

The impact of migration in small-medium-sized cities and the role of the local authorities in Greece.

The Municipality of Trikala.

Harry Kalliaras (Municipality of Trikala),

Athanasia Andriopoulou (University of Urbino Carlo Bo)

ABSTRACT

Knowledge of modern migration processes and dynamics in the Greek context has accumulated since the late eighties. However, the regulatory and policy framework proved inadequate to deal with the recent migration crisis (years two thousand and onwards), resulting in a powerful negative impact on cities and regions. Confronted with an unprecedented human challenge, the recent massive flows of asylum seekers required a renewal of the strategies and the launching of synergies to address needs beyond primary services' access but include integration policies. Said otherwise, the recent migration challenge requires the mobilisation of society as a whole (local, national and European levels) and the deployment of civil society and the local stakeholders. The lack of long-term, locally-adherent integration strategies seems to be the main factor leading to, among others, rising migrants' vulnerabilities and spreading racism and discrimination

in society. Stretched beyond their ‘ordinary mandate’, some local governance structures (Municipalities of the Central part of Greece such as Karditsa, Larissa, and Trikala) have marked a ‘good model’ for incorporating migrants into the local communities. The experience of the Municipality of Trikala can contribute to the discussion over the authorities’ role in efficiently addressing such migration-related issues.

The impact of migration in small-medium sized cities in Greece

Greece and the EU are facing the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. Even if numbers dropped temporarily since 2015, following the EU-Turkey agreement, Greece’s capacities to efficiently address the needs of the newcomers were limited due to the concurrent economic crisis. Efforts focused on handling the crisis with national, NGO, and EU funding, establishing around 60,000 places in accommodation centres with access to primary healthcare and basic education with around 12,000 children in the school system.

Even if Greece has a long migration history, the current crisis does not resemble the characteristics of past experiences. In contrast, past integration strategies were dedicated to a different migration segment and were tailored to a different historical moment: Balkan and ex-Soviet Union migrants were particularly advantaged by the then-booming Greek economy, while close historical and cultural bonds would facilitate the identification of common grounds on which to build integration paths. The challenges of the current migration strategies must address different vulnerabilities. At the same time, they should go beyond the reception conditions and extend to the integration of refugees in different spatial and temporal clusters, both in the short and long run.

The current National Strategy for Integration (the first dating 2013) introduces guiding principles and overall critical questions, such as what kind of society we wish for, the need to balance short- and long-term measures, and the need to see migration as an opportunity, not a threat. Nevertheless, it still lacks detailed, locally suitable approaches that consider balancing assets for migrant and indigenous populations adequately.

In the experience of some Municipalities of Central Greece, effective integration requires multilevel and multi-tier policies and long-term strategies. Accurate knowledge on the causes of movement and the ‘model’ of migration is a precondition to designing the policies. The approach to integration is undoubtedly different in terms of time-space and needs assessment, while in some instances, it may even aim at achieving different goals. In that perspective, the case of Greece may be different from other (mostly central or northern) EU migration destinations, representing a transiting destination or only a temporary settlement for most asylum seekers. Internal to Greece settlements and formal-informal communities of migrants, from the other hand, may also significantly differ from place to place. ‘Transitional migration’ needs a separate plan for integration and supportive strategies. In contrast, those who will choose to reside stably need proper housing, accommodation, and employment strategies at a local level to integrate.

The national Integration Strategy requires an action plan that endorses transferring integration tools and planning from the national to the local level, with more emphasis on horizontal cross-cutting policies, especially needed for valorising and developing skills. An action plan to address locally differentiated needs may also benefit the entire systemic architecture with a ripple effect. Starting by stimulating e-governance capacity may facilitate communication, networking and knowledge sharing, which can ultimately promote better coordination of the resources employed in reception and integration measures and ultimately counteract illegality and combat fraud. Eventually, progressive changes in the perceptions of migrants are underway. At

the same time, implementing such a strategy implies facing other transversal challenges, including the limited resources in addressing the unique needs of vulnerable groups or dealing with relocation schemes in Europe. Integration strategies should foresee actions for enhancing public administration and intercultural management and set the coordination between different policy planning levels.

Dealing with migration during a financial crisis has led to more extreme-right views and a shift towards more conservative values. Therefore, migration policies should also include measures to prevent political radicalisation against migrants and support organised strategies for reducing the burden on southern European countries and Greece. Measures required include a decongestion of the reception centres (i.e. islands) and decent refugee accommodation. Organised educational and recreational activities are needed in the refugee camps, and collaboration with public authorities and civil society actors for efficient reception services cooperating with EU and international organisations.

1. Local models of integration

1.1 Central Greece: Larissa, Karditsa, Trikala. The Municipality of Trikala

The Municipality of Trikala is positioned in the central part of Greece with a registered population of around 57 thousand inhabitants and represents one of the models for successful integration. In 2022, according to estimations, some 2,000 refugees and asylum-seekers coming from many different countries (Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Iraq, Syria) were living in this central part of the country (distributed between the municipalities of Larissa, Karditsa, and Trikala) referred by the Greek Ministry of

Migration and Asylum from reception centres, thus raising the actual number of inhabitants to about 75 thousand.

The cities in the central part of Greece were called to address integration challenges in a challenging context of conditions, essential among them the lack of adequate resources and effectively supportive policy frameworks. Instead of solving, regulations often present procedural complications and administrative barriers in accessing primary services (usually in terms of required documentation), such as postponements and interruptions in reaching primary social care (food, clothing, personal products, but also educational and recreational items like books and toys for the younger refugees) that are inflicted over the already existing vulnerability of the incomers. Such conditions inevitably broaden and deepen the distance of the newly arrived from the local community.

An important initiative has been laid through a tailored strategy between the Municipality of Trikala and the newly established local Integration Council of Migrants and Refugees, the municipal advisory body assigned to identify needs and propose concrete solutions for integration. Furthermore, an Immigrant Integration Centre operates in the Municipality of Trikala (KEM) as a branch of the Community Centre as a complementary structure to the Directorate of Social Care (also supervised by it) to further support the Municipality in the implementation of social protection policies and to develop a local focal point of reference for the reception, service and interconnection of citizens with all Social Programs and Services implemented in its operational area. The KEM offers specialised services emphasising employment, education, health, protection and welfare, social security and intercultural mediation/interpretation. The KEM provides information and advisory support for immigrant integration issues and acts as a referral of requests to other relevant structures, services and agencies (Councils for Integration of Immigrants, Associations of Immigrants/Beneficiaries of International Protection, NGOs, Social Services).

In addition, liaison experts deployed by the ICMC (International Catholic Migration Commission) and collaborating with the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and the Greek government coordinated the ongoing local integration initiatives (i.e., vocational training and language courses). This collaboration extended to three municipalities' authorities of central Greece (Larissa, Karditsa, and Trikala) and with their respective local integration programmes, bridging other local initiatives to the UN actions and supportive programmes offered by local stakeholders. Various urban working groups were set to establish and coordinate a network of services provided by various agencies locally. With the strategy orientation proposed by the three Municipalities, policy objectives aligned to the various levels of governance and the different spaces of reception, starting actions of capacity-building (i.e., training) for staff and public officials on legal issues and administrative procedures. Therefore, among the overall goals set by the Municipalities of central Greece to meet the recipients' specific needs was to point to innovation and the reconfiguration of the existing local systems.

Ultimately, actions extended to enhancing the networking with national and supranational communities of practice (such as joining the 'Cities Network for Integration') in line with the broader effort to create and consolidate channels of communication between authorities and stakeholders, create spaces where it is possible to share knowledge, practices and models, but also to find resources (fundraising, donations, crowdfunding) to employ in joint projects. Networking often may offer alternative solutions to the local and national authorities and, in the long term, can remove procedural and policy barriers to accessing refugee services.

In conclusion, the above-described actions have a two-fold effect: on one side, they facilitate and finetune the integration programs with the real-local needs, activating the community and creating new patterns of long-term, multilevel collaboration in the governance of migration while valorising the existing resources; on the other side, this combined approach significantly benefits the social cohesion,

brings people and communities closer, highlighting the ways not only the locals but also refugees contribute to their communities.

1.2 The role of the Local Authorities in Small-Medium Towns in Greece

Comprehensive reports on the refugee crisis reception centres in Greece, combined with the images reported by the media in small Greek islands, provide critical information on the implication of infrastructures adequately designed and equipped to receive high numbers of migrant flows that are additionally characterised by extreme vulnerability.

The varied geographic locations, the sizes and the different ‘local wealth’ of the cities in terms of economic, natural and human resources translate into different capabilities and knowledge of the hosting equips. These are factors essential to the equation that makes the reception and the hosting of migrants possible and dignified.

However, authorities are not free from responsibility for playing an active role in receiving and integrating migrants properly, even if the lack of a clear and effective integration policy framework may play a significant role in the capacity assessment to govern migration of the local authorities. The Municipalities’ active role neither culminates with the exact application of the directions provided by the national framework. Local authorities are also called to provide paths for integration and social cohesion, address the concerns for the increased diversity amongst the residents, and provide shared spaces for community life, vital urban infrastructure, and services to meet the needs of the entire local population.

Among local authorities’ challenges, good multilevel communication is crucial for effectively and timely addressing the needs, especially in unprecedented emergencies that entail unanticipated requests that cannot be satisfied otherwise. Communication rep-

resents a well-documented problematic aspect in Greece, growing proportionally to dispersed migration directives and policies over various levels of government. Local Authorities, in the guise of ‘policymakers’, should be dynamically involved in the design of both the reception and the integration policies. The establishment and the operation of the ‘Migrants Integration Centres’ under the umbrella of the Community Centre structure may represent one step taken in that direction.

The involvement of other local actors is also part of the answer: active engagement of the non-governmental sector and the civil society – including organisations run by migrants is also necessary. Intercepting local stakeholders means mapping new local capacities that may lead to better access to funds (national or EU), facilitating cities and Local Authorities’ access to resources in response to the identified integration needs with the necessary flexibility and timeliness. At the same time, better coordination between numerous stakeholders helps increase the effectiveness and efficiency of migration-related activities while setting community goals stimulates civic advocacy and commitment.

1.3 Policies for local actors

Local actors’ contribution in the policymaking can progressively become an asset that extends beyond single coordinated integration initiatives. Local actors can impact to the need for a strategy explicitly tailored to the local needs and requirements for the inclusion of migrants into the local labour market.

Policies on labour integration should be looking to a twofold goal: not only fit migrant’s needs and enable them to become active members of the local society but also consider how migrants’ profiles can help to fill labour market gaps and shortages in crucial sectors of local economies, in order to provide benefit for the local community. This aspect is vital as a countermeasure to fears of

draining market and labour opportunities from the ‘newcomers’ (the migrant community) while ensuring a common benefit, spendable beyond the specific space and time.

Migrants’ incorporation through the labour market requires prior knowledge of the local language: classes for children and adults should be a crucial part of integration practices and policy propriety. Indeed, many migrants may become marginalised even if highly skilled and potentially immediately employable to the local market because of fundamental language barriers.

Language skills, labour permits, and facilitated procedures for the ‘nostrification’ of their diplomas open the path for migrants to reach their full potential and become a valuable source of society and labour while contributing to the local budget by paying taxes. Local offices are greatly facilitated when permanent communication-information paths exist with the local actors active in the market.

Policy design should also take account of re-urbanisation and related demographic needs that migrants can tackle by reviving the villages, the smaller cities and even entire regions. In the same enriching view, cultural gains may also derive from supportive and well-tailored policies, especially if the culture and traditions of the migrant population vary to a large degree from that of the local population.

Conclusions

All the above considerations bring to the suggestion of perceiving integration as a complex bidirectional process. Integration-incorporation programmes should target not only migrants but also the city’s local communities to increase awareness of the benefits related to migration and promote intercultural dialogue.

From a broader perspective, networks of diverse local-sub-local actors countering stereotypes and negative discourses could be promoted by Local Authorities. Municipalities acting as semi-autonomous units can be expected to solve some of the many complex migration issues and can create conditions for better policy development. Reaching the municipal level's full potential means activating the local social fabric and coordinating with all levels of funding and governance.

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