

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# BORDERS AND CORONAVIRUS: REFUGEE POLICY AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN A TIME OF A DUAL CRISIS IN GREECE

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January 2021



Both the corona pandemic and the border crisis with Turkey have triggered tough deterrence policies, even outright violations of international law and refugee rights, always in the name of containing the health crisis and of national security.



National and religious populism has re-awakened, with the complicity of the Church and a portion of the Press. Those who tried to react to this dominant narrative have been denounced as fanatics of political correctness and potential censors. Freedom of expression has thus often become a pretext for promoting hate speech.



Linking refugees, directly or indirectly, with the coronavirus and the threat to national security has spread to public discourse and the media, thus awakening racist and xenophobic reflexes. As a result, progress in integration policies, from housing and education to the protection of women from gender-based violence, has been undermined.



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# FOREWORD

The coronavirus pandemic, together with the events in Evros at the Greek-Turkish border in February 2020, marked a change of course in Greece's migration and refugee policy. The trend toward a more restrictive refugee policy had already begun to emerge shortly after the Conservative Party of New Democracy took office in July 2019, as the party had already opted for a tougher line on immigration and asylum policy in the run-up to the elections. The emergence of the new coronavirus and the crisis in Evros at the beginning of the year provided an opportunity for the government to promote a change of course under the blessing, or at least forbearance, of the EU and only on rarer occasions under its critical eye. The fire in the refugee camp at Moria in September 2020 revealed the scale of the problems related to European immigration policy — a tragedy that marked a shift to an increasingly xenophobic, deterrent-based policy toward refugees on the EU's Southeast border with Turkey.

For refugees and migrants trapped at the border — often living in inhumane conditions — the consequences of the deterrence policy are particularly detrimental, especially for those who are waiting for their asylum application to be examined, but also for those who have already acquired the right to stay and are trying to stand on their own two feet in Greece. The publication "Borders and coronavirus: refugee policy and public discourse at a time of a dual crisis in Greece" analyses the ramifications of the "dual crisis" and the resulting changes in the course of certain areas of refugees' lives and is based on concrete examples. At the same time, it outlines how the crisis has been reflected in political rhetoric and news coverage, decisively shaping public discourse.

Lefteris Papagiannakis ("Political rhetoric, integration practices and policies") describes the reasons for the failure of political leadership and state administration to formulate and implement an integration strategy from the beginning of large movements of refugees in 2015. Dimitris Angelidis ("The era of the dual crisis: Coronavirus, borders and anti-refugee policy in Greece") monitors the unfolding of the dual crisis and describes the parallel change in policies and public discourse in relation to refugees. Against the backdrop of current events, Xenia Kounalaki ("Migration and the pandemic: Is Greece in danger of excessive political correctness?") explores the intense internal debate on

whether political correctness can be considered censorship and restriction of the freedom of speech. Fotini Kokkinaki ("The dual crisis reflected in the Press: Coronavirus and crisis at the Evros land border") critically examines the news coverage of key developments in the dual crisis. The restrictions that refugee children face in accessing education are described by Pavlos Haramis ("Waiting for Godot: The right of refugees to education in crisis situations"). Mel-pomeni Maragidou ("Refugee women faced with gender-based violence") addresses the issue of violence faced by refugee women as a further fallout of increasingly hostile public speech and the exacerbation of anti-refugee policies. Alexandros Sakellariou ("The Orthodox Church's stance: Identification with the national narrative and national and religious populism") highlights the special role of the Orthodox Church in shaping the new anti-refugee policies along the lines of a national and religious populism that exerts a great influence on politics and society.

The contributions included in this publication come from members of the "Network Against Right-Wing Extremism" of the FES Athens office. We would like to thank them warmly for their active involvement and contribution. The "Network Against Right-Wing Extremism" was created in 2013 and currently numbers more than 60 members from civil society, the media, science, and education. Its aim is to develop and promote strategies to combat the extreme right and racism. In addition to engaging with experts on the current political and social aspects of these issues, the Network has undertaken several actions to prevent right-wing views from taking hold among young people. As part of this initiative, a leaflet addressed to young people was published, entitled "Let us speak plainly about the Far Right. Because not everyone is as they want to appear"<sup>1</sup> (available only in Greek).

This collection of essays has been published in English to give the interested public outside of Greece an opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge of aspects of the situation and to follow the public debate in Greece on this dual crisis. Because while the country may, from time to time, become

<sup>1</sup> You can find the leaflet online at [https://www.fes-athens.org/file-admin/user\\_upload/office/documents/publications/As\\_mili\\_\\_soyme\\_kathara\\_\\_pdf](https://www.fes-athens.org/file-admin/user_upload/office/documents/publications/As_mili__soyme_kathara__pdf) or it can be sent free of charge if you contact [info@fes-athens.org](mailto:info@fes-athens.org).

the centre of attention in terms of international news coverage on immigration and refugee policy, important aspects of domestic political debate, which inform this policy, are often overlooked. This edition fills this gap, attempting to make a constructive contribution to the debate on a more humane immigration and asylum policy in Europe.

Athens, January 2021

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# POLITICAL RHETORIC, INTEGRATION PRACTICES AND POLICIES

*Lefteris Papagiannakis*

In November 2014, around 200 Syrians occupied the pavement of Constitution square opposite the Parliament, requesting asylum and access to basic health and housing services. By mid-December, 500 people sat across from the Greek Parliament, seeking asylum and access to basic services, with a police operation putting an end to the occupation.

These events were Athens' first contact with what would later be called the refugee crisis, which was to affect the whole world and especially Europe. The demands of the Syrians, who had left a country in the midst of a civil war, appeared to be self-evident, and for many it was incomprehensible how an EU Member State could not respond to them. It was clear that there were gaps and shortcomings in the country's reception and asylum procedures.

Of course, in the years to come, the explosive increase in flows showed that these gaps and shortcomings existed throughout the EU and that ultimately the systemic reception crisis needed to be addressed — a crisis, which culminated in 2015 when about 1 million people sought asylum in the EU, with vast majority of them passing through Greece.

The EU's response is now well known, with the EU-Turkey Joint Declaration spearheading the effort to reduce flows alongside the closing of borders between Member States. Greece, as a country of first reception, under European rules, is called upon to receive and manage the asylum requests of hundreds of thousands of people and at the same time to devise an integration policy for the future of those to whom international protection status is granted.

Hundreds of thousands of migrants have been living in Greece for decades, so we could assume that it would have a corresponding level of experience in planning for the integration of refugees. Unfortunately, this was not the case, as Greece had never systematically worked on integration as part of a well-planned comprehensive policy, unlike many other countries in the EU, which have been implementing integration policies for many years.

However, in order to have a more comprehensive picture of the scale of the challenge that Greece is facing, we must add to the mix the economic crisis that started in 2010, the social, institutional and political crisis that has evolved at the same

time, and finally the COVID-19 pandemic, which has changed global social and economic conditions once again, and whose consequences remain to be seen.

The debate on the integration of "others" into a society trying to come to grips with these challenges is understandably fraught, especially when conditions and content constantly change. In this process, the positions and rhetoric of representatives of the political system and institutions are of great importance, since they can define the framework and conditions for public dialogue.

A very important element that must be borne in mind regarding the refugee issue, as it has evolved since 2015, is that all political decisions and plans, national and European alike, have been based on deterrence. The terms of "reception" and "hospitality" were such as to convey the message to refugees and migrants who wanted to come that conditions would be difficult. Since the option of deterrence was the basis for any discussion, policy choice and planning, there was little scope for change. Greece, as an EU Member, has fully implemented such planning and has taken the same stance since 2015. The same policies have been in place for several years, with no effect when flows have been much smaller, so it is absolutely absurd to believe that they will be effective with greater flows.

It is regrettable that after five years there has been no coherent debate on the crucial issue of refugee integration into the country in which they will live in the future. It is also regrettable how the refugee crisis has been instrumentalised by politicians for mainly electioneering purposes, and it is an issue which, because of its global impact, should be the subject of common political choices through convergence and compromise.

Political and institutional players, through their publicly expressed views, play an important role in shaping the social environment for the implementation of an integration policy. Today, this environment is hostile and toxic, which makes it extremely difficult to discuss integration and, correspondingly, to implement such a policy.

But how has political rhetoric developed on this extremely complex issue over the last 5 years? How does this affect integration policies?

## SOLIDARITY: MARCH 2015 - MARCH 2016

At the onset of the refugee “crisis”, Greece had a new government, resulting from the co-operation of the Coalition of the Radical left (SYRIZA) and the Independent Greeks (ANEL). The government aimed to rid the country of the adjustment programs (MoUs), and during its first term in power it focused almost exclusively on that. Thus, for about 6 months, the refugee crisis, which had since evolved into a major issue, was not one of its priorities. This first term ended with the July 2015 referendum and the September elections that followed, with the same coalition government continuing for a second term.

Admittedly, this period was very critical in preparing the country for the explosive dimensions that the refugee crisis was about to take on, and perhaps it would have been expedient to have handled it differently.

However, with the great surge in flows in 2015, a huge solidarity movement developed, which started on the islands and spread to a large part of the country. New movements, collectives and organizations called for better conditions and a future for refugees, offering moral and material support. Many of the needs for materials and services that the country could not offer were met by international organizations that speedily deployed teams on the ground. Hundreds of volunteers from Greece and abroad mobilized to save thousands of human lives on the islands and in the Aegean.

Aylan Kurdi’s photograph<sup>2</sup> defined this period of solidarity, as thousands of citizens pushed for a more welcoming and open Europe and many governments adopted different policies in response to this new reality.

Already, German Chancellor Merkel’s phrase “we will do it” had sent the political signal and had a decisive influence on the development of the largest movement of people in Europe since World War II. In this climate, opposition was considered almost bizarre, and those who voiced it were seen as having radical views (e.g. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Northern League leader (Italy) Matteo Salvini, the far-right German “Alternative for Germany” (AFD) and others).

Political rhetoric was adapted to this new reality, and there was an extremely positive attitude toward creating suitable conditions for reception and integration. In Greece, the integration debate had not opened, as refugees were only passing through on their way to central and northern Europe.

Local government representatives also contributed to the positive climate of the time, with mayors taking important initiatives to accommodate refugees in their municipalities. Significantly, the mayor of Athens received an award from the World Mayors Foundation for being the third best mayor in the world for 2016, whilst the mayor of Lesbos ranked seventh, both for

their actions related to the refugee crisis.<sup>3</sup> The culmination of this period was the nomination of the residents of Lesbos for the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize for their attitude to the reception and accommodation of refugees in 2015.

Unfortunately, the positive environment that had been shaped did not translate into political action. Greece, used to having transit country status, did not prepare for the day after and did not strengthen the existing reception system, which had a limited capacity, nor did it make any plans for integration. The intensity of the flows would lead to a change in attitude, as reactions started and began to undermine solidarity — with an increasing impact of radical voices — which was confirmed by the election results.

In autumn 2015, borders began to close, the narrative began to revolve around security, border control and possible difficulties in integrating refugees due to cultural characteristics, with emphasis attached to religion, amid growing Islamophobia. The deadly terror attacks in Paris acted as a catalyst, since a growing number of people considered the refugee issue to be primarily a matter of security. Greece found itself under pressure and agreed to create accommodation (with a capacity for 50,000 people) since, due to the closed borders, refugees were finding it difficult to move on and were starting to become trapped in the country. The lack of alternatives and proposals became so obvious that at some point there was a debate about reducing the Greek public debt in exchange for hosting refugees, turning them into a product that has a trading value.<sup>4</sup>

## STRANDING OF REFUGEES: MARCH 2016– JULY 2019

In March 2016, the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement began, and the containment policy took on an institutional form: From that point on, anyone entering EU territory from Turkey via the sea, had to remain on the Greek islands until the asylum process was completed. Turkey took responsibility for limiting flows and in return received financial assistance for managing refugees remaining on its territory. In the context of the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement, only vulnerable refugees could be moved to the mainland.

The Greek islands of the north-eastern Aegean were transformed into sui generis detention centres due to the capacity shortfall in official camps, and informal camps with completely inappropriate accommodation and living conditions sprang up. The impact on the attitudes of local communities was disastrous, and the opposition towards refugees rose, as they were considered the source of the problem. Extreme and racist voices became louder and would dominate public debate in the coming years.

2 ‘He had a name: Aylan Kurdi’, *efsyn.gr*, 3/9/2015. [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/dikaiomata/39202\\_eihe-onoma-ailan-koyrnti](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/dikaiomata/39202_eihe-onoma-ailan-koyrnti), retrieved on 20/9/2020

3 [http://www.worldmayor.com/contest\\_2016/world-mayor-winners-2016.html](http://www.worldmayor.com/contest_2016/world-mayor-winners-2016.html), retrieved on 20/9/2020

4 ‘Financial Times’ debt-for-refugees deal proposal”, *tovima.gr*, 26/1/2016. <https://www.tovima.gr/2016/01/26/politics/protasi-twn-ft-gia-antallagi-ellinikoy-xreoy-s-me-prosfyges/>, retrieved on 15/9/2020

The ESTIA housing program – which initially concerned applicants entitled to relocation in other EU countries<sup>5</sup> and then accepted asylum seekers waiting for a decision on their asylum application in Greece – could be counted as one of the highlights of this period. The program began in the summer of 2016 and is still running, offering more than 25,000 accommodation places in various parts of the country.

Partners include municipalities (Athens, Piraeus, Thessaloniki, Neapoli - Sykees, Kalamaria, Levadia, Heraklion, Chania, Sitia, Trikala, Karditsa, Larisa, Philadelphia-Halkidona), which participate through their municipal development enterprises and other schemes. Their involvement sent a strong message on a national level about the role that institutions should play in important matters. At local level, the debates in the municipal councils and the outreach actions organized gave local communities the necessary information about the program and helped to create a more positive social environment for receiving refugees.

The experience of the ESTIA program led to the implementation of a similar housing program, HELIOS, for recognized refugees, accompanied by Greek language courses.<sup>6</sup>

At a central level in November 2016, a Ministry of Migration was set up for the first time, sending a political signal that immigration was now an important issue and that the State was attending to its coordination and to the implementation of an integrated policy on the matter. It was a very important initiative at a political and administrative level, which unfortunately did not have the desired effect, since the effort to implement a coherent immigration policy was not accompanied by the presentation of the relevant national plan. Priority was given to strengthening the reception system by setting up accommodation facilities and improving the asylum procedure by reinforcing the asylum service so that it could process a large number of applications, while the available European resources were not put to effective use, because of the lack of planning. Social inclusion policy remained fragmented and lacked cohesion, as the National Integration Strategy then in force had been adopted in 2013<sup>7</sup> and did not meet the needs at that time. Finally, in mid-2018 the government presented the new national strategy, which was adopted a few days before the July 2019 parliamentary elections.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, local governments continued to lead the way, and on the initiative of the mayors of Athens and Thessaloniki, in January 2018, 13 municipalities set up the Cities Network for Integration,<sup>9</sup> with a view to designing and exchanging good practices for the social integration of refugees and migrants. The narrative formulated through the cooperation of mayors, especially on the issue of integration, was also the first organized effort to formulate joint management, planning and implementation. The Network recently released its first newsletter.<sup>10</sup>

The run-up to the July 2019 parliamentary elections marked a major change in political rhetoric in Greece, with NEW DEMOCRACY (ND) promising to make migration policy tougher with a view to regaining control of the country, accusing the SYRIZA-ANEL government of laxity and indecision.

## THE CHANGE: JULY 2019 TO DATE

In its pre-election program, ND presented a set of proposals on migration, which included, among other things, closed reception centres and the acceleration of the asylum process. ND advocated tightening border controls and stricter controls of migrants' and refugees' legal papers, promising transparency in the management of the financial resources related to refugees and pushing for European resources to implement its policy.

The first move ND made upon coming to power was to close the Ministry of Migration Policy and transfer responsibility to the Ministry of Civil Protection, sending a clear message that immigration is mainly a security issue. Non-governmental organizations received criticism for their role in mismanaging the refugee crisis and financial matters, in particular.<sup>11</sup>

The government immediately tried to change the agenda, stressing that Greece no longer faced a refugee crisis, but migration crisis,<sup>12</sup> as the majority of people arriving in Greece and the EU were economic migrants. The aim was to make it easier for the government to take a tougher stance, because public opinion does not view economic migrants as being at-risk. It goes without saying that social integration was off the table, as references to it can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

5 European Commission: European Solidarity: A Refugee Relocation System, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/2\\_eu\\_solidarity\\_a\\_refugee\\_relocation\\_system\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/2_eu_solidarity_a_refugee_relocation_system_en.pdf), retrieved on 20/9/2020

6 Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection (HELIOS) <https://greece.iom.int/el/hellenic-integration-support-beneficiaries-international-protection-helios>, retrieved on 20/9/2020

7 General Secretariat of Population and Social Cohesion, Ministry of the Interior: National strategy for the integration of third-country nationals <https://migration.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/%CE%927-%CE%95%CE%B8%CE%BD%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE-%CE%A3%CF%84%CF%81%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE-2013.pdf>, retrieved on 20/9/2020

8 Ministry of Migration: National integration Strategy, July 2019. <https://migration.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/%CE%926-%CE%95%CE%B8%CE%BD%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE-%CE%A3%CF%84%CF%81%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE-2019.pdf>, retrieved on 20/9/2020

9 Athens Coordination Centre for Migrant and Refugee issues: Cities Network for integration. <https://www.accmr.gr/el/%CE%B4%CE%AF%CE%BA%CF%84%CF%85%CE%B1.html>, retrieved on 10/9/2020

10 Athens Coordination Centre for Migrant and Refugee issues: The network of cities for integration strengthens its function - 1st Newsletter. <https://www.accmr.gr/el/%CE%BD%CE%AD%CE%B1/918-%CE%BD%CE%AD%CE%B1-%CE%B1%CF%80%CF%8C-%CF%84%CE%BF-%CE%B4%CE%AF%CE%BA%CF%84%CF%85%CE%BF-%CF%80%CF%8C%CE%BB%CE%B5%CF%89-%CE%BD-%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%B1-%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BD-%CE%AD%CE%BD%CF%84%CE%B1%CE%BE%CE%B7.html?art=1>, retrieved on 10/9/2020

11 Dimitris Gatsios: 'K. Mitsotakis: The five pillars proposed by the ND', *capital.gr*, 16/11/2017. <https://www.capital.gr/politiki/3254769/k-mitsotakis-oi-pente-pulones-pou-proteinei-i-nd>, retrieved on 10/9/2020

12 "Kyr. Mitsotakis: The problem we face is related to migration rather than refugees", *kathimerini.gr*, 4/10/2019. <https://www.kathimerini.gr/politics/1045459/kyr-mitsotakis-to-provlima-poy-antimetopizoyme-einai-metanasteytiko-kai-ochi-prosyfygiko/>, retrieved on 10/9/2020

Soon, however, it became clear that many of the announcements could not be implemented and the government had to review its original plan. The government found itself under pressure as a result of difficulties in implementing emblematic promises such as the rapid de-congestion of islands and the establishment of closed centres. The political choice to treat immigration as a security issue had created a toxic environment for public debate, and local communities were reacting to the government's calls for solidarity. The creation of new centres on the mainland to help decongest the islands was no longer possible, but even on the islands the local communities did not consider closed facilities the solution to the problem. On the one hand, the EU does not fund closed camps, and on the other, residents did not want islands to be used as detention camps any longer.

Six months later, the Government created the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, which took over responsibility from the Ministry of Civil Protection and started to implement the ND program from scratch. The new minister's announcements included guarding of the borders, closed controlled camps, acceleration of asylum procedures and returns. Social integration continued to be absent.

Events in Evros and the pandemic will make any effort to develop a coherent migration policy that includes integration even more difficult.

In early March 2020, thousands of people tried to enter Greece through the land border at Evros, with Turkey playing an extremely dangerous game, having used and instrumentalised those people's needs. Greece described this as an attempted invasion by Turkey, and refugees and migrants turned into an enemy of the state. There were many complaints of excessive force used by the Greek authorities against those who managed to pass, but also complaints about people being shot and killed from the Greek side. These complaints were rejected as a provocation by the Turkish side.

Following this incident, Greece suspended access to asylum for 30 days for those who entered Greece in March, in an unprecedented move that violated international law. Any call for restraint, calm, respect for international law and respect for human rights was rejected in the name of defending the national line.

Immediately afterwards, the country entered lockdown because of the pandemic, and once again refugees were targeted because they were considered a risk for the transmission of the virus. The measures applied to the camps to limit the spread of the virus were more stringent than the corresponding measures taken for the general population. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control stresses that "whilst there is no evidence to suggest that SARS-CoV-2 transmission is higher amongst migrants and refugees, environmental factors such as overcrowding in reception and detention centres may increase their exposure to the disease. Outbreaks in reception and detention centres can also spread quickly in the absence of adequate prevention measures."<sup>13</sup>

It is important to mention that, in an effort to combine events in Evros with the pandemic, a theory was widely circulated that Turkey would send refugees infected with the virus by sea after the failure of the operation at the land border.

Once again in public discourse, refugees were described as dangerous, this time for reasons of public health, and the possibility of designing and implementing an integration policy has been further diminished.

## CONCLUSIONS

The continued delay in presenting a comprehensive and coherent plan for the reception and social integration of migrants and refugees, the continued invocation of urgency, handling the matter from a micro-political and electioneering perspective, led to refugees being targeted. Furthermore, the lack of response to extreme positions of politicians and institutional actors has created space for toxic public speeches, xenophobia and racism.

The effects of lack of planning were clearly evident in the Centre of Athens in 2020, with refugees once again in Victoria Square, and in the destruction of Moria, which everyone talked about but no one took steps to avert. Five years down the line, we have come full circle, but it seems that the new circle will be starting from scratch again.

<sup>13</sup> ECDC, Guidance on infection prevention and control of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in migrant and refugee reception and detention centres in the EU/EEA and the United Kingdom, 15/6/2020. <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/COVID-19-%20guidance-refugee-asylum-seekers-migrants-EU.pdf>, retrieved on 12/9/2020

# THE ERA OF THE DUAL CRISIS: CORONAVIRUS, BORDERS AND ANTI-REFUGEE POLICY IN GREECE

*Dimitris Angelidis*

The coronavirus pandemic, in conjunction with Turkey's move to open its land border with Greece for refugees and migrants at the end of February 2020, gave the Greek government the legitimate basis to resolutely adopt a tough agenda on the refugee issue: at the borders, a drastic reduction in the flow through deterrence and pushback operations; domestically, easier and quicker rejection of asylum applications and the creation of closed detention Centres. Traditionally, such policies have been openly adopted by political forces on the extreme right of the political spectrum and are addressed to a xenophobic audience with a visible presence in the public sphere in recent years, which considers refugees and migrants a threat to safety, public health, and national and religious identity. It was difficult, however, to make this agenda the central policy for a government that wants to be called liberal and pro-European, although it certainly incorporates a strong far-right component. It has therefore been necessary to invoke a state of emergency in order to overcome resistance and to make these policies the predominant doctrine in managing the refugee crisis, in derogation of European and international law.

According to the government's narrative, the so-called Evros crisis, which unfolded in parallel with the pandemic health crisis, marks a point of no return. "All opposition parties have to understand that we are now discussing in the post-Evros era. Nothing is the same anymore [...]," noted George Koumoutsakos, Deputy Minister for Migration and Asylum in May.<sup>14</sup>

Months ago, the discontent of NEW DEMOCRACY's (ND) electoral base began to manifest through criticism of the party's backing down from the platform on which it was elected and pressure for a much tougher stance to be taken. Former Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, the informal leader of the far-right wing of ND, spoke eloquently at the party's 13th congress in early December 2019: "There is general discontent as regards a single matter. And that is illegal immigration [...]"<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Standing Committee on Public Administration, Public Order and Justice, Uncorrected Minutes, Greek Parliament, 9th Revisionary Parliament, 18th Parliamentary Term –A; Session', Standing Committee on Public Administration, Public order and Justice, 7/5/2020

<sup>15</sup> Speech by the former Prime Minister, Mr Antonis Samaras, at the 13th Congress of New democracy. <https://nd.gr/omilia-toy-t-prothy-poyrgoy-k-antonis-samara-sto-13o-synedrio-tis-neas-dimokratias>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

## EXPECTATIONS CREATED AND DASHED

In the run-up to the elections, the increased flow of refugees and migrants was a key issue on which ND, as the opposition party, regularly criticised the SYRIZA government. But after the elections, the flow increased, reaching record monthly arrivals in September 2019, the highest since 2016,<sup>16</sup> an increase now attributed by government officials to the "geopolitical reality,"<sup>17</sup> while in the run-up to the elections ND blamed the previous government for its of "open borders" policy. The number of refugees and migrants trapped on the Aegean islands increased from 17,213 on 1 July 2019 to 41,974 on 1 February 2020, of which 38,281 remained in Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) with a total capacity of only 6,438. In the largest RIC, that of Moria in Lesbos, with a capacity of 3,100, the population more than tripled from 5,625 on 1 July 2019 to 19,505 on 1 February 2020.<sup>18</sup>

In the face of this situation, which has tested the resilience of local communities and exacerbated xenophobic reactions, the government has reacted in a rather erratic manner. The closure of the Ministry of Migration after the elections and the transfer of its portfolio to the Ministry of Civil Protection, the ministry responsible for law enforcement, resulted in competences being continuously transferred, roles overlapping and announcements that remained on paper. At the end of October 2019, a law was enacted in Parliament which has accelerated the asylum procedure since January 2020, but which introduces strict bureaucratic deadlines and proce-

<sup>16</sup> "Greece must act immediately to end dangerous overcrowding in island reception centres, EU support crucial", UNHCR, 1/10/2019, [https://www.unhcr.org/gr/13070-i\\_ellada\\_prepei\\_na\\_dranei\\_amesa.html](https://www.unhcr.org/gr/13070-i_ellada_prepei_na_dranei_amesa.html), retrieved on 13/9/2020.

<sup>17</sup> "Koumoutsakos: Geopolitical reasons behind the increase in migration flows", <https://www.kathimerini.gr/politics/1039209/koumoutsakos-geopolitiko-i-logoi-piso-apo-tin-ayxisi-ton-metanastey-tikon-roon/>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>18</sup> See "Overview of the situation of the East Aegean islands of 01/07/2019", National coordination Centre for border Control, Migration and Asylum, Athens, 2/7/2019, <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/4496/yp-prostasias-tou-politi-apatyposi-tis-ethnikis-ikonas-katastasis-gia-to-prosfygiko-metanasteftiko-zitima-tin-1-7-2019/>, retrieved on 13/9/2020 and "Overview of the situation of the East Aegean islands of 01/02/2020", National coordination Centre for border Control, Migration and Asylum, Athens, 2/2/2020, <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/7710/apotyposi-tis-ethnikis-ikonas-katastasis-gia-to-prosfygiko-metanasteftiko-zitima-tin-1-2-2020/> retrieved on 13/9/2020.

dures that make it very difficult for one to access and stay in the process. The ink was barely dry on the law when the new Minister for Migration and Asylum (the ministry was re-established on 15 January 2020 and the Prime Minister acknowledged that it had been a mistake to close it) Notis Mitarakis, announced that he was preparing new changes to the asylum procedure. On the initiative of Deputy Defence Minister Alkiviadis Stefanis, who was appointed National Coordinator for the Refugee Issue in October, a post he held for less than three months, the Hellenic Navy procured a floating anti-pollution barrier to “halt increasing refugee flows”<sup>19</sup> in the Aegean Sea. On 20 November 2019, Mr Stefanis and government spokesman Stelios Petsas announced a plan that included the creation of new “closed detention and reception centres” with a capacity of 5,000 – 7,000 people in Lesbos, Samos and Chios, to replace the existing ones. The mock-up of the new Centres was designed on the map of an uninhabited islet of the Aegean Sea.<sup>20</sup> The government initially denied that it was thinking of building facilities on uninhabited islands,<sup>21</sup> but later confirmed that it was discussing it.<sup>22</sup>

In view of the possibility of new facilities being constructed, local authorities on the islands protested, demanding the removal of refugees and migrants and the closure of all facilities, with the exception of a small-capacity centre for the immediate registration and identification of new arrivals. “We want our borders to be guarded effectively, we don’t want a decorative FRONTEX. We want deterrence. Our homeland is in danger. I don’t care what the treaties say,” said Kostas Moutzouris, Deputy Governor of North Aegean in an emotionally charged speech at a protest rally in Lesbos.<sup>23</sup>

Faced with the local government’s obstructionism in proposing possible sites, the government decided to seize tracts of land to set up the new centres.<sup>24</sup> The way in which the Vice-President of New Democracy and Minister for Development, Adonis Georgiadis, who is known for his extreme positions, supported the seizure is the case in point: “And when

I say closed [Centres], I mean closed! [...] Not even a mosquito to be able to ever leave from inside of them! 24 hours a day! Until they leave!”<sup>25</sup>

In mid-February 2020 there were violent clashes in Lesbos and Chios – something unprecedented for the islands – between residents, trying to stop work on the construction of new Centres on the seized land, and powerful police forces. On 27 February, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis met with the mayors of the islands at Maximos Mansion in an effort to defuse tension, announcing “initiatives to transform the exacerbation of the problem into an opportunity to tackle it better.”<sup>26</sup> He promised financial support for the islands, noted that there is a common understanding, and announced he would visit them himself in two days’ time.<sup>27</sup> This visit be postponed.

On 28 February, the Greek media re-broadcast Turkish media images of refugees and migrants gathered by the hundreds on the Turkish side of Evros, across from the border crossing of Kastanies. Two days earlier, on 26 February, the first coronavirus case in Greece was detected: a traveller who had just returned to Thessaloniki from Milan. The simultaneous occurrence of the border crisis and the coronavirus crisis in Greece would decisively change the government’s policy on the refugee issue.

## CLOSED BORDERS, PUSHBACKS AND SUSPENSION OF THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE

On the morning of 27 February 2020, one day before the crisis in Evros broke out and one day after the first case of coronavirus was detected, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis declared to the cabinet: “The migration problem is now acquiring a new dimension, as flows to Greece include people from Iran – which had many coronavirus cases – and many Afghans who have passed through Iran. Therefore, our islands, which have already been burdened with public health issues, must be doubly protected. [...] What does this mean in practice? That we are upgrading our border control to the highest possible level of deterrence.”<sup>28</sup>

It strains credulity to believe that these announcements were

<sup>19</sup> “A 2,7 km floating barrier in the Aegean to stop the flow of migrants”, *iefimerida.gr*, 30/1/2020. <https://www.iefimerida.gr/ellada/mpainei-plotos-frahtis-27-hlm-sto-aigaio-gia-na-stamatisei-i-roi-met-anaston>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>20</sup> Dimitris Terzis: «Refugees in exile on uninhabited islets», *EFIMERIDA TON SYNTAKTON*, 21/11/2019. [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/dikaiomata/219850\\_prosfyges-exoristoi-se-xeronisia](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/dikaiomata/219850_prosfyges-exoristoi-se-xeronisia), retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>21</sup> Giannis Albanis: “Government: They will be no refugee facilities on uninhabited islets”, *CNN Greece*. <https://www.cnn.gr/politiki/story/198435/kyvernisi-den-tha-ginoin-prosfygikes-domes-se-xeronisia>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>22</sup> Yiannis Basakis: “They are reintroducing the uninhabited islets project”, *EFIMERIDA TON SYNTAKTON*, 29/2/2020. [https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/kybernisi/233271\\_epanaferoy-n-shedio-xeronisia](https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/kybernisi/233271_epanaferoy-n-shedio-xeronisia), retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>23</sup> “The Regional Governor of North Aegean is out of Control: “Our homeland is in danger. We want deterrence””, *thepressproject.gr*, 22/1/2020. <https://thepressproject.gr/ektos-elegchou-o-periferiar-chis-voriou-egeou-i-patris-kindynevi-theloume-apatropi/>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>24</sup> Ioannis Kandelis: “The refugee issue: The whole project - seizure, facilities on islands and closed centres on the mainland”, *iefimerida.gr*, 11/2/2020. <https://www.iefimerida.gr/politiki/prosfygiko-shedio-epi-taxi-domes-nisia-kentra-endohora>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>25</sup> ‘Georgiadis: I want closed centres, not even a mosquito to be able to ever leave from inside of them! – the reaction of SYRIZA – video’, *real.gr*, 11/2/2020. <https://www.real.gr/politiki/arthro/georgiadis-thelo-kleista-kentra-na-min-bgaini-oute-kounoupi-h-antidrasi-tou-syryza-binteo-609924/>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>26</sup> “Announcement of the results of the Cabinet on 27 February 2020”, Government Spokesperson, 27/2/2020. <https://government.gov.gr/anakinosi-tou-ifipourgou-para-to-prothipourgou-ke-kivernitikou-ek-prosopou-steliou-petsa-gia-ta-apotelesmata-tou-ipourgou-simvoulou-tis-27is-fevrouariou-2020/>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>27</sup> Giannis Baskakis, Giorgos Pagoudis: ‘He is going to the islands to build consensus’, *EFIMERIDA TON SYNTAKTON*, 28/2/2020, [https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/kybernisi/233127\\_pigainei-sta-nisia-gia-synainesi](https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/kybernisi/233127_pigainei-sta-nisia-gia-synainesi), retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>28</sup> “Introductory remarks by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the beginning of the Cabinet meeting”, Hellenic Republic, Prime Minister, *primeminister.gr*. <https://primeminister.gr/2020/02/27/23386>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

really intended to protect public health from the coronavirus. The movement of refugees from Iran and from Afghanistan to Greece is not carried out directly, but through other countries, and takes much longer than the time that the coronavirus remains in the human body and can be transmitted. In addition, measures to restrict entries into Greece from neighbouring Italy or other countries experiencing a coronavirus surge were taken much later. Flights from northern Italy were suspended on 9 March, when 84 cases had already been detected in Greece, 56 of which were linked to a group of visitors returning from the Holy Land, including the first case found in Lesbos. Flights from the rest of Italy were suspended even later, on 14 March, and on 16 March the Ferries connecting Greece to Italy stopped operating.

Indeed, the government had temporarily forgotten the public health argument, as it now had a pretext on which to legitimize its border policy. The attempt of hundreds of refugees and migrants to enter Greece through Evros, prompted by Turkey,<sup>29</sup> was interpreted as an enemy act threatening Greece's territorial sovereignty and requiring a military response.

The next 24 hours saw the deployment of armed forces and national guard personnel along the Greek-Turkish land border. The government continuously made announcements on the number of people intercepted and those who had been prevented from entering. The country faced an "active, serious, exceptional and asymmetric threat to national security," according to the government spokesman, who added that "due to its coordinated and mass nature, this movement is absolutely unrelated to international law on asylum, which concerns only individual cases." Of course, international law provides for an individual examination of asylum applications, but not for the individual movement of refugees and migrants, who usually move en masse. Nevertheless, the Government announced measures equivalent to the suspension of international law, and in particular the Geneva Convention: stepping up measures to guard land and sea borders to maximum level and suspending the asylum procedure for one month. Those who entered Greece during that period would not have the right to lodge an asylum request but would be immediately deported to their countries of origin, when such a possibility existed, without being registered.

And yet the leaders of the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament who visited the region together with the Prime Minister on 3 March 2020 did not express any reservations, while the President of the European Commission, Ursula von Leyen, thanked Greece "for being our European shield in these times."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> "Caught in a political game: Asylum-seekers and migrants on the Greece/Turkey border pay the price for Europe's failure", Amnesty International, 3/4/2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur01/2077/2020/en/>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>30</sup> Statements by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in chestnut Evros following his visit with the heads of the European Union's institutions to the Greek-Turkish border, the Hellenic Republic, Prime Minister, *primeminister.gr*, 3/3/2020. <https://primeminister.gr/2020/03/03/23447>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

A different stance was taken in the coming period by Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson, in line with the strong reaction of international organizations, agencies, MEPs and citizens across Europe. She underlined that suspension of the asylum procedure violates European law and cannot be accepted, while at the beginning of April, when the suspension of the asylum procedure had only just ended, she announced that the Greek government had agreed that approximately 2,000 newly-arrived refugees and migrants arrested in Greece in March and detained for deportation at two new closed detention structures would be able to lodge asylum applications.<sup>31</sup>

Along with many other bodies and organizations, she also called for the investigation of revelations about two deaths in Evros in early March caused by live fire and rubber bullets, "probably from the Greek side," as well as an avalanche of revelations on informal violent return operations in Evros,<sup>32</sup> but also at the port of Igoumenitsa in western Greece and in the refugee structures of Macedonia, as well as on the islands, where life-rafts had started being used for returns.<sup>33</sup>

The government did not change its tune, insisting that it was fake news spread by Turkish propaganda and deeming that its policy had been successful, as it had thwarted Turkey's plans. However, the government maintained the maximum level of border protection, remaining vigilant in the face of a possible new attempt by Turkey. Indeed, government officials were circulating alleged reports of action by Turkey, which was denied within hours. Following Turkey's announcement that it was opening its borders with Greece on 18 March, the government's rhetoric had gradually resumed the link between coronavirus and its border policy, often combining it with the Turkish threat. "The unacceptable policy orchestrated to force a massive influx of migrants towards Europe through Greece could make Turkey accountable even for an attempt to spread the pandemic," stated Mr Koumoutsakos.<sup>34</sup>

However, the biggest achievement of government policy on the borders appears to be a 73% reduction in the flow of migrants between the beginning of 2020 and the end of September. "I would like to underscore that 74%, three quarters of this year's arrivals, took place in the first quarter of

<sup>31</sup> "The government has committed to the Commission to grant the right to seek asylum on arrival in March", 2/4/2020, *thepressproject.gr*. <https://thepressproject.gr/i-kyvernisi-desmeftike-stin-komision-nadosi-dikeoma-etisis-asylou-stis-afixis-martiou/>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>32</sup> See "The killing of Muhammad al Arab", Forensic architecture, 3/7/2020. <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-killing-of-muhammad-al-arab>, retrieved on 13/9/2020 and 'the killing of Muhammad Gulzar', Forensic architecture, 8/5/2020. <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-killing-of-muhammad-gulzar>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>33</sup> Giorgos Pagoudis: 'New evidence on returns with life rafts', EFMERIDA TON SYNTAKTON, 25/5/2020. [https://www.efsyn.gr/el-lada/dikaiomata/244850\\_nea-stoiheia-gia-tis-epanaprootiseis-meshedies](https://www.efsyn.gr/el-lada/dikaiomata/244850_nea-stoiheia-gia-tis-epanaprootiseis-meshedies), retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>34</sup> Vasilis Ignatiadis: 'Koumoutsakos in Ethnos newspaper: The plan for shielding the hotspots for the coronavirus: Isolation and quarantine spaces in the islands' RICs, *Ethnos*, 29/3/2020, [https://www.ethnos.gr/politiki/96903\\_koymoytsakos-sto-ethnos-shedio-gia-ti-thoraksi-ton-hotspots-apo-ton-koronoio](https://www.ethnos.gr/politiki/96903_koymoytsakos-sto-ethnos-shedio-gia-ti-thoraksi-ton-hotspots-apo-ton-koronoio), retrieved on 13/9/2020

2020. If we look at the last six months, i.e. April-September 2020, the reduction in flows is 91% and on islands the reduction is 96%," noted Mr Mitarakis, describing the decline in flow as the "first major change" from a total of seven major changes brought about by government policy.<sup>35</sup>

## FROM DETENTION CENTRES TO LOCKDOWN

On 17 March 2020, the interim guidance of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on COVID-19 Outbreak Response in refugee structures recommended decongesting camps, creating living conditions that allow for distancing, avoidance of stigmatization and discrimination, releasing those detained for reasons of irregular entry, and carrying out individual health screening.

Instead of following these and similar recommendations issued by international organizations, the government has used the pandemic to discriminate against refugees and migrants, to promote its closed centre and general detention agenda, and to reinforce its tough border policy with yet another argument.

"The continuing threat at our borders, combined with the spread of the coronavirus, requires an unabated effort to protect our borders," Mitarakis told the council of Ministers of the Schengen countries.<sup>36</sup> On 18 March, the government announced measures restricting circulation at the islands' RICs, two days before a lockdown was imposed on the general population, implementing the Agnodiki plan for crisis management in refugee populations. The measures for RICs included a ban on circulating at night, a ban on visits by those who were not working in the structures in the daytime, during which only one person from each family was allowed to leave every hour. This constituted a partial lockdown of thousands of people in overcrowded structures, cramped "in a tent, in the mud, without adequate access to water and soap,"<sup>37</sup> i.e. in conditions that fully favour the transmission of coronavirus. The restriction of movement in the RICs continued with successive six-month extensions, until mid-September at least, well after the expiry of the lockdown for the general population on 28 April, without, for that matter, any case being detected within the structures.

<sup>35</sup> "Briefing of political editors and foreign press correspondents by the Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister and Government Spokesman, Stelios Petsas and the Minister for Migration and Notis Mitarakis", Government Spokesman, Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 12/10/2020, <https://government.gov.gr/enimerosi-ton-politikon-sintakton-ke-ton-antapokriton-xenou-tipou-apo-ton-ifipourgo-pa-ra-to-prothipourgo-ke-kivernitiko-ekprosopo-stelio-petsa-ke-ton-ipourgo-metanastefsis-ke-asilou-noti-mitaraki/>, retrieved on 13/10/2020

<sup>36</sup> "N. Mitarakis at the Council of Ministers of Schengen countries: "The continuing threat at our borders, combined with the spread of the coronavirus, requires an unabated effort to protect our borders," Mitarakis told the council of Ministers of the Schengen countries. <https://www.mitarakis.gr/gov/migration/1965-dt-yma-symboulipoyyrgwn>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>37</sup> "Coronavirus-Lesbos: Doctors without borders send an urgent message", *news247.gr*, 9/4/2020. <https://www.news247.gr/koinonia/koronoios-Lesbos-oi-giatroi-choris-synora-stelnoyn-epeigon-minyma.7619963.html>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

The Agnodiki plan provided for a full lockdown of a facility upon detection of a coronavirus case, with a ban on entering and exiting the facilities for two weeks, the creation of examination, treatment and quarantine areas and contact tracing. "I imagine that everyone realizes that it is much easier to manage this problem in closed controlled structures and not in these open, unregulated structures that existed until yesterday," the government spokesperson noted. However, the Minister for Migration and Asylum had to admit that "we cannot restrict [...] movement within the structure where there is more interaction than in societies outside."<sup>38</sup>

Cases were found in the structures of Ritsona and Malakasa and in a hotel in the Kranidi area, where there was a significant delay in starting the tracing process and in taking isolation measures, resulting in 148 cases being found among 490 residents. "There is no mechanism for the continuous epidemiological surveillance and aggressive contact tracing of possible cases. Similarly, the management of transmission – recently confirmed by lab results – in some facilities, such as Kranidi, lacks coherence. The medical monitoring and isolation of cases is impossible and there are no arrangements for the protection of vulnerable populations by moving them to protected housing," notes a study on pandemic management in refugee structures.<sup>39</sup>

The government, of course, claimed that its policy was successful, as "there was a total of 200 cases in all 93 structures with 100,000 residents nationwide."<sup>40</sup> However, the relatively small number of cases in refugee structures during the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020 is rather a matter of luck and the overall low rate of coronavirus propagation in Greece.

The situation in the second wave of the pandemic in August and September was very different, with cases in refugee structures reaching a total of 700 by the end of September and the camps, one after the other, being placed under lockdown. But again, Mr Mitarakis described his policy as effective because "from the beginning of the crisis to date we have only one death caused by coronavirus among 95,000 asylum seekers."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> An interview for Antenna TV with journalists Nikos Rogakos and Panagiotis Stathis, 3/4/2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYrY6-je78U>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>39</sup> Demosthenes Papadatos-Anagnostopoulos, Nikos Kourahanis, Efthimia Makridou: "The management of the COVID-19 epidemic in the refugee population in Greece. A Critical analysis", Centre for Research & Education in Public Health, Health Policy & Primary Health Care (KEPY) 2020. <https://socialpolicy.gr/2020/05/%CE%B7-%CE%B4%CE%B9%CE%B1%CF%87%CE%B5%CE%AF%CF%81%CE%B9%CF%83%CE%B7-%CF%84%CE%B7%CF%82-%CE%B5%CF%80%CE%B9%CE%B4%CE%B7%CE%BC%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE%CF%82-%CE%BA%CF%81%CE%AF%CF%83%CE%B7%CF%82-covid-19-%CF%83.html>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>40</sup> "Mitarakis in SKAI: what will happen to asylum seekers who "broke" the quarantine", *skai.gr*, 25/4/2020. <https://www.skai.gr/news/politics/mitarakis-ston-skai-ti-tha-ginei-me-aitountes-asylo-pou-espanantin-karantina>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>41</sup> "Interview with Minister for Migration and Asylum, Mr. Notis Mitarakis in Politico", Hellenic Republic, Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 7/10/2020. <https://migration.gov.gr/syntetyxi-toy-y-poyr-goy-sto-politico/>, retrieved on 8/10/2020

The cynicism of the declaration becomes more evident in light of the events which led to the complete destruction of the Moria RIC by fire on 9 September 2020. The fire was caused by the rioting of a group of refugees when the first case of coronavirus was detected in the RIC, followed by another 35 cases through tracing, which led to a lockdown of the structure following the six-month restriction of circulation.

The first case was a recognized refugee who had been forced to leave the RIC and the island, as foreseen by the ministry's policy for evicting 11,000 recognized refugees from camps in early summer. However, the refugee had to return to the RIC – where he transmitted the coronavirus – because he did not find work and accommodation in Athens, as was the case for thousands of other recognized refugees who initially spent the night in Victoria Square and then ended up staying in makeshift tents in camps throughout Greece.<sup>42</sup> The implementation of the eviction plan without forewarning and preparation for the day after was criticized by organizations and agencies, including UNHCR, which expressed deep concern. But for Mr Mitarakis, the problem did not lie in the difficulty of recognized refugees accessing housing, work and financial support. In response to the question of why the refugee returned to Moria, he replied: "First and foremost, he returned because there was no control and there was no control because these are not closed structures. [...] We are responsible insofar as we should complete the closed structures faster."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> «Recognised but unprotected: The situation of refugees in Victoria Square', *Refugees support Aegean*, 3/8/2020. <https://rsaegean.org/en/recognised-but-unprotected-the-situation-of-refugees-in-victoria-square/>. retrieved on 3/9/2020

<sup>43</sup> Standing Committee on Public Administration, Public order and Justice, Greek Parliament, Uncorrected minutes, 9th Revisionary Parliament, 18th Parliamentary Term –A; Session, 21/9/2020

# MIGRATION AND THE PANDEMIC: IS GREECE IN DANGER OF EXCESSIVE POLITICAL CORRECTNESS?

Xenia Kounalaki

Is political correctness a form of censorship? Is the alleged ‘sanitization’ of public discourse the great threat to freedom of expression? What is the Greek experience, particularly on the basis of the public debate on the refugee and migration issues, which flared up strongly following events at the Greek-Turkish border at Evros and the coronavirus pandemic at the end of February 2020? I shall try to answer these questions, as many people in our country feel they are being silenced by so-called human rightists’ but also by the implementation of the anti-racist law of 2014, which is an amendment to L. 927/1979 on combating certain forms and manifestations of racism and xenophobia through criminal law.

The questions are part of a broader debate that is taking place not only in Greece but throughout the world. And the excesses of political correctness that sometimes lead to the *cancel culture*, that is, the disappearance from the map of anyone who uses profane, politically incorrect, language, even in humour, have led to its de-legitimation and to the establishment of an alt-right, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic or transphobic rhetoric. The purpose of this neo-conservative, reactionary speech is supposed to speak plainly or call a spade a spade. We’ve seen some very radical positions taken abroad: by the Dutch writer and director of the New York Review of books, Ian Buruma, and the New York Times opinion editor, James Bennet. Both of these reputable U.S. editorialists were forced to resign because they published controversial articles. Professors at U.S. Universities also found themselves on an overly strict blacklist of political correctness, for using, for example, a wrong term that is now outdated in the student communication code, such as gender-marked pronouns or adjectives.

However, the difference of implied (self-?) censorship or a cancel culture, which is indeed spreading in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, is that in Greece racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, misogynist and homophobic speech is heard on government lips and by reputable columnists in major media, and is not marginal, nor is it deemed to be reprehensible – at least for the time being. From time to time there is a great outcry against a misogynist or racist comment, but in reality, hate speech is often predominant and, in the name of freedom of expression, remains unpunished and socially acceptable, or at least tolerated.

“With the official form of censorship having been abolished, political correctness is its modernized version, which, in a curious oxymoron, cunningly espouses precisely what it is accused of: curtailing expression. We are truly lucky, at least in our country, not to be subjected daily to strict censorship, as in other countries of the world,” admits columnist Mirela Di-alepi in *LIFO*, placing the domestic confrontation in an international context.<sup>44</sup>

“But unfortunately, we have witnessed in Greece, as well, what often happens with attempts to make the world a little better: some people have tailored “political correctness” to suit them and turned it into pure, unadulterated hysteria,” says journalist Manos Voularinos in *Athens Voice*,<sup>45</sup> a free press publication repeatedly criticized for its deplorable articles (mostly against migrants) while also being on the receiving end of a brutal attack from the anarchist organization Rouvikonas. *Athens Voice* is one of the most worrying examples of how self-appointed castigators dish out “penalties” at will when political correctness is violated. For the moment, at least, it is an absolutely deplorable exception, but also a dystopian preview of the future of media and journalists in Greece.<sup>46</sup>

The debate on whether political correctness is equivalent to a new form of censorship has taken on urgent importance in our country as the dual crisis, the pandemic and the refugee crisis, became one and the same, attributing to the ignorant and careless migrants the role of potential coronavirus carrier and a “health bomb” that threatens to attack the uncontaminated Greeks, who scrupulously observe containment measures. Journalist Elias Kanellis at *TA NEA* openly linked foreigners with the coronavirus and did so in the headline of the article (‘Coronavirus and foreigners’): “We don’t often discuss it because it is a taboo subject for proponents of politi-

<sup>44</sup> Nine plus one arguments against political correctness, 7/9/2020. <https://ampa.lifo.gr/αταξινόμητα/9-1-epicheirimata-kata-tis-politiki-orthotitas/>, retrieved on 15/9/2020

<sup>45</sup> Political correctness as a parody, 7/9/2020. [https://www.athensvoice.gr/politics/676544\\_i-politiki-orthotita-os-parodia](https://www.athensvoice.gr/politics/676544_i-politiki-orthotita-os-parodia), retrieved on 15/9/2020

<sup>46</sup> Rouvikonas uploaded videos from the attack on Athens Voice, 4/7/2019. [https://www.athensvoice.gr/greece/560256\\_o-royvikonas-anevase-vinteo-apo-tin-epithesi-stin-athens-voice](https://www.athensvoice.gr/greece/560256_o-royvikonas-anevase-vinteo-apo-tin-epithesi-stin-athens-voice), retrieved on 15/9/2020

cal correctness, but it is worth considering – and above all the state needs to consider that migrants in Greece, either because they are under pressure or because they are careless, constitute one more source of infection propagating the coronavirus. Even when they are diagnosed, if they are at an age at which they consider the effects of the disease not to be serious for them, they try to avoid hospitalisation because they do not want to engage with the official state.”<sup>47</sup>

Andreas Andrianopoulos, former Minister of NEW DEMOCRACY, feels equally muzzled by those who defend political correctness: “Freedom of expression is threatened by excessive political correctness. In the name of avoiding any inconvenient associations for individual social groups of the population, restrictions and prohibitions are starting to be imposed which, in essence, severely affect many individual freedoms. Freedom of speech and expression first and foremost. How is it possible, by way of example, for voices denouncing the country for measures to restrict circulation outside closed migrant structures to be tolerated, while opinions that strongly criticize those demonstrations are condemned?” he asks in an article on ‘The authoritarianism of political correctness.’<sup>48</sup>

The entire non-parliamentary party DIMIOURGIA XANA, which began as centrist and reformist, but ended up xenophobic, appeared to be vindicated by the latest developments and called for a protest rally in Victoria Square, also attended by Ilias Kasidiaris, former pro-Nazi Golden Dawn cadre, and at that time leader of the party configuration “Ellines gia tin Patrida (Greeks for the Fatherland),” who has since been convicted by a Court of First Instance to imprisonment without bail for his participation in running a Nazi criminal organisation. “DIMIOURGIA XANA, which, since 2012, standing its ground against political correctness, has highlighted the risk of the country’s Islamisation due to the massive and uncontrolled influx of migrants, will be present, supporting the struggle of the residents of the neighbourhood, who seek nothing more than their self-evident right, to live in Greece and not in Islamabad!”<sup>49</sup>

The response of journalist Takis Theodoropoulos to objections put forward by those opposed to the demonstration because those involved essentially ideologically joined the cause of Ilias Kasidiaris was the following: “If borders are eliminated, the emotional amalgamation sought by human

rightists advocating political correctness will become a reality. It will be extremely difficult, I suppose, to claim the right to freedom of religion, gender equality, or transgender identity,”<sup>50</sup> he writes in *KATHIMERINI*.

Author Soti Triantafyllou claims that the problem of political correctness is the subject of the ideological confrontation between the left and the right: “The left has always fought for freedom of its own speech, not for freedom of speech,” she notes in an Article in *Athens Voice*.<sup>51</sup> In attributing to the Left an obsession with identity policy, she noted that “according to left-wing ideas, Muslim immigrants are entitled to project their ‘identity,’ while European citizens are not entitled to do so. The Left did not acknowledge the need for reciprocity, nor does it recognize it now.”

In my opinion, the Left - Right divide has nothing to do with political correctness and the reaction to it. Conversely, we see socially liberal politicians being very sensitive about issues such as migration, LGBTI rights, the feminist movement and hate speech against minorities. For example, the harsh attitude of Adonis Georgiadis, Minister for Development of NEW DEMOCRACY, and his presence on a daily basis in the media during the days of the refugee problem flare-up was not well received within his party, according to a report in *Kathimerini*: “The Minister for Development, in his frequent television appearances, to which he has recently returned after a break of a few weeks, expresses views that are really pushing things in terms of the government line. He deploys a very right-wing rhetoric on the refugee issue, which clearly has an audience amongst the ND voters. However, care is needed not to overdo it, as it could aggravate matters.”<sup>52</sup>

At the same time, Manos Logothetis, Secretary General for Migration and Asylum, said after the fire in Moria that “Greece is under attack. If we give in, Greece will appear to have been defeated. That’s why migrants, having done what they did, will remain on the streets, in tents under the olives for as long as necessary.”<sup>53</sup> Pro-government politicians, such as the former head of the centrist, liberal Drasi party and a former MEP candidate for NEW DEMOCRACY, Antypas Kaprioglou, asked for his resignation.

In conclusion, aphorisms, such as those of writer Soti Triantafyllou, are oversimplified. Political correctness is not the prerogative of the Left, as implied, and nor is opposition to political correctness by the Alt-right something that defines the entire conservative party. A large part of the centre-right believes passionately in the meaning and gravity of words, for example, by strongly denouncing the term ‘illegal immigrants’. It should be

47 Coronavirus and foreigners, 15/9/2020. <https://www.tanea.gr/print/2020/09/15/politics/o-koronoios-kai-oi-ksenoicr/>, retrieved on 17/9/2020

48 The authoritarianism of political correctness, 15/5/2020. <https://www.in.gr/2020/05/15/apopsi/o-aytarxismos-tis-politikis-orthotitas/>, retrieved on 15/9/2020

49 Invitation to the rally at Victoria Square, published on 15 July 2020. <https://www.dimiourgixana.gr/%CE%BD%CE%AD%CE%B1-%CF%84%CE%B7%CF%82-%CE%B4%CE%B7%CE%BC%CE%B9%CE%BF%CF%85%CF%81%CE%B3%CE%AF%CE%B1%CF%82/3118-%CE%B4%CE%B7%CE%B-%CE%B9%CE%BF%CF%85%CF%81%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%B1-%CE%BE%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B1-%CF%83-%CE%B1%CF%85%CF%84%CE%AE%CE%BD-%CF%84%CE%B7-%CE%B4%CE%B9%CE%B1%CE%B4%CE%AE%CE%B-%CF%89%CF%83%CE%B7-%CE%B8%CE%B1-%CF%80%CE%AC%CE%BC%CE%B5>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

50 In praise of borders, 8/3/2020. <https://www.kathimerini.gr/opinion/1068114/egkomio-ton-synoron/>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

51 The consistent left, all is good, 3/10/2019. [https://www.athensvoice.gr/politics/589725\\_i-synepis-aristera-all-good](https://www.athensvoice.gr/politics/589725_i-synepis-aristera-all-good)

52 Theoreio, 13/9/2020. <https://www.kathimerini.gr/opinion/561076627/theoreio-13-9-20/>, retrieved on 15/9/2020

53 If we give in, we will appear to have been defeated, 11/9/2020. [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/259293\\_ypohorisoyme-tha-fanei-oti-ehoyme-itithe](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/259293_ypohorisoyme-tha-fanei-oti-ehoyme-itithe), retrieved on 17/9/2020

noted that there is an international debate on whether it is legitimate to declare asylum seekers “illegal,” which calls into question the legality of their existence.

In March 2020, during the Evros crisis, Greece’s Prime Minister insisted on referring to immigrants as “invaders.” “[Turkish President Erdogan] is attempting to turn tens of thousands of migrants into illegal invaders to further his own interests, illegally crossing our borders,” he said in Berlin, in the presence of Chancellor Angela Merkel, who in contrast noted that even those migrants who are not entitled to asylum should be treated with particular sensitivity because “no one leaves their home country lightly.”<sup>54</sup> After the fire in Moria, dozens of members of Merkel’s Christian Democrats, as well as Bavaria’s ultra-conservative Prime Minister, Markus Söder, have pressed for refugees from the Lesbos camp that was devastated by the fire to be accommodated in Germany in the name of Christian solidarity.

At the same time, continuing the government’s policy of linking the crisis of the coronavirus and the crisis at the border, Kyriakos Mitsotakis attempted to bring public health and humanism into conflict. “The situation is a matter of public health, humanity and national security,” he said after the fire in Moria, implying that he cannot endanger public health in the name of humanitarian values, as would be the case, for example, if the former residents of the burnt-down hell hole were transported to the mainland or even to other parts of Lesbos.<sup>55</sup>

Ten observations from the description of the domestic landscape of public speech at the time of the dual crisis:

1. “Language is not neutral. Almost everything we say is ideologically nuanced. Language has an agenda, even when we do not have it,” journalist Thodoris Georgakopoulos rightly points out.<sup>56</sup>
2. Political correctness is not tantamount to censorship. It is a code of communication that respects the weakest social strata, minorities and their human rights. Nor can doing away with political correctness be considered free speech. It is an act of savagery against specific social groups.
3. Political correctness remains marginal in the Greek public speech. Its proponents are mocked and denounced as “pathetic people moved by the soap opera that is the migrant issue.”<sup>57</sup>
4. Those in Greece who complain that they are silenced by political correctness are doing so from positions of power. Either as government officials, MPs and local actors, or as columnists in influential media.
5. On the contrary, those who are subjected to racism, misogyny, homophobia or transphobia usually do not have a public stage, as they belong to weak minorities. Their only hope of protection and support are those who have power, a public voice and legal training.
6. At the moment, our country does not mourn a victim of cancel culture. I would even say that those who have expressed racist views, orally or in writing, either withdraw for a short time from the public eye after the reactions and return under a new title (a typical example is the case of the morning-TV show presenter Katerina Gkagkaki laughing at sexist jokes heard on air; Mrs Gkagkaki was temporarily removed from her position in the municipality of Athens, only to return in another position shortly afterwards) or are glorified because of their so-called brave stance against political correctness. Therefore, there is no need to be concerned in Greece about cancel culture extremes. However, it is important that we follow the debate that is taking place internationally, to avoid it, if and when it occurs.
7. Political correctness is not a matter for the Left, but of those who respect human rights.
8. Political correctness is often an internal value code in younger people, which is automatically expressed, without thought. Older people need to develop and assimilate this new language culture.
9. Social media play an important role in recording, highlighting and discrediting cases of racist speech or hate speech in general. All the latest incidents in which there was a great outcry against such phenomena have come from Facebook and Twitter, with the creation of the relevant hashtags. #cancelbigbrothergr was the motto against the reality show of the same name on SKAI, when a player appeared to be promoting rape culture.
10. It is interesting to note the new trend towards social responsibility on the part of enterprises, which are aware of the sensitivities of a dynamic younger audience. It was expressed through an advertisement (acting as an indirect response to transphobia and homophobia) in which a father allows his daughter to make him up and place hair clips in his hair,<sup>58</sup> as well as the rush to withdraw ads from Big Brother after the incident promoting rape culture.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup> «Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel (CDU) mahnte, «niemand verlässt seine Heimat leichtfertig.»» 9 March 2020. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/griechenland-kyriakos-mitsotakis-begruesst-groko-beschluss-zu-fluechtlingskindern-a-5cb20b76-1188-4fe1-9025-a3cc67f7c03a>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>55</sup> <https://twitter.com/primeministergr/status/1303672689152978944>, retrieved on 17/9/2020

<sup>56</sup> Political correctness and freedom of expression, 29/3/2019. <https://www.kathimerini.gr/opinion/1016799/politiki-orthotita-kai-eleytheria-ekfrasis/>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>57</sup> Takis Theodoropoulos: The migrant issue is not a soap opera, 13/9/2020. <https://www.kathimerini.gr/opinion/561076687/to-metanasteytiko-den-einai-sapoynera/>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

<sup>58</sup> Lidl went public with the ad about the Dad and daughter Princess, 24/6/2020. <https://www.protagon.gr/epikairota/ta-lidl-koinopisan-ti-diafimisi-tou-av-vasilopoulou-me-ton-baba-kai-tin-kori-prigkipissa-44342075685>, retrieved on 11/9/2020

<sup>59</sup> Sponsors are backing out post haste from Skai’s Big Brother, 7/9/2020. <https://www.protagon.gr/epikairota/apoxwroun-aron-oi-xorigoi-apo-ton-big-brother-tou-skai-44342114937>, retrieved on 13/9/2020

# THE DUAL CRISIS REFLECTED IN THE PRESS: CORONAVIRUS AND CRISIS AT THE EVROS LAND BORDER

Fotini Kokkinaki

Decades before the coronavirus and the February 2020 crisis at the Greek-Turkish border in Evros, the Greek press, with some notable exceptions, turned a blind eye to the complexity of the refugee and migration issue, showed disregard for human rights and international law, and held a position of suspicion, fear or hostility toward refugees and migrants, who were treated as a threat to security, social cohesion, health and prosperity in Greek society. This attitude was typical in the 1990s, during the first large influx of migrants from neighbouring Albania and has made a comeback in the last ten years, during the economic crisis in Greece, and particularly in the last five years, during the so-called refugee crisis. The Evros crisis and the pandemic have highlighted the worst aspects of this attitude.

Human rights and the freedom of access – for certain groups, mainly the most vulnerable – were hit hard by the pandemic, long before anything else was affected. The whole planet is experiencing circumstances unprecedented in the 21st century, from health and work to the right to circulate. Indeed, there has been a rapid decline in human rights in the democracies of the western world. This decline is not static, nor can it be considered to have stopped. It is an “avalanche” that crushes basic freedoms and achievements in its path.

By focusing on what has been happening in recent months in Greece, we can identify the beginning of this dual crisis in February 2020. The first case of the new coronavirus in Greece was detected on 26 February 2020.<sup>60</sup> It was a Thessaloniki resident who had recently travelled to Italy. Greece, with its many refugee facilities lacking even basic sanitary conditions for the people who must live there, was called upon to manage the additional issue of protecting the refugee population.

However, it handled it more as a health threat posed by the refugee population. Just one day after the first case was diagnosed, the Prime Minister himself addressed the cabinet on the issue of the “health threat” posed by refugees and migrants – not by those who were already in Greece but by

those who intended to reach it. “The migration problem is now acquiring a new dimension, as flows to Greece include people from Iran – which had many coronavirus cases – and many Afghanis who have passed through Iran,” stated Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis.<sup>61</sup> This is one of the most direct associations made between the pandemic and the migrant and refugee population.

But immediately after these announcements, early on the morning of 28 February 2020, the crisis at the Evros land border – the so-called instrumentalisation of refugees and migrants – broke out. This instrumentalisation was initially carried out by the Turkish state, which announced that it was opening the borders to help refugees and migrants reach Greece and Europe,<sup>62</sup> and then also by the Greek state. In actual fact, the events of 26 February became the pretext for a stricter policy toward refugees and migrants living in or entering Greece. It also gave rise to the government’s one-month suspension of filing of asylum applications by newly arrived refugees and migrants.

## REFUGEES AS “INVADERS”

The media started writing immediately about this “invasion” and “asymmetric threat,” which was all the more worrying because these articles were published in newspapers and online media with wide readership. For instance, *KATHIMERINI*’s article entitled “Authorities on high alert attempt to prevent an invasion by migrants - the forces in Evros are being strengthened”<sup>63</sup> and in *PROTO THEMA*, the article enti-

<sup>60</sup> “COVID19: The first positive case in Greece – a 38-year-old from Thessaloniki”, *naftemporiki.gr*, 26/2/2020. <https://www.naftemporiki.gr/story/1565985/covid-19-to-PROTO-thetiko-krousma-stin-ellada-38xroni>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

<sup>61</sup> Thodoris Karoulanis: “The Prime Minister announced that those refugees – migrants coming from Iran and Afghanistan would be contained at the borders, because of coronavirus”, <https://www.euractiv.gr/section/koinoniki-eyropi/news/anaschesi-sta-synora-se-os-yys-prosfyges-metanastes-proerchontai-apo-iran-afghanistan-proan-iggeile-o-prothypoyrgos-logo-koronoioy/>, 26/2/2020., retrieved on 12/10/2020

<sup>62</sup> «Reuters: Turkey opens its borders to allow refugees to leave”, *CNN Greece*, 27/2/2020. <https://www.cnn.gr/kosmos/story/209262/reuters-h-toyrkia-anoigei-ta-synora-tis-gia-na-fygoyn-oi-prosfyges> retrieved on 12/10/2020

<sup>63</sup> “Authorities in high alert attempt to prevent the invasion of migrants – the forces of the Hellenic Police are being strengthened in Evros”, *kathimerini.gr*, 29/2/2020. <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/1066975/se-synagermo-oi-arches-gia-na-apotrepsyn-eisvoli-metanaston-enischyontai-oi-dynameis-tis-elas-ston-evros/>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

tled “Migrants at the borders: Nearly 35,000 tried to pass on Saturday.”<sup>64</sup> Later, TA NEA adopted the same rhetoric with a report that brought back the concept of danger on the border, titled “Signal from Ankara for ‘invasion by refugees’.”<sup>65</sup>

There has been a further silencing and/or degradation of the various voices from the international community. A typical example is the intervention of the Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe, Dunja Mijatović, who referred to “an unprecedented humanitarian crisis at the Greek border,”<sup>66</sup> which was barely mentioned in the domestic press. At the same time, the Commissioner called on all the Member States involved to ensure immediate assistance to refugees and migrants trapped at the border.

Meanwhile, Greek and international organizations expressed disagreement over the temporary suspension of the asylum procedure and concern over the excessive use of force against refugees and migrants at borders. They also called for preventive measures to be taken against the coronavirus for the populations living in refugee camps, calling for the removal of vulnerable groups who remained in overcrowded Reception and Identification Centres on islands unable to observe minimum social distancing and personal hygiene measures.<sup>67</sup> These interventions by respected organizations long active in the sector, such as the European Council for Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), a Europe-wide network including dozens of humanitarian and human rights, received very little media coverage.

The Greek state’s lack of readiness and management capacity made the twofold crisis even more volatile. These two crises, whose intensity escalated during that period, to a large extent also reveal Greece’s current agenda for refugee and migration policy. As a gateway into European territory, given that its borders are also the EU’s borders, Greece was extremely unlikely to open its borders to accommodate the wave of refugees and migrants trying to enter Evros. This role of Greece as the border guard of European territory was also confirmed by the statements of the European leadership during their visit to Evros, but also in the run-up to the visit, in the statements from the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who explicitly stated that the situation in Evros “cannot be” an acceptable solution.<sup>68</sup>

A key point are the words of the Commission’s President to the prime minister: “We trust your government and for the further reason that although you have a very important task, we welcome the fact that you are operating in accordance with European law.”<sup>69</sup> The temporary suspension of the lodging of asylum applications was considered to be lawful under European law and was portrayed as such by the media.

## THE MEDIA IN EVROS

While domestic media largely reproduced the government’s narrative of asymmetric threat without further investigation, most international media covering the events adopted a cautious and critical stance, enabling the voice of the refugees and migrants themselves and their testimony about their plight to be heard.

A typical example is the BBC report that included video of Afghan refugees being arrested by masked men driving unmarked white vans.<sup>70</sup> When the BBC journalist asked them where they were going, the answer was “to the police station.” The BBC report – aired by very few media outlets – shows them heading away from the local police station to an unknown destination.<sup>71</sup>

The following day, the BBC journalist asked Greek National Defence Minister, Nikos Panagiotopoulos, whether it is common practice in Greece to arrest and transfer refugees and migrants to an unknown location. He responded that, in his view, “for a country, normal practice is to protect and safeguard its borders.”<sup>72</sup> While the Minister’s other statements were covered by all the media, this succinct exchange got very little media coverage. Most outlets accepted the Minister’s statement uncritically. Of course, both Commissioner Mijatovic and the UNHCR underlined in their statements and announcements that the limit when it comes to guarding borders was respect for human rights, which are a priority, but this stance was not widely covered in the Greek press either.

There was a major debate about whether or not there were deaths in Evros from gunfire. The first of the deaths, that of Syrian Mohammed Al-Arab, came to light via a tweet from independent journalist Jena Musa.<sup>73</sup> It made the social media rounds in record time, while government sources denied the information and attributed it to Turkish propaganda. In fact, government spokesman Stelios Petsas explicitly denied that

64 “Migrants at borders: Almost 35.000 tried to enter on Saturday”, *protothema.gr*, 5/3/2020. <https://www.protothema.gr/greece/Article/981456/metanastes-sta-sunora-shedon-35000-pro-spathisan-na-eisvaloun-apo-to-savvato/>, retrieved 12/10/2020

65 Manos Charalabakis: “Signal by Ankara for invasion by refugees”, *tanea.gr*, 15/5/2020. <https://www.tanea.gr/2020/05/15/greece/sinia-lo-apo-tin-agkyra-gia-eisvoli-prosfygon>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

66 ‘D. Mijatović: An unprecedented humanitarian crisis at the Greek-Turkish border’, *makthes.gr*, 2/3/2020. <https://www.makthes.gr/nt-mijatovits-aney-proigoymenoy-anthropistiki-krisi-sta-synora-el-ladas-toyrkias-262864>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

67 “Protect our Laws and Humanity!” - Open Letter by 256 Organizations, *humanrights360.org*, 6/3/2020. <https://www.humanrights360.org/quot-protect-our-laws-and-humanity-quot-open-letter-by-85-organizations/>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

68 “Von der Leyen - The problem in Greece is a European challenge -- the EU leadership in Evros on Tuesday”, *euronews.gr*, 2/3/2020. <https://Gr.euronews.com/2020/03/02/tin-triti-evro-mitsotakis-hge-sia-ee>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

69 ‘Von der Leyen - Greece’s borders are also European’, *kathimerini.gr*, 3/3/2020. <https://www.kathimerini.gr/politics/1067379/fon-nter-laienta-synora-tis-elladas-einai-kai-eyropaika/>, retrieved 12/10/2020

70 Mr Joan Fisher: “Migrants clash with the Greek Police at the Turkish borders”, *bbc.com*, 2/3/2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-51700885>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

71 “News24/7 in Evros”, facebook page *news24/7*, 2/3/2020. <https://www.facebook.com/news247/posts/10156810254456481>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

72 “Minister of Defence Nikos Panayotopoulos statements from Kastanies – day 3<sup>th</sup>”, youtube channel *e-Evros tv*, 1/2/2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeNpHZBmmWI>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

73 Jennan Moussa: The announcement of the first death in the Evros region, Jennan Moussa twitter account, 2/3/2020. <https://twitter.com/jenanmoussa/status/1234403547330088961>, retrieved 12/10/2020.

anybody had died.<sup>74</sup> On this issue, the domestic press accepted and faithfully reproduced the denial of government officials, as well as the argument that this was fake news generated by Turkish propaganda and that the international press was the victim or accomplice of such propaganda.<sup>75</sup>

However, well-documented visual material of the Forensic architecture research team refutes the above-mentioned argument,<sup>76</sup> exposing both the Greek government and the media that had accepted the government line without further research. It would be reasonable to expect such material to be further investigated with a view to identifying the perpetrators and assigning blame, as organizations and MEPs did through their question to the European Commission.<sup>77</sup> However, the video footage was not covered by the majority of Greek media.

Precisely the same pattern was followed in the second death: that of Pakistani Muhammad Gulzar,<sup>78</sup> on 4 March 2020. In the case of Gulzar, the announcement of the refugee sit-in at the City Plaza hotel – which identified the dead man as a refugee who had stayed on its premises – was even silenced. The media gave little coverage to this statement, despite its importance for the identification of a deceased refugee.<sup>79</sup>

The news published in some Greek media about the costume wigs found in Evros was controversial. According to the prevailing interpretation, the wigs showed that refugees were being dressed up as women and children to trick the Greek authorities and “blackmail” them into allowing them into Greece as “civilian population,” in the war terminology deployed by the government and media. Media that reproduced this news included the public television channel ERT and the daily newspaper Kathimerini. The most common titles that accompanied the photos published were: “Turkey

supplies wigs to migrants in Evros”<sup>80</sup> and “Turks put bracelets and women’s wigs on migrants going to the borders.”<sup>81</sup>

This appears to be fake news, as the details regarding the time and the specific place where the wigs were found were not disclosed. Nor, for that matter, did the reports mention who discovered them, completely overlooking the fact that a single man may also be in a vulnerable or disadvantaged position or wish to seek asylum. In addition, it presents refugees and migrants as pawns of a Turkey that wants to cheat the Greek authorities.

## REFUGEES AS A THREAT TO PUBLIC HEALTH

With the introduction of the lockdown in Greece on 23 March 2020, the Evros issue gradually stopped making headlines. Many civil society organizations expressed concern about the adequate safety and health coverage of people who did not have their own homes or had to live in camps, without access to personal space or even basic amenities such as water and soap.

Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without borders),<sup>82</sup> with more than 10 years of presence in Lesbos and other parts of Greece and the world, sounded the alarm, but the majority of the media did not publish their views. Not only were no measures put in place to protect people living in refugee structures, but camps were placed under strict quarantine as soon a case was found among the residents, who were not allowed to leave or enter.

In fact, in the so-called second wave of the pandemic, which is believed to have started with the flare-up of cases after mid-August, migrants were blamed for the increased number of cases in Athens.<sup>83</sup> According to reports “many [migrants] live together in apartments or hotel rooms in specific areas of the capital”<sup>84</sup> and “the way they live causes small

<sup>74</sup> <https://twitter.com/jenanmoussa/status/1234584209685188608>, retrieved 12/10/2020

<sup>75</sup> “Petsas refutes again: the reports on deaths and injured in Evros constitutes Fake News”, *lifo.gr*, 4/3/2020. <https://www.lifo.gr/now/politics/272371/nea-diapseysi-petsa-fake-news-ta-peri-yparkisis-nekroykai-traymation-ston-evro>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

<sup>76</sup> “The killing of Muhammad al - Arab”, *vimeo.com Forensic architecture channel*, 4/3/2020. <https://vimeo.com/395567226>, Retrieved on 12/10/2020

<sup>77</sup> Christos Kalimanis: “The government should explain to the EU about the death of a refugee in Evros”, *efsyn.gr*, 30/6/2020. <https://www.efsyn.gr/node/250092>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

<sup>78</sup> “Revealing video of Muhammad Gulzar’s death in Evros from fire”, *efsyn.gr*, 8/5/2020. [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/dikaiomata/242470\\_apokalypitiko-binteo-gia-ton-thanato-toy-m-gkoylzar-ston-ebro-apyra](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/dikaiomata/242470_apokalypitiko-binteo-gia-ton-thanato-toy-m-gkoylzar-ston-ebro-apyra), retrieved 12/10/2020

<sup>79</sup> “Report of a second dead refugee from live fire in Evros”, *tvxs.gr*, 8/3/2020., <https://tvxs.gr/news/ellada/kataggelia-kai-gia-deytero-nekro-prosfyga-apyra-ston-ebro>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

<sup>80</sup> Turkey supplies wigs to migrants in Evros, *kathimerini.gr*, 5/3/2020. <https://www.kathimerini.gr/politics/1067714/i-toyrkia-promitheyei-me-peroykes-metanastes-ston-evro/> retrieved on 12/10/2020

<sup>81</sup> ‘Turks put bracelets and women’s wigs on migrants going to Evros’, *iefimerida.gr*, 5/3/2020 <https://www.iefimerida.gr/ellada/ebros-oi-toyrkoi-bazoyn-gynaikeies-peroykes-stoys-metanastes>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

<sup>82</sup> ‘Coronavirus– Lesbos: Médecins Sans Frontières send an urgent message’, *news247.gr*, 9/4/2020. [https://www.News247.gr/koinonia/koronoios-Lesbos-oi-giatroi-choris-synora-stelnohn-eu-gon-minyma.7619963.html?fbclid=IwAR0VPVUszxBlhJH9k23VCPd-VhQpL5vAx6OPgilG4UCH74MDibCAx0LN8\\_OE](https://www.News247.gr/koinonia/koronoios-Lesbos-oi-giatroi-choris-synora-stelnohn-eu-gon-minyma.7619963.html?fbclid=IwAR0VPVUszxBlhJH9k23VCPd-VhQpL5vAx6OPgilG4UCH74MDibCAx0LN8_OE), retrieved on 12/10/2020

<sup>83</sup> ‘Coronavirus: Half of the cases in «Sotiria» and «Evangelismos» are migrants from the Centre of Athens’, *iefimerida.gr*, 11/9/2020., <https://www.iefimerida.gr/ellada/anisyhia-exarsi-toy-koronoioy-metanastes-athina>, retrieved on 12/10/2020

<sup>84</sup> ‘Foreigners from the Centre of Athens make up half the cases in “Evangelismos” and “Sotiria”’, *protothema.gr*, 11/9/2020. [https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/1043546/al-lodapoi-apo-to-kedro-tis-athinas-ta-misa-krousmata-se-euaggelismo-kai-sotiria/?fbclid=IwAR0VPVUszxBlhJH9k23VCPdVhQpL5vAx6OPgilG4Uch74MDibCAx0LN8\\_oE](https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/1043546/al-lodapoi-apo-to-kedro-tis-athinas-ta-misa-krousmata-se-euaggelismo-kai-sotiria/?fbclid=IwAR0VPVUszxBlhJH9k23VCPdVhQpL5vAx6OPgilG4Uch74MDibCAx0LN8_oE), retrieved 12/10/2020

outbreaks of the virus, and then as carriers they can spread it to neighbourhoods they reside in or frequent.” This rhetoric has overlooked the reasons why migrants and refugees choose to stay in such accommodation, such as low income and lack of access to the labour market. At the same time, through the reproduction of this rhetoric, the idea of an “external enemy” threatening the health of the Greek population was also cultivated.

With urban centres, and especially Athens, experiencing the second wave of the pandemic, the coronavirus cases recorded in camps in Greece had a special place all their own in the media and became breaking news,<sup>85</sup> without, however, any mention of how the existing conditions in these structures make refugees and migrants vulnerable.

An example of the consequences of just such an approach are the events in Kammaena Vourla. Residents of the area, with the backing of the municipality, refused to accommodate 39 unaccompanied minors, even preventing them from accessing food supplies, citing fear of the spread of the coronavirus. Local media seemed to support the reactions of the residents<sup>86</sup> without criticism, and even incite them, although clear information was provided that all children had undergone coronavirus testing and were negative.<sup>87</sup>

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**85** ‘Coronavirus– Greece: 24 additional cases in refugee and migrant structures’, *skai.gr*, 18/9/2020. [https://www.skai.gr/news/greece/koronoios-ellada-24-epibleon-krousmata-se-domes-proseprogygon-kai-metanaston?Fblid=IwAR0VPVUszxBlhJH9k23VCP-dVhQpL5vAx6OPgilG4UCH74MDibCAx0LN8\\_OE](https://www.skai.gr/news/greece/koronoios-ellada-24-epibleon-krousmata-se-domes-proseprogygon-kai-metanaston?Fblid=IwAR0VPVUszxBlhJH9k23VCP-dVhQpL5vAx6OPgilG4UCH74MDibCAx0LN8_OE), retrieved on 12/10/2020

**86** ‘Kammaena Vourla: Reactions by residents towards refugees - Extraordinary municipal council’, *lamianow.gr*, 23/9/2020, <https://lamianow.gr/kamena-voyrla-antidraseis-ton-katoikon-gia-toys-prosfyges-ektakto-dimotiko-syluylio-eikones-et-veo/> retrieved on 12/10/2020

**87** Announcement by the NGO METAdrasi on the occasion of reports in the press about 100 refugees and migrants settling in Kammaena Vourla, 23/9/2020. [https://metadrasi.org/23-9-2020/?Fblid=IwAR-2vDQzUCXiAf\\_UXLM-ch3BJw1l6aGgrJQEJpqz32xOfN4eum5H2BG-Jfo](https://metadrasi.org/23-9-2020/?Fblid=IwAR-2vDQzUCXiAf_UXLM-ch3BJw1l6aGgrJQEJpqz32xOfN4eum5H2BG-Jfo), retrieved on 12/10/2020

# “WAITING FOR GODOT”: THE RIGHT OF REFUGEES TO EDUCATION IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

*Pavlos Charamis*

Education is an inalienable right of every human being, protected by the current international conventions on human rights, and in particular on children’s rights, as it is a prerequisite for individual progress and social development and well-being. At the same time, it is also a prerequisite for the realization of other fundamental rights. Educational institutions are also vital in the case of migrants and refugees, as their functioning can be linked to a twofold mission: on the one hand, to have a positive impact on the personality of every young citizen, highlighting humanitarian values as the foundation of human relations, deconstructing stereotypes and prejudices that feed discrimination, hatred and conflict; and on the other hand, they provide the necessary educational resources for effective integration into the labour market and access to a variety of public and social goods.

In a crisis situation, access to education becomes more difficult and its role becomes even more important. As child abuse and exploitation increases in the more general climate of poverty, hardship and insecurity that generally accompanies these crises, a well-organized educational structure can also provide a secure environment that in such circumstances may even prove to be a life-saver.<sup>88</sup>

Over the course of the last decade, Greece has faced a series of crises with dramatic economic and social consequences. In parallel with the economic crisis that started at the end of the previous decade, there came the refugee crisis in mid-decade, which has been marked by a sharp increase in migration flows to the country, on top of which two further crises appeared at the end of the decade: The public health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the regional crisis in Greek-Turkish relations, which reached serious proportions at the end of the 2010s. These crises, with varying degrees of intensity, coincided over a limited period of time and their effects are still interlinked and are jointly feeding into various afflictions.

In this study, without ignoring the importance of past crises, which have been crucial in shaping the current situation, we are focusing on the two most recent crises, which have been less studied: the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis in Greek-Turkish relations. These two crises, flaring up in early 2020, have once again tested the strength of Greek society by initiating or accelerating important processes within it. It would be interesting to consider whether these crises have contributed to the strengthening of xenophobic attitudes and racist behaviours and, therefore, whether they have also affected educational institutions by making it difficult to integrate refugee children into school and society at large and to create a climate of tolerance, co-operation and solidarity. However, surveys carried out a little earlier showed another picture. Both the research carried out in 2019 under the “More in Common” initiative<sup>89</sup> and that carried out in 2018 by the University Mental Health Research Institute (UMHRI)<sup>90</sup> showed that most Greeks are well disposed toward migrants and refugees.

The outbreak of the Greek-Turkish crisis marked the beginning of unexpected tension at the land border between the two countries. Greece was called upon to face an unprecedented situation, as thousands of migrants and refugees, with the forbearance and encouragement of the Turkish government and support of Turkish media, gathered at the Greek-Turkish border, while organized groups tried to cross the border. In many respects, and with strong arguments, this action has been described as the “instrumentalisation of destitute people” by the Turkish Government in order to exert diplomatic pressure on Greece and the EU.

The Greek government saw this move as an attempt to breach the border and undermine national sovereignty, reacting with a ban on crossing the Evros region and with a significant strengthening of the border guard forces. The border tension, with constant attempts to enter Greece from the Turkish side and Greek efforts to deter entry, lasted throughout March 2020 and was weakened by the exacer-

<sup>88</sup> EU-UNICEF: Education in Emergencies. Emergency Lessons Campaign, Schools’ Pack, page 8, [https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/09/06-09-2016-Emergency-Lessons-Schools-Pack\\_July-2016.pdf](https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/09/06-09-2016-Emergency-Lessons-Schools-Pack_July-2016.pdf), retrieved on 21/4/2018

<sup>89</sup> ‘Perceptions of national identity, migration and refugees in Greece’, May 2019. <https://newpost.gr/photo/master/201905/r2qey1557669046180.pdf>, retrieved on 2/9/2020

<sup>90</sup> [https://www.epipsi.gr/images/Documents/Deltio-Typou\\_18-12-19/HBSC2018\\_05\\_Immigrants.pdf](https://www.epipsi.gr/images/Documents/Deltio-Typou_18-12-19/HBSC2018_05_Immigrants.pdf)

bation of the epidemic crisis. However, its consequences have acted as a catalyst. The image of Turkey’s incitement of these populations, combined with the violence at the Greek-Turkish border, has reinforced the impression among Greeks that the aspirations of the refugees are the same as those of the Turkish Government. In these circumstances, the strengthening of national and religious stereotypes in Greece was to be expected, and violations of the rights of refugees were more readily accepted during that period of time.

However, we must point out that tolerance of racist acts and acts of violence against migrants and refugees had grown well before the Greek-Turkish crisis. The 2019 Report of the Racist Violence Recording Network underscores the increased normalization of everyday racism, accompanied by the growing climate of impunity created in specific areas of the country by the relevant public prosecutor services and judicial authorities. At the same time, it points out that public figures and politicians are sending messages to the public through hate speech and xenophobic stereotypes, which are used to justify racist behaviour.

Concurrently, Greece, like the global community, was being put to the test by the COVID-19 crisis. The first wave broke out in Greece in early March, with limited consequences compared to other countries. But it had a significant impact on education, as all educational institutions closed in early March as part of comprehensive lockdown measures, operating only for a few days before the summer break. The suspension of school operation has had a significant negative impact on schools, as the syllabus ceased to be taught for a trimester, while for the vast majority of schools’ online synchronous and asynchronous learning programs limited themselves to going over material taught previously. This process has highlighted serious problems and shortcomings in the infrastructure and equipment of schools, teachers and households, the relevance of available programs and teaching methods, and the education of teachers. Therefore, assessments – supported by international experience – that school closures have reduced the quality of education and strengthened educational inequalities are well founded.

In early September, a second wave of the pandemic broke out, with features that made it even more threatening. The start of the school year was postponed for a week to allow time to better prepare the educational structures from a healthcare standpoint, as little had been done during the summer. However, when it came to preparing schools from a pedagogical standpoint, the situation proved to be even more problematic.

Education has once again borne the brunt of social shocks within the broader environment. When the schools reopened, there were incidents in which refugee children were denied access to school. A typical example is the reaction of parents and pupils at the High School of Kilkis to the attendance of 46 refugee children in joint classes, with health and educational reasons being invoked.<sup>91</sup> In another case, the local mayor declared that the Municipality was unable to provide “any assistance to additional students on top of the existing number of students in the municipality,” referring to children from the refugee structure of Ritsona.<sup>92</sup> Similar reservations were also expressed by parents from the Municipality of Vyronea following coronavirus cases in an accommodation facility for refugee children.<sup>93</sup> The climate was exacerbated by newspaper reports under headlines such as “*Refugee and elderly structures are sources of risk*”<sup>94</sup> and “*Refugees: A National risk.*”<sup>95</sup>

On the other hand, the Greek government, through concrete measures and arrangements, is making it difficult for refugees to access education. The absence of sufficient documents or necessary vaccinations becomes a pretext for preventing children from being enrolled in school, in breach of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the provisions in force. In other cases, the imposition of exceptional restrictions for refugee children by the competent authorities acts as a means of preventing enrolment and schooling. A recent circular from the Ministry of Education,<sup>96</sup> on the pretext of restricting the spread of the pandemic, specifically imposed on refugee children the obligation – which was subsequently revoked – to undergo “a COVID-19 test 72 hours before attending school and [to attend only if it] is negative,” without, however, ensuring that the test is provided free of charge. Apart from the negative educational effects, such a measure constitutes racial discrimination against the refugee population.

91 DIMOKRATIA, 16/9/2020.

92 AVGI, 5/9/2020

93 ELEFTHEROS TYPOS, 1/9/2020

94 ELEFTHEROS TYPOS, 8/9/2020

95 ELEFTHERI ORA TIS KYRIAKIS, 20/9/2020

96 Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, Α.Π.Φ 7/ 118240 Δ1/09-09-2020, p. 18. <https://bit.ly/2KTiTX1>, retrieved on 16/10/2020

Is it worth looking at how the refugee children themselves have experienced this extremely problematic situation with schools closed and movements banned? As relevant research is lacking, we will have to make do with the testimonies of people who happened to be close to the refugees, as disclosed during a public online debate on the integration of migrants and refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>97</sup> According to what was mentioned in the debate, the majority of these children did not have access to the Internet, and consequently the discontinuation of conventional classes caused serious obstacles to their learning. There is also a general feeling that during the lockdown period their education was “left behind” and inequalities in education were reinforced, with a greater likelihood of social exclusion. Apart from difficulties in accessing the Internet, the remote learning delivered by the Ministry of Education crashed often, while only half of the schools could have access at the same time. However, it was necessary to make use of this potential, as it ensured a useful occupation for children in lockdown and at the same time a way for them to distance themselves, albeit temporarily, from the ‘dramas’ of everyday life.

This clearly shows that there is an urgent need for a comprehensive plan for Greek education that takes into account the specificities of children of refugee origin. A good school serves all children well and equips all children to shape their personality through education. The guidelines of international organizations operating under the responsibility of the UN provide a reference framework that can serve as a springboard for such planning, provided that it is firmly based on the facts of educational and social realities at national level.

According to a recent UN study<sup>98</sup> the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing education disparities to the detriment of children, youth, and adults belonging to the weakest social groups, which obviously include forcibly displaced persons. Particularly worrying is the study’s forecast that around 23.8 million children and young people, from pre-primary to tertiary education, may find themselves out of education next year because of the economic impact of the pandemic alone, and experience of similar situations in the past has shown that many refugees will be included amongst them.

Priority should therefore be given to a design that will activate all human and material resources to address these issues. The Greek education system has many years of experience in the field of education of children of migrant background, which has been consolidated over the last few decades in institutions such as the Intercultural schools or the Education-

al Priority Zones (ZEP), Reception Classes and, recently, the Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP). At the same time, a large proportion of educational staff have participated in training programs focusing on intercultural and anti-racist education, diversified pedagogy, compensatory education and support lessons. This rich educational legacy has not been utilised or updated to the extent that it should, while at the start of the new school year, schools had neither sufficient data on the impact of the recent discontinuation of school operation nor a plan to fill learning gaps. A comprehensive UNESCO study<sup>99</sup> emphasizes the right of every child to achieve learning objectives set out for each class and education level. However, the competent departments of the Ministry of Education had not seriously attended to identifying and filling the learning gaps ahead of the new school year.

Another dimension highlighted by the above-mentioned UN Report concerns the alternative use of distance learning. The use of information and communication technologies is recognized as necessary. At the same time, however, the competent authorities must take all necessary measures to ensure that these technologies are used by all children and that “no one is left behind”. This was the slogan of a comprehensive 2002-2015 reform project in US education (No Child left behind, NCLB). The implementation of distance learning in Greece during the last school year has brought to the fore the risk of widening inequalities to the detriment of children who do not have the necessary means. Thus, the fact that many refugee children – as well as some non-refugee children – did not have the infrastructure and equipment needed to participate in distance learning should have sounded the alarm and a recovery plan should have been put in place immediately. A typical example of this is Germany, where a €500 million program was recently adopted to provide digital devices to schools and students belonging to disadvantaged groups.<sup>100</sup>

But the UN report is not limited to the pandemic’s impact on education. It also highlights other consequences, as the closure of schools is very often accompanied by lack of access to other basic services relating to health, nutrition and safety of children and young people. Such services in the context of a general health and economic crisis are particularly valuable for children, who are impacted the most. The pandemic could therefore be the occasion for a comprehensive re-design of school services by upgrading those areas related to children’s physical and mental health and reinforcing schools with relevant scientific staff.

Finally, let us hear the voice of those who are working in education of refugees on the front line, thereby indirectly giving

<sup>97</sup> Event organized by the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) on 4/6/2020 on the topic of: “The integration of migrants and refugees in the COVID-19 era: Opportunities and challenges”. The speakers were **Dimitris Verginis** (NGO ARSIS), **Panagiotis Nikas** (NGO ZEUXIS), **Lora Pappas** (NGO METAdrasi) and **Lefteris Papagiannakis** (NGO Solidaritynow). <https://bit.ly/3iNB4Kc>, retrieved on 4/9/2020

<sup>98</sup> Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond, United Nations, August 2020. [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_covid-19\\_and\\_education\\_august\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf), retrieved on 15/9/2020

<sup>99</sup> UNESCO/Education sector: COVID-19 Education response. Preparing the opening of schools, Resource Paper, 5/5/2020, page 5. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373401>, retrieved on 5/9/2020

<sup>100</sup> Kollender E. and Nimer M.: Long-term exclusionary effects of COVID-19 for refugee children in the German and Turkish education systems: a comparative perspective, Istanbul Policy Centre, Istanbul 2020, page 15. <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/content/Images/CKeditorImages/20200717-00071708.pdf>, retrieved on 31/8/2020

a necessary clarification on the choice of title. Pepi Papadimitriou, Refugee Education co-ordinator at Ritsona camp, in a letter published in the press entitled *“Ritsona: waiting for Godot,”*<sup>101</sup> notes, among other things:

*“I will never forget January of this year, when the population of the camp increased from 850 to 2.800 residents. Since the day after the relocation of these people from the islands, where they had been located, to Ritsona, there have been huge queues outside the container housing the office of the Ritsona Refugee Education coordinators of the Ministry of Education.*

*Hundreds of people, documents in hand, have been queuing for hours at a time to give the details of their children and to register them so that they can start attending to school. At least that is what they had hoped. Or rather what they yearned for. Whenever we met with them, we would see an ever-growing longing light up their eyes and those of their children. And their question was always the same: When will we be able to attend school?*

*Days and months have gone by, schools have closed and reopened, and the children of Ritsona [camp] keep on waiting for school, like Godot is awaited in Beckett’s play. And, tragic irony, the bare tree on stage in that play is said to symbolize the tree of knowledge...”*

# REFUGEE WOMEN FACED WITH GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

*Melpomeni Maragidou*

Violence against women is a phenomenon that knows no chronological or geographical boundaries. It is a violation of human rights regardless of when, where, by whom and how it is perpetrated. Whether it is psychological, verbal, physical or sexual violence, women across the globe are confronted with gender-based violence with ramifications for their physical and mental health.

The consequences are tragic. Violence against women can lead to injuries, serious physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health problems, including sexually transmitted infections, HIV and unwanted pregnancies. In extreme cases, it can even lead to death. The World Health Organization has described gender violence as an epidemic, stressing that it is a public health problem affecting more than a third of all women worldwide.

Violence against women tends to increase in all emergencies, including epidemics. Women who are displaced, female refugees and women living in conflict-affected areas are particularly vulnerable. Women worldwide have therefore become even more exposed to gender violence during the coronavirus crisis. Refugee women even more so.

Data may be scarce, but reports from China, the United Kingdom, the United States and other countries show an increase in domestic violence cases following the outbreak of the coronavirus. It is characteristic that the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, said in April 2020 that “Unfortunately, for many women and young girls the threat looms largest where they should be safest. In their own homes (...) Over recent weeks, as economic and social pressures and fear have grown worse, we have seen a horrifying surge in domestic violence.”<sup>102</sup>

In Greece, according to an Announcement from the General Secretariat for Family Policy and Gender Equality (GSFPGE),<sup>103</sup> there was a significant increase in reports of domestic violence during lockdown, when the circulation constraints due to the coronavirus pandemic were in place. According to data from the General Secretariat, in April 2020, calls to the 15900 SOS hotline for incidents of violence were as high as 1,070, compared to 325 in March. Equally worrying was the increase in domestic violence calls in April - 648 calls. Calls related to domestic violence nearly quadrupled in April - the month of the lockdown - compared to the previous month, March, with 166 calls recorded for similar incidents. The same evidence shows that seven out of ten incidents of violence were reported by the victims themselves and three out of ten were reported by third parties, such as parents, children, siblings, neighbours or friends. However, we do not know whether and how many of these cases involve reports by refugee and migrant women.

At the same time, according to the same data, most victims of violence were spouses/partners (in 61% of cases). The same evidence shows that 8% of incidents of violence concerned former spouses/former partners.

The General Secretariat for Family Policy and Gender Equality explained the increase by saying that “experts note that at times when couples spend more time together, there is an increase in incidents of violence. This is related to the fact that the two spouses or partners spend more time together and friction will bring faster and more easily to the surface behaviours involving violence, of any kind.” At the same time, it stressed that “a man who is not violent will not suddenly become so as a result of a difficult situation that he might face. It is men who have already chosen this way to relate to their wife or partner who may become more aggressive with more frequent outbursts of aggressive behaviour.”

<sup>102</sup> [https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1246973397759819776?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1246973397759819776%7Ctwgr%5Eshare\\_3&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.tanea.gr%2F2020%2F04%2F16%2Fworld%2Fgkouteres-prostateyste-tis-gynaikes-eksarsi-tis-endooikogeneiakis-vias-stin-karantina%2F](https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1246973397759819776?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1246973397759819776%7Ctwgr%5Eshare_3&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.tanea.gr%2F2020%2F04%2F16%2Fworld%2Fgkouteres-prostateyste-tis-gynaikes-eksarsi-tis-endooikogeneiakis-vias-stin-karantina%2F)

<sup>103</sup> <https://bit.ly/3cffCb5>

## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE REFUGEE POPULATION BEFORE COVID-19

Gender-based violence in the refugee population was a phenomenon that existed prior to COVID-19 and has been recorded in various studies and reports. In January 2018, UNICEF commissioned DIOTIMA Centre for Women's Studies - a recognized and specialized body on gender-based violence - to conduct research on the services for combating gender-based violence in the refugee and migration population in Greece, and more specifically on addressing needs and barriers to access these services, with a view to examining the functionality of the system for responding to gender-based violence and to making policy proposals that will help to improve the existing response capacity. This research study<sup>104</sup> stated, amongst other things, that although no systematic data on gender-based violence cases are collected by the UNHCR, the information available to the UN Refugee Agency showed that in 2017 it received a total of 622 gender-based violence reports related to the refugee and migration population in the Aegean islands. In particular, in at least 174 cases women experienced violence upon their arrival in Greece, a finding that raises serious concerns about protection. These figures represent only female survivors and cover inappropriate behaviour, sexual harassment and attempted sexual attacks.

Doctors without Borders has said that, from January to the end of September 2018, they treated – in their clinic located outside Moria camp – a total of 23 patients who reported having suffered sexual abuse, including rape, in or around the camp. Of these patients, 14 were adults and 9 minors, some of whom were only 5 years old.<sup>105</sup>

According to data published in January 2020 from DIOTIMA Centre's "program for preventing and responding to gender-based violence in the urban fabric," implemented with the support and funding of the UN Refugee Agency in Greece, 77% of women in the refugee population report that they have suffered sexual violence during the period of time that they were forced to live on the street or were accommodated in facilities.<sup>106</sup> In particular, 39% were raped, 33% sexually harassed, 5% sexually assaulted/experienced attempted rape. Out of the remaining 23%, 20% pertains to women who were subjected to severe psychological pressure (3%) or threatened and/or forced into sex (17%), risking eviction from accommodation if they resisted, while 3% pertains to cases of physical violence.

Research by Doctors of the World, in collaboration with the Themistocles and Dimitris Tsatsos Foundation and the GSFPGE, aimed at highlighting the educational needs of front-line

professionals working in refugee accommodation facilities and in the Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation (ESTIA) program<sup>107</sup> showed that these cases of gender-based and domestic violence are a well-known reality, as only one accommodation facility in Greece reported zero cases of gender-based violence, with professionals in the field alleging a multitude of incidents.<sup>108</sup>

On a global level, a report by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) states that women and girls, as well as men and boys, are at high risk of becoming victims of rape and sexual and gender-based violence, in particular at checkpoints and border areas, as well as when crossing the desert.<sup>109</sup> Some 31% of respondents who participated in the MMC survey and who witnessed or survived sexual violence in 2018 or 2019, did so in more than one region. Traffickers were the primary perpetrators of sexual violence in North and East Africa, accounting for 60% and 90% of reports on the respective routes. In contrast, in West Africa the primary perpetrators were security forces, military and police, accounting for a quarter of reported abuse.

## LACK OF SUFFICIENT INFORMATION AND CAMPAIGN FOR REFUGEE WOMEN

Flare-up of gender-based violence against refugee and migrant women during the coronavirus pandemic lockdown was emphasized in the online debate on gender-based violence against refugee and migrant women organized by the Social Action and Innovation Centre (KMOP) in June 2020.<sup>110</sup> In this context, there was emphasis on the need for cultural mediators in all organizations dealing with migrant women and refugees – victims of gender-based violence – so that they can offer support to all women regardless of nationality.

But the issue of mediation is not the only problem. Tellingly, there has been insufficient evidence so far on the upsurge of violence in the refugee population living in Greece and of the situation in the facilities. There are no reliable institutional statistics; there is no action plan. By way of indication, on Friday 22 May 2020, the DIOTIMA Centre attended the meeting of the Special Permanent Commission on Equality, Youth and Human Rights of the Hellenic Parliament on "Domestic violence in the times of coronavirus: Women's organizations bear witness." Anna Vougiouka, a social scientist and researcher, said that "quantitative and qualitative data from the GSFPGE facilities network are needed in order to gain as clear a picture as possible of the current situation, needs, challenges and weaknesses, so that we can plan more concrete steps and policies for the forthcoming period."<sup>111</sup>

<sup>104</sup> <https://diotima.org.gr/teliki-ekthesi-ereyna-gia-tin-antimetopisi-tis-emfylis-vias-ston-prosfygiko-kai-metanaesteytiko-plithysmo/>, retrieved on 6/9/2020

<sup>105</sup> <https://msf.gr/magazine/moria-dieykrinistiki-apantisi-ton-gia-tron-horis-synora>, retrieved on 2/9/2020

<sup>106</sup> <https://diotima.org.gr/dt-asteges-polles-prosfygisses-thymata-emfylis-vias/>, retrieved on 2/9/2020

<sup>107</sup> <http://estia.unhcr.gr/el/>, retrieved 2/9/2020

<sup>108</sup> <https://empowerref.gr/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Training-needs-assessment.pdf>, retrieved on 2/9/2020

<sup>109</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/5f1ab91a7>, retrieved on 5/9/2020

<sup>110</sup> <https://www.kmop.gr/el/afxisi-tis-emfylis-vias-enantion-prosfygon-ke-metanastrion-en-meso-covid-19/>, retrieved on 2/9/2020

<sup>111</sup> <https://diotima.org.gr/paremvasi-stin-eidiki-epitropi-isotitas-sti-voyli/>, retrieved on 6/9/2020

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that since the outbreak of the pandemic there has been no official major awareness campaign for women victims of gender-based violence living in refugee camps. At the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020, “No tolerance,” a feminist collective, noted in a speech that “there is absolutely no provision for refugee and migrant women, who make up a significant proportion of the population in this country,” calling for “information to be provided and the 15900 hotline to operate in many languages, so that it can be accessible to refugee and migrant women.”<sup>112</sup>

The failure to register incidents is, of course, not just a Greek phenomenon. According to a survey by the International Rescue Committee, reports of gender-based violence at the refugee camps at Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh fell by 50% during the lockdown period. Experts consider that it is unlikely that this reflects any reduction in gender-based violence. Instead, lockdown has made it much more difficult for survivors to report abuse.

## THE CASE OF MORIA

After the outbreak of the pandemic, all eyes turned to Moria. Humanitarian organizations and NGOs had sounded the alarm about the even more suffocating conditions created by the lockdown in the camp, especially for women who lived in or around the camp.

As early as April 2020, DIOTIMA Centre, active in Lesbos, expressed its strong concern about the situation faced by the male and female survivors of gender-based violence in Moria, particularly in the midst of the pandemic, due to their being trapped in the same place as their abuser.

The two sections intended for the protected housing of single women and single-parent families within the Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) were stiflingly overcrowded (about 400 women and children), resulting in many survivors – in particular, those in the informal makeshift camp outside of the RIC, known as the Olive Grove – living fully exposed to multiple risks and to gender-based violence.

DIOTIMA also issued a statement saying that, “for reasons of prevention”, lawyers were not allowed to accompany persons reporting incidents to the police. Moreover, restriction of movement to and from Moria made it difficult to get to the police station. For example, the organization referred to the case of one woman whose passage was blocked for quite a long time by a police checkpoint because reporting an incident of domestic violence at the police station was not considered sufficient reason to circulate. In the end, they allowed her through - exceptionally.

DIOTIMA notes that it has recorded that women have experienced one or more gender-based violence incidents in the

last six months, since their arrival in Greece.<sup>113</sup> The incidents mainly concern rape and domestic violence within the Moria camp, as there was a significant increase in these forms of gender-based violence in the last three months during which lockdown measures were imposed on the RIC.

In a telephone interview, psychologist Panos Tsitsanoudis, a DIOTIMA prevention officer in Mytilene, reported that since June there has been an increase in the incidence of rape within the camp. At the same time, there has been an increase in domestic violence cases. “There are also incidents that are reported to other organizations and incidents that are not reported to any organization. However, the increase in rapes that has been observed by us and at the level of our analysis tells us something about the lockdown and the conditions prevailing in Moria,” commented Mr. Tsitsanoudis.<sup>114</sup>

He explains the phenomenon as follows: “The Camp has already had a set of hierarchies and violent relationships. In DIOTIMA we talk about patriarchy, we talk about power relations. I think there was ample fertile ground in the camp, and lockdown only served to aggravate and intensify things. In other words, what was already in the camp was unavoidably intensified because of the lockdown.”

## THE WOMEN OF MORIA AFTER THE FIRE

Following the first confirmed coronavirus case within the RIC and the announcement by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum that the structure would be put on full lockdown in early September, dozens of organizations made it clear that this strategy neither addressed nor responded to key concerns about the health of residents. On the contrary, it actually worsened the vulnerable mental and physical health of asylum seekers while leaving them at high risk of contracting the coronavirus.

A few hours after this announcement, on 9 September 2020, Moria went up in flames and 12,000 asylum seekers were left homeless, including women survivors of gender-based violence. Others remained on the streets and others gradually moved to the Kara Tepe area, in a temporary camp, essentially remaining exposed to the violence of perpetrators.

“After the fire, a new chapter has begun,” said Mr. Tsitsanoudis, explaining that “The few means that existed in Moria camp for protecting women were mainly related to the three women’s sections, where when an incident was reported, procedures were activated to move these women to an area with rudimentary protection from the rest of the camp or cutting off access to perpetrators. After the fire, there are no longer any means of protecting them and women who used to reside in the sections found themselves on the streets and easily approached by perpetrators.”<sup>115</sup>

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.tovima.gr/2020/04/15/society/kamia-anoxi-to-menoume-spiti-gia-tis-kakopoiimenes-gynaikes-den-einai-asfales/>, retrieved on 6/9/2020

<sup>113</sup> <https://diotima.org.gr/dt-ektetheimenes-sti-via-ton-draston-oi-epizos-es-sti-lesvo/>, retrieved on 2/9/2020

<sup>114</sup> Telephone interview with Panos Tsitanoudis on 18/9/2020

<sup>115</sup> Telephone interview with Panos Tsitanoudis on 18/9/2020

In a statement, DIOTIMA said that, after the fire, staying in unsafe places constitutes a significant risk, given that the perpetrators can identify and approach women at any time and noting, for example, that in the first days after the fire, three women survivors reported a menacing approach by their abuser during the day.<sup>116</sup>

Mr Tsitsanoudis describes the case of three women who said they were homeless, in the company of other women from the sections, when a group of men approached them and threatened them. “These women carried the stigma of women who had resided in those sections; therefore, they had escaped abusers, meaning they were alone. Significantly, one woman told us the men approached them and said, ‘you are from the sections, you are not good women,’ and made a threatening move towards them.”

Adamantia Lambouka, DIOTIMA Centre’s supervisor for the management of gender-based violence incidents, noted that after the fire, the reports that they had were about two cases of rape and some new assaults on gender-based violence survivors by spouses: “We had kept an open channel of communication with these women from the sections. Therefore, they approached us again to report the events. There was only one case, who found us through another woman, who took down our contact details and reported an incident of rape. Of course, these are the cases that we have learnt about. We do not know what might be the extent of gender-based violence throughout the population, because we are talking about 12.000 people.”<sup>117</sup>

From the very outset of the crisis, the DIOTIMA Centre professionals in Mytilene have been in the process of identifying and assisting the survivors. Ten days after the outbreak of the fire, about 100 women, including gender-based violence survivors, had been transferred with the assistance of the DIOTIMA Centre to a safe place on the island. However, as the organization notes, “the continued state of insecurity which has developed does not allow for a sufficient response or for immediate measures to be planned and taken to protect and ensure their safety.”<sup>118</sup>

“The way that the new camp at Kara Tepe is set up, it cannot ensure any protection for the survivors,” Mr. Tsitsanoudis commented, and Mrs. Lambouka added that “It was set up overnight. There are no secure areas. It is only a temporary solution. There is an attempt underway to transfer women from there, and some have already been moved to accommodation, but the landscape is changing continuously. We are waiting to see how the gender-based violence conditions will evolve in the new camp, which is surrounded by army and police, but I do not know whether that will prevent such incidents. What I am saying, however, is that all these women have remarkable courage given what they have gone through.”

At the time of writing, we can see that women in Lesbos are having to deal with domestic violence, verbal violence and rape on top of poor living and lockdown conditions and the epidemic. Unfortunately, once again, these developments confirm that there is no plan for the refugee issue in general, but, furthermore, there is a lack of prevention and protection policies and initiatives for women exposed to gender-based violence.

<sup>116</sup> <https://diotima.org.gr/dt-ektetheimenes-sti-via-ton-draston-oi-epizodes-sti-lesvo/>, retrieved on 7/9/2020

<sup>117</sup> Telephone interview with Adamantia Lambouka on 19/9/2020

<sup>118</sup> Telephone interview with Adamantia Lambouka on 19/9/2020

# THE ORTHODOX CHURCH'S STANCE: IDENTIFICATION WITH THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE AND NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS POPULISM

*Alexandros Sakellariou*

## INTRODUCTION

The attempt to explain the stance of the Orthodox Church on the refugee and migration issue, with emphasis on the crisis at the Greek-Turkish border in Evros in the first months of 2020, is based on two pillars: On the one hand, the timeless identification of the Church with the nation, and on the other hand the cultivation and propagation of a kind of religious populism or, more correctly, a national and religious populism.

The study of the Church's attitude to these issues is particularly useful because the Church is still an important institution in Greek society and in the Greek political sphere, very often playing a key role in social and political matters through its interventions. This approach includes not only the public statements of religious professionals, senior and junior clergy, but also their various actions, i.e. a combination of words and deeds.

The main questions are as follows: What attitude did the Church take when the crisis broke out on the border with Turkey and what are the effects observed so far? What explanation can be given to make the Church's attitude comprehensible? Is there any link between the almost simultaneous occurrence of the coronavirus pandemic and, if so, how exactly is it expressed? The term Church, in its theological and ecclesiological sense, includes the clergy and all its members, its faithful. Moreover, the church is where the faithful gather to perform their religious duties and sacraments. A third dimension is the institution as a whole as a bureaucratic set of organisations, administration, bodies, etc. Here we are using the term Church to denote the institution and its professionals, that is to say, the clergy.

The aim is not to call into question the contribution of the Church, but to highlight some contradictions between its social work in the field of migration and its recent interventions, which may indicate a partial change in its attitude.

## IDENTIFICATION WITH THE NATION AND NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS POPULISM

The Church presents itself as the protector and mother of the Greek nation in the years of the Ottoman Empire, and this link with the nation is considered to be given and indisputable. Moreover, the Orthodox Churches, especially of the Balkan peninsula, are national churches, as they emerged and were founded by – and usually broke away from – the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Matalas 2003). In addition, Christianity has, in any case, played an important role in the emergence of the nation-state in Europe (Turner 1988: 324), to the point where it would be more accurate to talk about the triptych nation-state-church rather than the nation-state (Bax 1987:2-3). The Orthodox Church, therefore, has, through many political and mythical processes, identified with the Greek nation to an extent where, very often, non-Orthodox are not considered to be true or authentic Greeks, even today. As Archbishop Christodoulos said in an interview, "Justice, the Church, inter alia, is an institution of the nation. [...] by supporting institutions, the nation and society as a whole are supported."<sup>119</sup> This identification of the Church with the nation must not be overlooked when the debate comes to immigration.

On the other hand, the term populism is one of the most controversial and difficult to define in the social sciences (Aslanidis 2016: 9-29, Stavrakakis 2019). The debate on religious populism in Greece intensified with the election in 1998 of Archbishop Christodoulos to the Archbishop's throne, and especially during the period of tension between the state and the Church over the issue of religion being included on police identity cards. At that time, the archbishop's discourse was steadfastly one of religious populism, because it was organized along purely competitive lines, distinguishing, on the one hand, "Us," the people that the Church embodies with the help of the god, from "Them," the villains, the atheists, the modernizing and authoritarian government of the time, as well as its various supporters, the avant-garde and intellectuals in Greece and Europe (Stavrakakis 2004, Pantazopoulos, 2005).

<sup>119</sup> An interview with Stavros Theodorakis, 2005. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNbVV3MKs6Y>, retrieved on 5/9/2020

These two characteristics – the frequent reference to the People, and the dichotomy of “Us vs. those who are against us” – become in certain cases more marked in times of border crisis and more generally, reflecting the attitude of a large part of the Church toward the migration since 2015. In this case, it would be more appropriate to talk about a national and religious populism, with, on the one hand us, the Orthodox Christian Greeks, the (blessed) people who are always good, and, on the other hand, others, who are portrayed as bad, who are either dark or manifest powers, conspiring against us through migration, or the immigrants themselves who will alter us culturally, with the result that our Greek Orthodox civilization and our religion will disappear through Islamisation. We will go on to examine this expression of this national and religious populism by adopting the approach that populism is not limited to the level of discourse, but also includes performative characteristics such as gestures, emotions, symbolism, acts, etc. (Moffitt 2016, Brubaker 2017).

## PUBLIC DISCOURSE: US VS. THEM

The first reactions of the Church to the events in Evros came from the local Dioceses. The Metropolitan of Didymoticho said on 29 February 2020: “Can we remain silent and indifferent in the face of events taking place at our borders? The armed forces and the Greek border guards have been waging a war recently. An undeclared war with illegal immigrants as weapons... We pray for all those, who are not few in number, who are waging a war for the homeland and the dignity of our people. Local society stands as a whole by those who defend our borders.”<sup>120</sup>

Following the visit of the four Metropolitans to the border area on 2 March 2020, the Metropolitan of Xanthi declared that “We have come here today to give our blessings, but also to express our support to the army, the police, the fire brigade, the mayors in the region, and also to the people for the fight in which they are engaged right now to protect the borders of our homeland.”<sup>121</sup> For the Church, the defence of the homeland and the nation is above anything else, making the national dimension clear, with obvious frequent reference to the people.<sup>122</sup>

In order to emphasize the fundamental difference between Us and Them, what Greeks (We) did when they were immigrants is idealised: “[...] Asia Minor disaster, invasion of Cyprus, migration in the 1950s and 1960s, the new emigrants of the past decade. However, wherever we went, we did not demand, we did not threaten and we did not impose. We respected our second homeland, we worked hard and we

received recognition because we deserved it and not because others imposed our presence there.”<sup>123</sup> In the Evros crisis, a partial change in attitude – as compared to 2015 – was observed in some Metropolitans, such as the Metropolitan of Syros, who adopted the national narrative: “His Reverence Dorotheos II, without departing from the teaching of the Church about one’s neighbour, today expresses his support, alongside that of His Beatitude the Archbishop of Athens and all Greece, Ieronymos II, the Hierarchs of Thrace and the islands of the East Aegean and all Greeks in the joint fight to defend the land and sea borders of our Homeland against the outside-led threats and invasion.”<sup>124</sup>

The key words of this public speech, which constructs these two opposites, are: nation, homeland, borders, people, threats, invasion, illegal immigrants. According to the Archbishop of Ierapetra, “In Evros, ‘I saw a Greece of which we should all be proud. In hearing the Hymn to the Virgin Mary as Champion General, that people spontaneously sang, I felt once again the strength of the Greek people’s soul. The difficult struggle that our Army, our Police, our Fire Brigade and all the Security Bodies of our home country are engaged in for the territorial integrity of the land and of the European Union itself, on a daily basis, is truly moving and admirable. [...] the Greeks are used to difficult times and struggles to defend our sovereignty. Even when, on many occasions in the course of our history, we waged a lonely fight, without allies, without support, we always remained faithful to what our ancestors taught us, and united we have gone forth to act in concert for our homeland, our faith and the principles and values of our civilization.”<sup>125</sup>

This kind of national and religious populist speech, with a clear anti-migration tone, was even linked to the coronavirus pandemic. For example, an Orthodox priest stated on 9 March 2020, on a television show on the possibility of the virus being spread through holy communion and close proximity in churches, “It bothers me and I am particularly concerned about the large number of people entering our country in an uncontrolled manner; they could be carriers of diseases that are actually forgotten and we know that this has been the case in the past.”<sup>126</sup> At the peak of the pandemic, when churches were closed to the faithful, the Metropolitan of Didymoticho said in a statement, on 18 March 2020, “For the people of Evros, the enemy is currently twofold: from within Greece, the threat of the coronavirus spreading, and from outside of it, the daily pressure of illegal immigrants, who operate, in a guerrilla warfare like manner, in collusion with neighbouring forces. [...] The forces of the border guard, army and fire brigade are engaged in a fight day and night,

<sup>120</sup> Maria Manaka: “Didymoticho: An undeclared war with illegal immigrants as weapons”, Romfea, *romfea.gr*. <https://cutt.ly/Bfel2Hz>, retrieved on 5/9/2020

<sup>121</sup> “The Metropolitans at the border. Anthimos: We performed the funeral of the European acquis”, *xanthi2.gr*, 3/3/2020. <https://cutt.ly/GfeSLD1>, retrieved on 5/9/2020

<sup>122</sup> Similar statements of support were made even by regions very far away from events, such as Crete. Zachos Karelis: “The Church of Crete on the situation in Evros”, *orthodoxia.info*, <https://cutt.ly/XfeO-JZY>, retrieved on 5/9/2020

<sup>123</sup> “Are we in danger or are we being alarmists? romfea.gr, <https://cutt.ly/tfePtzy>, retrieved on 5/9/2020

<sup>124</sup> Christos Kalimanis: ‘The Metropolitan of Syros, a text of 2015 and the ‘holy about -face’ concerning the refugee crisis’, *efsyn.gr*, 5/3/2020. <https://cutt.ly/xfeADY1>, retrieved on 5/9/2020

<sup>125</sup> ‘Archbishop: European solidarity is in danger of being demolished on the Evros border”, 5/3/2020. <https://cutt.ly/dfeGHE7>, retrieved on 5/9/2020

<sup>126</sup> ERT1, 9/3/2020. <https://cutt.ly/ZfeJnIV>, retrieved on 5/9/2020

successfully tackling the pressure of illegal immigrants.”<sup>127</sup> Although these cases do not constitute the majority, they are significant, and the adoption and repetition of the term “illegal immigrant” does not go unnoticed.

## PRACTICES: SYMBOLISM AND SUBSTANCE

Beyond public discourse, populism is also ‘expressed’ in practice. Many of the statements mentioned above were made not only by the Dioceses’ offices, but also in the context of visits to the borders by the four Metropolitans in Thrace and the Archbishop, who wanted to witness the situation on the ground and raise the morale of locals and the forces protecting the borders. These were visits of high symbolic value, which were combined with the delivery of a public speech by the representatives of the Church and high-ranking representatives. In this case, discourse accompanies the actions of the Church and is reinforced by them. But it is not only a matter of the above visits that took place during the Evros crisis. Since the beginning of the year, as was the case in similar instances in the past, a number of priests, particularly in provincial towns and villages, have attended protest rallies against migrants and against the opening of migrant facilities in their region, often expressing themselves through anti-migration and anti-Islamic speech. The presence of a local priest or a Metropolitan at an event of such content has a special symbolism, since it offers support, sometimes tacit and sometimes more dynamic, to the narrative of population change, cultural alienation and Islamisation.

The meeting of the Archbishop of Athens and other Metropolitans with the Minister for National Defence in the summer of 2020, following the events in Evros, is a case in point. They gave the Minister, as a gift from the Church, four pairs of state-of-the-art thermal binoculars worth €40,000 for use in the defence of the Evros border.<sup>128</sup> In this case, the Church is not content with moral and symbolic support, but it also provides material support to the Ministry of Defence, since it now considers that migration is a question related to protecting the nation and the country, even if it means supporting a war operation.

In addition to border protection, the Church is also helping local society on issues relating to the creation of refugee structures, as shown by the establishment of a refugee structure in Megara, on land owned by the Church. The Holy Synod of the Church appeared to have agreed to the concession of the land or at least to have no objections. Following relevant press reports, local society reacted, with the support of the local Diocese. The Diocese of Megara claimed that “it always supports the legitimate causes of its congregation, and that is why it is now stands with it in solidarity in all the efforts of the Municipal and Community authorities and the residents of the Municipality of Megara and Nea Peramou, to

stop a facility for refugees and migrants from being established (...). The site is owned by the central financial services of the Greek Church, which also has the entire management of the site, while the Holy Diocese has no involvement in the matter.”<sup>129</sup> Following the reactions, the Archbishop met with the Mayor and a delegation of the residents, revoking any agreement of the Church with the Ministry of Immigration and Asylum. The Mayor talked about the understanding shown by the Archbishop and underlined the contribution of the Metropolitan of the region: “We have won another great battle, but we are not complacent, we will be constantly vigilant. Together, administration, opposition party, the Vice-Prefect and the people have succeeded together. Of course, thanks to the valuable help of the Metropolitan of Megara (...) and the wholehearted support and understanding of the Archbishop of Athens and all Greece [...], who has shown a great understanding of our problem and made a recommendation to the Holy Synod, which approved it unanimously, not to lease the premises [...] to the Ministry, and therefore the Ministry will not be able to set up a migrant/refugee facility.”<sup>130</sup> In this case, too, the Church followed the sovereign national narrative by adopting a populist stance in favour of the request of the region’s inhabitants that it overturn its original decision.

Finally, the Archbishop’s announcement following the destruction of the Reception and Identification Centre at Moria on 9 September 2020 was significant. The announcement is fully in line with the national narrative, clearly relegating humanitarian issues to second place behind national interests: “[The Church] is entitled and obliged, not only to express its deepest regret at the events in Moria, but also its deep concern about how this tragic situation jeopardises our own national integrity and peaceful life in our own Homeland. A fraudulent, immoral and inhuman plan to instrumentalise and exploit desperate refugees and migrants has been developing, for several months now, with all its ramifications for our national security and for the lives of Greek women and men, particularly in the border regions of our country and in several very long-suffering neighbourhoods in the urban centres, while, at the same time, our neighbouring country is escalating the tension in the Aegean Sea, in breach of any concept of international law, through premeditated aggression and brutal insults to the religious sentiment of the whole of Christianity, and particularly Orthodox Christians. (...) our Church stands, as always, on the side of the competent and responsible Greek State and puts its Services and Organisations at its disposal for whatever may be needed,” noted the Archbishop.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>127</sup> “We remain in a state of readiness...”, *imdos.gr*, 18/3/2020. <https://cutt.ly/PfeHwtD>, retrieved on 10/9/2020

<sup>128</sup> Press releases of the Holy Synod, *ecclesia.gr*, 2/6/2020. <https://cutt.ly/XfeDM00>, recovered 10/9/2020

<sup>129</sup> Press release of the Holy Metropolis of Megara and Salamis, 28/5/2020

<sup>130</sup> “Holy Synod: will not lease its site 75 ME to the Ministry of Migration”, *megaratv.gr*, 2/6/2020, <https://cutt.ly/sfe3G3w>, retrieved on 10/9/2020

<sup>131</sup> “Declaration of his Eminence about events in Moria”, 10/9/2020. <https://cutt.ly/zfY3p1k>, retrieved on 15/9/2020

## SUMMARY - CONCLUSIONS

The Church's attitude towards the refugee and migration issue is part of its broader rhetoric and practice, which predates the events of Evros. Since at least 2015, due to the rapid increase in the flow of refugees and migrants, but also even earlier (Sakellariou 2014), many Metropolitans have expressed their negative views, speaking out in defence of the fence in Evros, organizing events (Metropolitan of Thessaloniki) and talking about the risk of Islamisation of Greek society and the changes in the composition of its population, arguing that the refugees are of the same extraction as the Ottoman conquerors, or that there are no refugees, only invading migrants (Metropolitan of Chios). It is also telling that even Archbishop Ieronymos stated in a television interview that "they are people [refugees/migrants] and we must stand by them. We need to help them, but the wounds will be many. In terms of health, labour and poverty, not to mention morality. If these people stay here, we cannot but be influenced by them, because they cannot be assimilated, (...) they are reserved, they have their ghettos, they will affect society, and unfortunately we will lose what we have known so far, our Greek neighbourhood will be lost, at least for the first generation, this wonder of life, which we always talked about (...) we are a pure country."<sup>132</sup> It should be noted that national and religious (anti-migration) populism is directly determined by the element of religion, namely the fact that the majority of migrants and refugees are Muslim, leading to a clear anti-Islamic stance on behalf of the Church (Sakellariou 2018, Sakellariou 2019). As has been supported internationally and has occurred in Greece in the case of many extreme right-wing parties and organizations, the far-right too often takes on and appropriates religion and the Church, because this serves its purpose and strengthens its populism, particularly in terms of migration and Islam (Marzouki, McDonnell, Roy 2016, DeHanas, Shterin 2018).

The attitude of the Church could be considered to be partly contradictory because of its social work in the migration crisis, but also because of the ecumenical dimension which it supposedly teaches and pursues. Besides the rhetoric of national and religious populism, the practical dimension reflected in symbolic acts and decisions of the Church is also important. The Church has influence on public discourse, national narrative and ideology, strengthening and perpetuating the "Us and Them" dichotomy, as well as on a symbolic level through acts or omissions that also contribute to the perpetuation of national and religious (anti-migration) populism. In this sense, the Church is fully integrated into the national narrative, serving the purposes of the nation and respecting the national line, demonstrating its national character and possibly in part its secularity.

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<sup>132</sup> Interview with ERT1, Focus, 21/3/2016.

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## BORDERS AND CORONAVIRUS: REFUGEE POLICY AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN A TIME OF A DUAL CRISIS IN GREECE

At the end of February 2020, the coronavirus crisis broke out at the same time as the crisis in Evros on the Turkish land border with Greece, where thousands of refugees and migrants tried to enter Greece and Europe, encouraged by the Turkish Government. In Greek political and journalistic discourse, these two crises were linked, giving new content to the refugee management crisis that had existed since 2015.

Refugees and migrants would now appear in the Greek public sphere as a threat to both national security and public health, paving the way for tough anti-refugee policies, with the forbear-

ance, if not the blessing, of EU leadership, which explicitly gave Greece the role of being the “shield of Europe.” Prevention and pushback operations have now become the new doctrine of border control, and generalized detention or lockdown has become the new norm in refugee facilities. The new policy was accompanied in the public sphere by the freeing of xenophobic speech and hate speech combined with an intensified attack on what is perceived by the vectors of this speech as the “tyranny of political correctness.” This edition explores these issues, also focusing on the gender-based dimen-

sion of the dual crisis, i.e. how relations of domination are constructed between the genders and perpetuated in the context of new anti-refugee policies. It also examines, in the new conjuncture, the issue of social integration policies for refugees and migrants through their access to or exclusion from the Greek education system. Finally, it looks at the special role of the Orthodox Church – as an institution which has identified itself with the nation over time and systematically cultivated a kind of national and religious populism – in implementing anti-refugee measures.