

Thessaloniki, three years after the refugee crisis.

The long read: Three years after the 2015 crisis and after the spotlights have gone out, what is the situation with the refugees now in Thessaloniki? What is the state's plan for the refugees that remained in Greece and for those that are still coming?

By George Akilidis, Elena Alexandrou and Christos Chelidonis, June 2018



No one can forget what happened in Greece in 2015. The hundreds of thousands of refugees who were crossing the eastern sea borders of Greece in an effort to reach Europe. During that period, more than one million refugees and migrants entered Europe through Greece. The majority of them wanted to reach the Northern European Countries

and particularly Germany, especially after the statement of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, that all Syrian asylum-seekers are welcome to remain in Germany – no matter which EU country they had first entered from. Of course, the initial enthusiasm and hope that, maybe for the first time, developed countries decided to face a humanitarian crisis from a more humane angle, didn't last for long. At the end of 2015, one after the other, the Eastern European countries, including a number of Balkan States, started closing their borders. The start was made by Hungary, which built a razor-wire barrier across its borders with Serbia, and later with Croatia. But what made the difference for Greece was the fence that FYROM built across our common borders. Soon after that, thousands of refugees were stuck in Greece and started gathering at the Customs with our Balkan neighbors, waiting for a reopening of the borders or an opportunity to “sneak into” Europe. Everyone in Greece remembers the makeshift camp that was created in Idomeni. The large number of refugees and migrants that gathered there, which soon exceeded the 15000, and the terrible living conditions which soon started to pose a threat for their health, made us all realise that the situation had changed in the way Europe had started facing the refugees.



Refugees demonstrating in Germany



Idomeni Camp and the fence with FYROM

changed in the way Europe had started facing the refugees.

The Greek state, once again, was caught unprepared to confront with professionalism and seriousness a very difficult situation. It is easy to understand why it did happen, especially if someone recalls in his memory the 2015 summer's statements of Greek Officials, such as the Minister of Defence, who was threatening Europeans that Greece will let Jihadists enter Europe, if Europeans don't help Greece with its economic problems, or the statement of the Minister of Migration who was trying to convince Greek people that there was no problem with the refugees in Greece and those that were piling up at the squares of Athens were just enjoying the Greek summer sun. Of course, after the closing of the borders and when Greek Officials late realised that it was very possible for Greece to be converted into the refugee storehouse of Europe, they started calling for help from the EU and also making comments that were criticising the inhumanity of the Europeans, and that Greece was left alone to confront a major crisis.

The way to confront with the urgent situation, of accommodating as soon as possible more than 60000 refugees that were "trapped" in Greece and also those that were still coming from Turkey, was the assignment of actions to the Greek Armed Forces. Almost 45 refugee camps were built all over Greece in the next months. The Armed Forces, using their staff, their material and the know-how, provided shelter, food and medical care to almost 50000 people. Gradually, NGO's, with the guidance of the formal state services and with the funding of the EU, started to take over the responsibilities from the



Refugee Camp created by the Greek Armed Forces in 2016

Army and tried to improve the living conditions in the camps by introducing other services such as children's' education, entertainment, etc. In Northern Greece, more than 25 refugee camps were built which were hosting almost 30000 refugees and migrants.

The March 2016 agreement between Europe and Turkey just confirmed what everyone was already thinking: That all those refugees, would stay and apply for asylum in Greece and also that this number will probably raise in the future since Europe made clear through the agreement that it will receive refugees only directly from Turkey, in an effort to reduce the flows. Using the funding from the EU, UNHCR starting settling refugees into houses in several cities in Greece. The Majority of refugee families of Northern Greece's camps were relocated into houses with most of them being settled in Thessaloniki. This housing program run by the municipality of Thessaloniki is called «REACT» (Refugee, Assistance, Collaboration, Thessaloniki). This gave them the opportunity for a new start in their lives since they now had more human living conditions with their kids being able to start studying at neighborhood's schools.

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ut since then almost 2 years have passed. Many of the refugee camps in Thessaloniki have been closed and the lights of publicity have been withdrawn from the refugee issues and many of us tend to forget that these people exist among us and still have problems. In an effort to understand the current situation better, we spoke with families from Syria that now live in Sindos, a suburb of Thessaloniki, and asked them about their life in Greece the last years. We chose to speak with people with a similar background in order to understand how refugees, who escaped war and live in Greece for the last years, perceive their current living conditions. We realised that there are common concerns among them. All of them reminded us once again that even if they have applied for asylum in Greece, they do not actually wish to stay in Greece forever. Germany and general Northern Europe is

the “promised land” since most of them have relatives that live there and describe them their living conditions, the opportunities for work and also the better care of those states for the residents there. Not having realised that they probably will never be able to move legally to a European State, does not allow them to start making efforts for learning the Greek language. This is a big obstacle because learning the language is the first step for integrating in society. This also makes them more reluctant to open up and seem to want to reconnect with people from the same countries as them, going to places like the Muslim Center of Thessloniki.

This is not the case for their children. They seem to be doing well in adjusting to the new environment. The children study in schools in the same classes with Greek children and they have started learning Greek. Our presence at the summer fest of the 22nd Kindergarten of Thessaloniki was a very nice experience that reminded us that nothing is impossible if there is will. Kumar, the almost 6 years old boy from Syria, was impossible to be distinguished among the other children since he was singing by heart almost all the words of the songs, even if he obviously could not understand the meaning of most words. Only the mark on his nose, an old wound which he acquired when his village was bombed in Syria, was there to remind everyone why the Greek society should hug these people and why the kid’s parents, who were watching their son with pride, should also make an effort to integrate in our society.



Students during the summer fest of the 22nd Kindergarten of Thessaloniki. Kumar is the eighth from the left.

Of course, the refugees are fully aware of the economic crisis in our country and some of the people that we spoke, have already faced the difficulty in finding a job in Thessaloniki today. Roula, a young mom from Aleppo, arrived in Greece from Turkey through Evros river in 2016. She wandered in Greece and ended in Kavalari Refugee Camp near Thessaloniki. The last year she lives in Sindos with her husband and their three children. She saw her life improving a lot in the last period. Her children go to school and she is very pleased and thankful for her neighborhood and the way people treated them. She said that her life has been improved a lot since she started learning Greek. But now she starts facing other problems and concerns about her family’s future. She told us that she has no problem living in Greece as long as she has a job. Roula, consider work as the main factor for a refugee to intergrate in Greek society. She had never worked in Syria, but she is trying to work, and had been worked in the past for few months as a cleaner, but she knows that it is difficult even for Greeks to work. She knows that even if as a refugee it is easy and quick to have a programmed appointment with a doctor, it is very difficult when you have an emergency health problem. The European program may cover through UNCHR their rent and bills, but the money that they receive as a welfare payment, hardly cover their basic needs if she or her husband doesn’t work. So, she realises that there are not many opportunities for improving, even more, her and her family’s life. On the other hand, her mother in law and her husband’s brothers live

in Sweden and the comparison is unavoidable! So, she cannot exclude the option of going there or of course returning to her country if the war stops.

Similar were the answers of Basel the Singer from Al Hasakah, Syria. He is a single dad with a baby daughter who arrived in Kastelorizo Island at the beginning of 2016. Since then they have lived in Rodos Island for two months in a refugee camp, then in Athens for some weeks, then they lived for seven months in the refugee camp of New Kavala out of Thessaloniki. The last one and a half year they also live in Sindos. Basel faces similar problems with Roula's family but one more is that he is a single dad. Even if he could find a job he couldn't work because he doesn't know what to do with his daughter. She is a baby and mandatory education in Greece starts at the age of 5. He has no relative in Greece and until then he has to take care of her all day long. So, he is waiting for his passport to be issued in order to be able to travel to Switzerland. Hence, he is not trying to learn Greek and he is even thinking of returning to Turkey where he thinks that his life will be easier. We heard similar opinions from the most refugees that were interviewed, but on the other hand, there are also those, like Mr. Saffir from Syria. He came in Thessaloniki in 2015 with the first flow of refugees and despite all odds and possible difficulties, they have managed to create small businesses- in this case a small mini market- making the city their new home and proving that if there is will, there is also hope!



Mr. Saffir's family at their balcony in Thessaloniki

In our effort to clarify the present situation regarding the refugees in Thessaloniki, we visited other organizations and venues. We visited the Toumpa's Guesthouse, a guest house which was created in May 2015 by the municipality of Thessaloniki and is directed by NGO ARSIS. We spoke with the coordinator of the Guesthouse who explained to us that in there leave mainly single-parent families of refugees with underaged children. The Guesthouse is a small place where the single mother or father can leave in better conditions. They can guest up to 28 persons simultaneously. Cooked food is provided to the refugees and there are people taking care of their children for a while in order to have some free time for themselves. Also, the children attend the neighborhood's schools. Of course, there are all the comforts of a modern house such as



Toumpa's Refugee Guesthouse front entrance

Internet access, TV, radio, washing machines and toys for children. The guest house is a passing from the camps to the next phase, which is probably a house in the city or the reunion with their family, since the Guesthouse has hosted a lot of separated families which finally have reunited in another European country where the rest of the family lived. What concerns a lot Manolis, the Guesthouse coordinator, is that the last months all the procedures that have to do with refugees last longer. The interviews for granting the asylum and even the reunification of the families take much longer time than they did in the past. This is something that he cannot explain, but maybe it is a sign that things are getting worse and that should concern us about the way that Europe will deal with the Refugee issue in

the near future! The people in the Guesthouse are allowed to leave up to 6 months with some extension of few months to be given in some cases, until the family to finds the next place to stay. They have kept some families for up to 17 months, but there is always insecurity for these people. He told us about the case of a family that is living now in the Guesthouse. A single father from Syria with his 5 children, the younger of which is 10 months old! The mother died in Syria and the family left. He explained to us that this father, as it is natural, is terrified of leaving the Guesthouse, because he has no other relatives in Greece and that he is unable both financially and physically to leave in a house in Thessaloniki alone with his five kids. He tried to explain to us through this example what are the problems that these people face and that it is very difficult to start their own lives here. He told us that this man is thinking seriously to return to Turkey, where he has other relatives that will help him with his kids and he will be able to work. When we were discussing integration and the difficulties of this effort, he mentioned the big differences in the cultures between the western and the eastern civilization and why these are obstacles. Manolis told us about a young single mom that lived in the past in the guest house with her four kids. She was from Afghanistan and she had never left her village in the past. As the majority of the women in her country, she wasn't working and she rarely left her house as a housewife until her husband died and she became a refugee in order to find a better place for her child. When she was in the Guesthouse and the personnel was encouraging her to go for a walk in the city and telling her that they would look after her baby for a couple of hours, she could not understand it. It was something that she, or her mother, or sister, or her friends in her village would never do in their lives. This was an option that no matter how obvious and natural it is for us, she did not know that she had and she could not find any joy in doing it. It is maybe a very simple and unimportant thing, but it describes the way that these people sometimes have to cover, in order to fit in our society. Starting from the walk and going deeper into things that touch religion, appearance or relationships between the two sexes.



Toumpa's Refugee Guesthouse
internal

Another thing that we should all make clear in our mind, is that these people haven't stopped coming. The refugee crisis was not only in 2015! It reached its peak then, but people continue to arrive in Greece. And since now the EU has an agreement with Turkey about the refugees that arrive at the Aegean Islands, smugglers have changed their route and they now send refugees to Greece via Evros river in Thrace. The flow of refugees reaching Greece from the beginning of 2018 up until now seems to be increasing and the numbers are comparable with the first outbreak of the crisis of 2015, the Greek state has a lot of issues to deal with that come with this reality. The important question that arises here is if there is any plan for the future of these people from the part of the Greek state, but unfortunately, as it occurs from our research, there does not seem to be a concrete plan from the part of the state towards refugees' integration into the Greek society. The State is watching again reluctantly and without taking any organized actions. The efforts of the government and the NGO's have mostly to do with the coverage of the immediate needs of the people coming, meaning food, housing, and medical care. Indicative of how critical the situation is, is the fact that during the April of 2018 he had an increase of 1000% of refugees coming from Evros to Greece and the total number of people coming was approximately 2,900, a number exceeding all the people

coming from the Aegean at that same time and many of these people ended up coming to Thessaloniki.

To become more specific, describing the present picture in Thessaloniki and the way the refugees and immigrants live, we are currently having refugees living in overcrowded camps (too limited activities for people there, mainly children go to school at evenings) and other refugees, mainly male single adults, that are unfortunately homeless and live on the streets or abandoned buildings under very bad living conditions¹ - as journalist Mr. Antonis Repanas, (the awarded Journalist for its job regarding the Refugee Crisis), told us during a very reproductive interview. He explained us that they are not accepted in camps, especially those coming from countries like Afghanistan or Pakistan and carry no legal documents with them. According to him, the situation now is worse than the Idomeni days, since there no longer plan for relocation of the refugees to other countries.



Refugee child in Diavata Camp

The population in the few remaining Refugee camps of Thessaloniki reached again their limits in capacity, with the living conditions becoming worse day by day instead of improving. The conflicts among ethnic groups of different origin, like Kurds vs Arabs, in the camps, carrying in a way the war with them and worsening the already bad conditions, and the once high level of accommodation that some of these camps had offered in the past, has gone and now have turned into dangerous places to live in! In this camp, there are no longer vacant containers left and people live in tents. The camp is so full, that even rooms that were previously used for the refugee children's activities are now used.

But there are, also, many difficulties the Greek state itself has to face for the creation of concrete plans concerning the integration of these people. First and foremost is the fact that there are continuously new people that are coming, so the focus is still on the coverage of those people's basic needs. The closing of the borders from the part of the other EU /countries does not help either, as Italy and mainly Greece are left alone in this battle. Also, there is many times resistance from the refugees themselves, who feel trapped here and try to leave to other EU countries and reunite with other family members of theirs, many times reaching NGO's to help them with that. Organizational issues and the current financial and social crisis are also extra obstacles. According to Mr. Repanas, 'it is easy to judge the state as outsiders,



Refugees outside the Asylum service

but politicians have to play strategy games and they do so with human beings'. 'The case of Idomeni was also a strategic one, a means to put pressure on EU countries to open up their borders'. So, 'whether the state was prepared or not is a relative notion; sometimes the states do not want to be ready'.

Speaking of the asylum procedures that are followed, refugees or new-comers who wish to ask for asylum from EU having entered the Union from Greece, are forced to ask for asylum only by the Greek state, otherwise leave the EU. As a result, to the huge number of people first coming to Greece

¹ Description of an abandoned building near the Train Station, where refugees are sleeping on the floor and are bitten by insects. Volunteers cook for them twice a day, as it will be mentioned below.

and wanting to ask for asylum, the waiting time for people to be interviewed by the authorities is at least two years and currently the closest available appointments are at 2020.² In order for their request to be examined at two degrees in case of rejection, people have to wait for at least one more year, whereas there have been cases that people had to wait in total of four whole years! According to Mr. Repanas, this whole procedure might also last that long, not only due to the possible lacking in organization, but to discourage people from asking for asylum and return back to Turkey or home. This, of course, has a huge negative impact on the life of these people, who just feel stuck on a place and the unbearable conditions of the camps, without having the ability to continue with their lives, by being able, for instance, to open their own business or visiting family members to other EU countries. Exception to this long waiting list are the Syrians and vulnerable people - where tortured or are facing serious health issues -, who are entering a 'fast-track- procedure, and their cases are examined much faster.

The dangers stemming from the lacking in integration policies vary and are at the cost of everyone. To be more exact, they seem to pose threats to the Greek society, as their marginalization, especially of the single males and those that are rejected the asylum and remain at the country and the city (since there are not concrete deportation mechanisms that are applied), can cause violent behaviour - already fights are taking place on the streets, dividing people the society itself. Nowadays, drugs and illegal cigarettes are sold by refugees, even children, or illegal immigrants in the main squares of the city, whereas there are refugees, males mainly, who resort to prostitution. Additionally, this is negative of these people themselves, as they are stuck and not given the chance to continue their lives, consisting a waste of human resources. Moreover, many refugees risk their own lives and those of their children to cross the borders illegally and go to another EU country (mainly see Germany as a paradise as we have mentioned before), since they find the whole situation here and the procedures unbearable. And we should not forget, that lack of ineffective policies threaten the existence of EU itself, as Brexit and the rise of far right parties can indicate.



NPD's demonstration against refugees

For the alleviation of the situation, there is some light coming from the civil society. Referring specifically to Thessaloniki. For example, we are having cases of schools or teachers who create events and activities that both refugee and Greek children participate in, the Municipalities of Thessaloniki and Kalamaria that create events for the Universal Day of Refugees and sensitize the locals for the issue. The Municipality of Thessaloniki also notes down who can do what among the refugees, to help them in the future in finding a job. This is a very important procedure because among the refugees there are many educated and skilled people that can be useful in our society in many ways. This one of the few



"Playing together" event between Greek and refugee students in Thessaloniki, on 23 May 2017

² Information gathered through an interview with a layer working in the Regional Asylum Center of Thessaloniki.

movements showing that some people working for the state, are thinking seriously the future of these people and of our country also.

There are even volunteers who cook twice a day for refugees living in an abandoned building in the Train Station. Also, the OMNES NGO in Kilkis, an hour outside Thessaloniki, has rented fields where both refugees and unemployed Greeks cultivate biological products that are sold in other EU countries (could the solution be really the countryside?). All these, do not only offer support to these people and show a great sense solidarity, but can also help the integration of refugees and their acceptance by the skeptical members of the Greek society.



OMNES NGO action in Kilkis

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ne is for sure though: Greece is left alone at this, but the solution can only be found collectively. Proposals for the future can only include the effective cooperation of the EU state members and definitely not with the closing of the borders, making Greece a place where human beings are just ‘packed’ in camps, something that goes against the basic human rights and goes against the smooth cooperation among member-states. There should be an equal division of the number of refugees to each EU country according to their capacities and the asylum proceedings, whereas more efficient procedures and people are needed to alleviate the situation and make the family reconnection procedure much faster. A possible ‘fast-track’ processing of asylum requests in the EU borders concerning people that are financial immigrants (e.g Pakistanis or Afghans), would probably made things easier as would more efficient deportation procedures. The help offered by civil society, everyday people or NGO’S, is unfortunately not enough. The actions of the citizens may be very helpful but they can never substitute the official state’s policy. The successful integration of refugees to EU states, will not only be beneficial for these people, but the economies of the countries themselves since we are now having a waste of these people’s abilities and skills.

Especially Greece, must win this “bet”. With most of the north European countries thinking how they will “get rid” of a large number of immigrants and refugees (applying the Dublin II regulation and return them to south European countries), we cannot be dilatory in our actions once again! If we do, the consequences for the Greek society will be devastating. The rise of “Gold Dawn’s” percentages is only a sign that Greek state didn’t handled well in the past the immigration issue! Our actions should be aiming at preventing and not



Golden Dawn’s gathering in Saint Panteleimonas square

suppressing the problem. The solution for reducing the far-right voters in Greece should be aimed for example at preventing the creation in Thessaloniki and other cities, of new ghettos like that of Omonia square or Saint Panteleimonas in Athens that made the area’s residents to fear for their security. By jailing the Golden Dawn members, you only postpone the problem you don’t face it. The solution lays in integrating the refugees and the migrants and making them useful members of the societies and not outlaws who fight for their survival. This is

something that we must bear in mind especially in Thessaloniki which is raising a large “weight” of the refugee – migration problem.

Unfortunately, our long and deep investigation in the refugee issue, during the last months didn’t prove us yet that there is a solid plan from the Greek state concerning the future. There are moves, there are actions but not organized and synchronized as they should be. But we should not think pessimistic. This is not something that we cannot deal with and the situation is not yet at the point of no return. As we mentioned above there are moves that show that we can handle the situation as long as we plan and act NOW!



Main Sources

- Interviews with several Syrian families in Sindos from 10 -16 Apr 18
- Visit on 10 May 18 in Toumpa’s Refugee Guesthouse and Interview with the coordinator.
- Attending the 22nd Kindergarten’s summer fest on 12 Jun 18 and discussing with the refugee parents, the Greek parents and the School’s director.
- Interview on 22 June 18 with Freelancer Journalist Antonis Repanas.
- Interview on 31 May 18 with the layer of the Regional Asylum Center of Thessaloniki.
- Extended internet research
- Relative arthrography