Syria and Afghanistan, arrived through the Aegean Sea into Greek territory, aiming to reach Northern European countries. This number represented 0.23% of the EU population, which was estimated at around 510 million in 2016 by the European Commission.

Following the EU-Turkey Joint Statement in March 2016 and according to EU and UNHCR estimates, 60,000 refugees were stranded in Greece. This number comprised 0.6% of the total Greek population, which was about 10 million people at that time. This figure remained more or less stable in the subsequent years, as shown in the diagrams provided by the UNHCR.

The reasons for the minimization of arrivals were twofold. First, Turkey was blocking sea and land arrivals following its deal with the EU. Second, the Greek government, especially after 2019, was conducting illegal pushbacks at the borders, leading to hundreds of deaths and tragic “incidents” like the one in Pylos.

Sea and land arrivals monthly

[.CSV](#) [JSON](#)



So why did this demographically insignificant number of refugees, in relation to the EU and Greek populations, easy to manage in EU level and expected after the war in Syria create such a significant issue? Why was it framed as a "refugee and humanitarian crisis"? And why did it mobilize— as we will see in what follows—huge resources of people and capital to manage it? Nonetheless, when an event is framed as a "crisis," the important question becomes who will manage it and in which ways.

Things become even more interesting if we start following the money. On March 16, just two days before the announcement of the EU-Turkey Joint Statement, the Emergency Support Initiative (ESI)¹ was created to assist Greece in refugee management, signaling the first humanitarian operation ever on EU soil.

From 2016 to 2021, the EU allocated 3.39 billion euros to Greece, roughly the same amount Turkey received for that period, although Turkey had to accommodate 3 to 4 million people and Greece less than 100.000 over those years. Out of the 3.39 billion euros, 450 million came from the Internal Security Fund for border protection, leaving almost 3 billion earmarked for emergency support, asylum, migration and integration. More particularly 2.27 billion came from Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). The majority of these funds were given directly to INGOs. The largest recipients were UNHCR², which received nearly 1 billion euros, IOM with 702.37 million euros, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum with 526.55 million euros, and the Ministry of Defense with 127.71 million euros.

¹See more here:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/greece-end-activation-emergency-support-instrument-dg-echo-echo-daily-flash-13>

² Still the total funding of INGO's for the Greek operations was not solely from EU. For example, on 2020, 80% of UNHCR funding was from the EU but another 20% was given from other donors (for more see UNHCR Greece Factsheet September 2020, available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/83090>)

More particularly, the initial response to the Greek refugee crisis funded through the Emergency Support Initiative (ESI) by DG ECHO, directed all the funds exclusively to International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and UN agencies. The allocation of 670 million euros bypassed the Greek state, reflecting DG ECHO's greater trust *in established institutional partners from Global South operations* over the perceived untrustworthiness of Greek institutions. This direct funding to INGOs and UN agencies meant they held decision-making power regarding the management of the refugee population.

By following the money, it becomes clear that the current "refugee crisis" was managed, much like "financial crisis" by International Institutions and not primarily by the Greek State.

Despite the substantial financial assistance provided by the EU relative to the refugee population stranded in Greece over these years, the allocation of these funds adhered to a colonial logic characteristic of humanitarian operations led by international NGOs worldwide. This involved an ad hoc, project-based, donor-driven and short-term approach to "assistance" across all aspects of refugee management. The most telling example of this logic is the establishment of camps as the primary accommodation model, done hastily and without any consideration of possible alternatives.

Our research indicates that from March 2016 to March 2017, around 50 new camps were constructed in mainland Greece, with the vast majority situated in remote and isolated areas. These camps cannot be seen as a means to promote "integration" despite that their funding came primarily from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). Instead, camps produce socio-spatial exclusion and promote the logic of "unmixing," a concept that will be explored in more detail in subsequent sections of this paper. As an alternative to camps, the project ESTIA³, was granting apartments for short term periods to the most "vulnerable" refugees -while "vulnerability" for that period was probably the only way for refugees to get access into better living conditions, as it will be discussed in the following sections. Still ESTIA project had the same logic of ad-hoc, temporary and granted services providing no stability to refugees (Lafazani, 2024).

Furthermore, the newly established Ministry of Migration in Greece, constrained by austerity measures from the MoU, was facing significant budget and staffing limitations. To be more precise, as the ministry was established in 2016, it couldn't actually hire any personnel due to MoU regulations that aimed at minimizing the public sector. EU funding distributions further deepened this disparity, with the budget for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) being double that allocated to all Greek ministries combined.

Every time the Syriza government attempted to propose alternative management strategies during these crises was met with threats: a Grexit during the financial crisis (Wodak and Angouri 2014) and a Schengen exit during the refugee crisis (Kasperek 2016).

2. Continuities in struggle

The second chapter of this paper argues that the significant social mobilizations and grassroots structures that emerged during the financial crisis paved the way—in terms of networks, knowledge, infrastructures, and confidence—for a grassroots immediate response during the period of the "refugee crisis."

³ <https://migration.gov.gr/en/ris2/filoxenia-aitoynton-asylo/>

Immediate support initiatives: pedion of areos, Piraeus port, Skala sykamnias

Long term initiatives after EU-Turkey common statement: refugee squats, permanent infrastructures, social clinics, soup kitchens

Epilogue

The concept of "crisis" in both instances facilitated a particular type of management by International Institutions, embodying a colonial rationality traditionally applied to the Global South. By examining these crises together, this chapter highlights the continuity in the management approach by international institutions and calls for a re-thinking of the narratives that have shaped our understanding of Greece's recent history.

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