

Challenges of the Athens municipality regarding the integration and social orientation of migrants and refugees.

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Social orientation and integration action plans for asylum seekers and refugees in Greece are still problematic despite the efforts made by the State regarding the design of migration policies and simplified integration-related administrative procedures in the last decade.

Given that there is no specific social orientation of any type provided at national / institutional level in Greece (no obligatory language courses for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, no integration related criteria regarding administrative procedures, etc.), integrating the local community is a very complex process, especially for newcomers without supporting network.

In several EU countries migration policies and integration action plans designed for migrant populations have been adapted and fine-tuned in order to support asylum seekers and refugees in their efforts to start a new life in a new environment, understand the local community's social codes, general functioning, history and civilization but also adapt to the local rules, laws and obligations that occur from their entire and complete integration to the receiving country's civil society. In Greece, migration policies did not focus on integration for several years, therefore a similar transfer of policy design could not be considered doing.

In the last decade, numbers have skyrocketed in terms of foreign population in the country (i.e. asylum seekers, refugees and migrants) and particularly in the city of Athens, with a peak in asylum seekers arriving to the country in 2016. The State has proven unable to successfully manage increasing incoming flows and satisfy basic needs related to reception procedures and protection issues, focusing its efforts on emergency relief (registration, housing, basic needs) rather than working on the mid/long-term integration process. In other words, it seems that asylum seekers have been dealt with as temporary highly vulnerable visitors or transitioning passengers instead of valuable human resources, potential workforce and future active citizens.

UNHCR statistics on the evolution of arrivals in Greece in the last five years can be found at the UNHCR online operational portal:

<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

However, the unprecedented flow since 2015 changed the responses to reception and integration by public authorities at all levels. At the national level one of the consequences of the increased migration inflow has been the formulation of a new National Integration Strategy by the Ministry for Migration Policy that was put under public consultation in late 2018. The new National Integration Strategy foresees the cooperation and involvement of all policy levels (central, regional and local) and actors (national authorities, local authorities,

organisations, NGOs, public and private sector), while it highlights the role of local authorities, which have a crucial role to play in diversity management and migrant integration.

Yet, social orientation activities are still mainly handled by NGOs working in the field, providing language courses, administrative support for various procedures and social activities thus promoting a smooth integration of refugees and migrants.

Nevertheless, the Municipality of Athens offers Information and orientation for inclusion in the Greek society through its social services, mainly by referring to appropriate structures and services according to the specific needs of each person but also provides free access to primary healthcare services, language courses and cultural ad hoc events and activities. In addition, based on a non-discrimination policy, all social and welfare services managed by the municipality such as municipal health clinics or the Centre for Reception and Solidarity (KYADA) are available and accessible to all persons in need regardless of national or ethnic origin.

Currently, the main Municipality of Athens' tools for Integration are:

- A. The Athens Coordination Centre for Migrants and Refugees (ACCMR)
<https://www.accmr.gr/en/the-athens-coordination-center.html>
- B. The Migrant Integration Centre (KEM)
<https://www.accmr.gr/en/services/service/839.html>
- C. The Migrant Integration Council (SEM): a consultative mechanism initiated in 2011, involving the municipality and six migrant communities, serving as an interface to inform the municipal council about migrants' needs and to formulate recommendations and proposals that specifically affect this group.
- D. The Centre for Reception and Solidarity (KYADA): it operates as a one-stop-shop for social emergencies offering services to all vulnerable groups including irregular persons. It provides shelter, collects and distributes food items, clothing and shoes. KYADA cooperates with public services like clinics, referring persons in need to the relevant public services or NGOs.

Lastly, the Municipality of Athens' Accommodation and Services Scheme for Asylum Seekers and beneficiaries of International Protection is part of [ESTIA](#) Program (Emergency Support to Integration & Accommodation) and has been implemented by the City of Athens and UNHCR and funded by European Union Civil Society and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO). The ADDMA Accommodation has provided housing to 5.150 Asylum seekers on average since April 2016 and is currently accommodating 1.636 PoCs. In the frame of the Accommodation Scheme, essential challenges in the successful integration of asylum seekers and refugees appear through our daily fieldwork, and could be summarised as listed below:

- The vulnerability criterion characterizing the asylum procedure and its consequences on the process of integration;
- Lack of state means and infrastructures: a) language barrier, scarce interpretation services and the consequent risk of marginalisation, b) extremely limited own accommodation solutions, c) limited social and welfare services;

- Very limited access to labor market;
- Difficulties in following the National Educational System (at all age);
- Lack of institutional overall integration planification due to the systematic need to overcome emergency situations;
- General socioeconomic context in Greece (unemployment, economic crisis, limited access to state allowances, continuation of arrival flow);
- Political standpoint: Emergency relief Vs. Development policies;
- Current political context: European elections and Greek Municipal elections.

All these challenges are been dealt with mostly with the support of NGOs, volunteer organisations and other actors of the field providing adequate services with very limited means, as funding is the main issue encountered by actors at all levels. That being said, a shift in the political planning can be observed as the competent authorities have being working on integration policies. Still, Greece is currently in a very subtle political context, as municipal elections are approaching in parallel with the European Parliament elections. Under these circumstances, no significant change in the Municipality of Athens' political design for migrant and refugee integration can be expected.

In addition, the Ministry for Migration Policy has announced the gradual termination of accommodation for refugees that have received their status in 2018 – evictions have started and will be carried out throughout the year, potentially increasing dramatically the number of homeless people in the city of Athens (and all cities implementing the ESTIA Accommodation Scheme). As a result, one may wonder how these political decisions will affect the wider question of migrant and refugee's integration.