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The Socioeconomic Integration of People in Need of International Protection: A Spatial Approach in the Case of Greece

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Abstract: This paper explores the impact of dispersal policy of asylum seekers in Greece under the accommodation scheme running in the country. Combining an analysis of secondary data and the findings of field research through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in migration governance, the authors seek to identify whether there are differences in the integration prospects between the residents of the camps, which are mostly outside cities or in rural areas, and the beneficiaries of urban autonomous living. The contribution of this paper lies in that it brings into the spotlight the spatial criterion for the evaluation of integration both under the lens of rural–urban placement as well as under the lens of collective-autonomous living. To this end, it follows the integration policies and practices implemented at national and local levels and compares the access granted to people in need of international protection and their outcomes. The findings are in accordance with the literature supporting that the positive impact of urban autonomous living in socioeconomic integration usually prevails the residence in rural collective housing. However, it points out the importance of local actors in the success of integration efforts.

Keywords: integration; accommodation; labor market; education; social services; migration governance; dispersal policy



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1. Introduction

Almost half of two million people who entered the European Union since 2014 used the Eastern Mediterranean sea route ([UNHCR 2021a](#)). The majority of those who arrived in the Greek islands until the Balkan route closed did not file for international protection and chose to move further towards another country. However, between 2015 and 2016 the asylum applications in the country increased by 287.1%, placing Greece in an unprecedented asylum crisis ([Greek Asylum Service 2020](#)). In fact, in 2016, Greece ranked as the first European country with the highest ratio of the number of asylum applications to its population ([Manuela Samek Lodovici et al. 2017](#)). Based on the available statistical data until January 2020 ([Greek Asylum Service 2020](#)), the male applicants filed 67.5% of the total applications and 12,415 applications came from unaccompanied minors. Approximately 50% of the applicants were aged between 18 and 34 years old. 75,000 of the applications were filed by Syrian nationals, 59,454 applicants had Afghan origin, close to 34,000 were from Pakistan, and about 30,000 were from Iraq. A total of 63,006 of the first instance procedures were considered as negative in substance, while 52,043 were filed as inadmissible. Yemen, Syria, Palestine, Somalia, and Eritrea were among the top 10 countries with the highest recognition rate in regards to the asylum applications in Greece (above 80%). Stateless people also had a high recognition rate of 89.7%. Taking into consideration that until April 2021 there were 330,017 applications filed, there were almost 89,000 positive decisions ([Ministry](#)

of Migration and Asylum 2021a). The majority of the applicants belonged to the working age population, 4% of them were children in school age, and all of them passed through a dangerous and risky process to enter the country. Thus, the effectiveness of the response of Greece regarding the facilitation of their socioeconomic integration becomes an emerging issue.

Almost 65,000 asylum seekers were registered in the island of Lesbos, which received the major bulk of arrivals through the Eastern Mediterranean Sea route. Samos and Chios, two other islands in the region of North Aegean, which became the entrance point for third country nationals to Greece and the European Union during this crisis, were among the top five registration points. Attica and Thessaloniki were also between the most overloaded registration points (Greek Asylum Service 2020). However, the goal of the Greek state through the allocation of the newcomers in the available accommodation facilities is to keep the proportion of asylum applicants to the native population in the Greek regions below 1:100 excluding the islands of North Aegean where first reception centers are located (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021a).

The purpose of this paper is to identify the impacts of the policies and the initiatives implemented in all levels of migration governance to facilitate the socioeconomic integration of the newcomers following a spatial approach through the analysis of the accommodation scheme for the people in need of international protection. The authors have conducted a secondary data analysis of factsheets, press releases, and feedback provided in the official websites of government agencies, NGOs, and IOs as well as semi-structured interviews with 30 representatives of stakeholders engaged in migration governance in Greece. The interviews were conducted by the authors and took place either in person or online from January 2020 to January 2021. The list of interviewees is available upon request.

The paper is structured as follows: first, the theoretical framework that serves as the building block of this research is described, then allocation policies for the asylum applicants under the accommodation structures offered in Greece that serve as a spatial parameter for the analysis are introduced. Then, the analysis of the integration policies and local practices follows and the outcomes regarding the socioeconomic integration of the newcomers in spatial terms unfold and the main conclusions are presented.

2. Research Building Blocks

Allocation of refugees is considered one of the first measures of integration policy (Askim and Hernes 2017). Access to housing and labor markets as well as the involvement of migrants in processes and issues that affect the communities of the host country are crucial parameters that fall into the sphere of settlement and integration nexus (Murphy 2010). The UN Declaration of Human Rights makes specific reference to the right to work and free choice of employment and to just and favorable conditions (Article 23 of UN General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948). The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees also establishes the right to work (Articles 17–19). In detail, states shall accord to refugees lawfully staying in their territory the most favorable treatment accorded to nationals of a foreign country in the same circumstances regarding the right to engage in wage-earning employment (Article 17 of UN General Assembly, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 28 July 1951 1951). Moreover, according to article 19 par. 1, each Contracting State shall accord to refugees lawfully staying in their territory who hold diplomas recognized by the competent authorities of that state, and who are desirous of practicing a liberal profession, treatment as favorable as possible and, in any event, not less favorable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances. The recognition of the right to work, including technical and vocational guidance and training programs, policies, and techniques to achieve steady economic, social, and cultural development and full and productive employment under conditions safeguarding fundamental political and economic freedoms to the individual, is also part of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (Article 6 of UN

General Assembly 1966). Employment is necessary to increase the self-sufficiency and the socioeconomic participation of migrants, their standard of living, their interactions with the natives, and the overall outcome of their inclusion in the host society (OECD 2018a).

Appropriate accommodation can play an important role in the employment prospects of people in general and migrants in particular, as well as their educational outcomes and the formation of social networks (European Website on Integration 2016). Since the effectiveness of migrant integration depends on the housing conditions (OECD 2018a), the optimal settlement of the newcomers should combine accessible housing market prices with available employment positions and proximity to social services (OECD 2016). Platts-Fowler and Robinson (2015) found that integration can evolve in distinctive ways in different places because it is grounded and embodied in space and place. Regarding regulated accommodation, uneven geographies increase precarity (Papatzani et al. 2021). Kreichauf (2018) argues that accommodation inside camps separates population, excludes migrants spatially and legally, and stabilizes temporality, marking immigrants as a short-term phenomenon. Kandyliis (2019) considers camps as spatially isolated and socially marginal living spaces that prolong and expand human suffering. Kourachanis (2018) suggests that social housing, such as the ESTIA urban accommodation project running in Greece, should be extended to avoid placement inside camps but also be part of a holistic social integration plan that combines education, training, and social awareness strategies. Vergou (2019) also links accommodation with education arguing that the accommodation of urban refugees in camps outside cities or in rural areas leads to school segregation. Regarding urban accommodation under IOs and NGO-supplied housing, Vergou argues that the dispersal criteria could induce territorial social-spatial segregation.

Integration and the urban context that can facilitate it are processes that start the first day of arrival of migrants in the host country and happen on the level of the host neighborhood (Seethaler-Wari 2018). According to Auslender (2021), civil society actors are the most important foundation for integration through housing. Auslender (2021) examined the adaptation of multi-level governance in local refugee housing and integration management in a case study of the Leverkusen model and emphasized that civil society engagement facilitates refugees' integration.

The implementation of effective refugee integration practices is of particular interest to Greece since following the results of the research conducted by Łuczak and Kalinowski (2020), it is among the EU member states with a high level of material deprivation making social exclusion an immediate issue to be addressed. Furthermore, Kalinowski (2021) provided evidence that the at-risk-of-poverty rate of EU member states which joined the Union before 2004 is higher and residents in rural areas have a higher poverty risk than residents of cities. In this context, the challenge for the Greek regions becomes obvious. As Pomianek (2018) points out, rural development is threatened by demographic changes, so local authorities should be aware of these changes and take action to address them under the principles of sustainable development, as in the case of some communes in Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodship. Tourist rural destinations, such as Śląskie, Małopolskie, and Podkarpackie Voivodships have a higher level of development with positive impacts on local employment and positive rates of migration (Pomianek 2014). Since Greek regions are famous for their tourist attractions, they could invest in sustainable development plans to address depopulation by attracting migrant workers already residing in the country under the status of international protection.

3. Allocation Policies in Greece

Greece has not shared a long term history in hosting people in need of international protection, as it used to be a country of origin and during the 1990s it turned into a country of destination for international migrants. Thus, the national and local authorities were unprepared to respond quickly and effectively to the asymmetrical pressure of the massive scale of arrivals and the processing of a large number of asylum applications. Apart from migrants receiving the status of international protection following a positive decision on

their asylum application, Greece also hosts more than 55,000 asylum seekers ([Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021a](#)) residing in the structures offered under the official accommodation scheme including the Reception and Identification Centers (hotspots), the open temporary accommodation facilities (Domes), and the ESTIA (Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation) urban accommodation scheme. In September 2020, the first closed controlled access center in Samos was inaugurated within which a Reception and Identification Center, a temporary reception structure, discreet places for vulnerable people, and pre-departure detention centers for foreigners can operate ([Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021b](#)).

3.1. First Reception and Long-Term Accommodation Sites for Asylum Seekers

In the beginning of the migration crisis, the hotspot approach was followed to facilitate the coordination of the European Agencies and the Member States in the identification and registration process of the migrant population that entered the EU borders through the countries in the frontline ([Guild et al. 2017](#)). In the Reception and Identification Centers (RICs), or hotspots, the Hellenic Police, Frontex, the Greek Asylum Service, the EASO, and the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention have been present ([Danish Refugee Council 2019](#)). There are six RICs in the Greek territory, namely, Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Leros, Kos, and one in Evros ([Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021b](#)).

Before the EU–Turkey agreement, migrants were free to move from the islands after registration. After the EU–Turkey Statement, there was a geographical restriction of the asylum applicants in the islands until the end of their asylum process. It has been estimated that in February 2020 the facilities in the islands hosted 42,000 people despite their limited capacity of 5400 ([Smith 2020](#)). After the relocation of thousands of asylum applicants in mainland facilities, the population in the RICs was reduced to 12,750 refugees and asylum seekers. A total of 9940 (78%) reside in the RICS, 1027 (8%) participate in the ESTIA project, and 1775 are either self-accommodated or reside in other facilities. A total of 50% of the population in the islands is of Afghan origin, 14% are Syrians, and 8% come from Somalia ([UNHCR 2021b](#)).

The provisions of the ([Law 4375/2016 n.d.](#)) referred to the establishment of the Open Temporary Reception Facilities for the asylum applicants and the Open Temporary Accommodation Structures for those who are under a readmission, removal, or return procedure. The Ministry of Defense instated old military camps for facilitating the accommodation of this massive migration flow. The accommodation units inside the camps consisted of prefabricated units or existing buildings ([Greek Council for Refugees 2019b](#)). Despite the initial intentions regarding the temporary duration of the camps, they have been transformed into long term accommodation facilities. The Migration and Asylum Ministry took administrative control of the 28 long term accommodation sites (LTAS) with a joint ministerial decision, which was published on 24 March 2020 ([Joint Ministerial Decision 2945 n.d.](#)).

There are 32 mainland LTAS according to the SMS IOM Factsheet of April 2021. Table 1 gives an overview of the LTAS capacity, geography, and demographics.

The LTAS in Ritsona in the region of Central Greece is the most populated site (2496 people) and the one in Eleonas, in the capital city center, comes second in population with 2397 people. However, the Ritsona site does not have access to public transportation. The sites in Malakasa and Skaramangas in Attica region exceed 2000 and 1800 residents each, respectively. Malakasa and Eleonas sites have an over occupancy rate of residence. The Minister of Migration and Asylum announced in April 2021 the closure of the Skaramangas site in 2021 ([Newsit 2021](#)). The mayor of Athens also expressed his intention to cease the function of the Eleonas site by the end of 2021 ([Georgiopolou 2021](#)). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has supported the Greek authorities by enhancing the accommodation capacity of the reception and accommodation sites, maintaining them and offering coordination and management services to strengthen the capacities of the authorities ([Multi-Sectoral Assistance to Migrants and Refugees Stranded in Greece n.d.](#)).

Moreover, through the FILOXENIA project which ended at the beginning of 2021, IOM offered temporary shelter and protection for the most vulnerable migrants in Greece. FILOXENIA targeted vulnerable migrants living in inappropriate conditions in the RICs providing them with 6000 places in hotels in the mainland ([FILOXENIA—Temporary Shelter and Protection for the Most Vulnerable Migrants in Greece n.d.](#)). IOM also operates six shelters for unaccompanied minors in Attica, Thessaloniki, and Patra ([Operation of Six Shelters for Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Greece n.d.](#)) with a capacity of 150 places. The organization created Safe Zones to protect migrant children and supported the creation of 470 places in shelters for UMCs in cooperation with the Council of Europe Development Bank ([IOM 2021](#)).

Table 1. LTAS capacity, geography, and demographics.

Capacity	Facilities/Geography	Beneficiaries/Geography	Demographics
3229 containers	10 sites in Central Macedonia	6064 beneficiaries reside in Central Macedonia	46.82% Afghans
1826 apartments or rooms	7 sites in Attica	8517 beneficiaries reside in Attica	24.34% Syrians
98 other shelter units	4 Central Greece/4 Epirus	4019 beneficiaries reside in Central Greece/2159 beneficiaries reside in Epirus	34% male
20,170 registered beneficiaries	2 Western Greece/2 Eastern Macedonia and Thrace/2 Thessaly	154 beneficiaries reside in Western Greece/1218 beneficiaries reside in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace/1546 beneficiaries reside in Thessaly	24% female
4184 unregistered residents	1 Peloponnese	756 beneficiaries reside in Peloponnese	42% children
79 visitors			

Source: [Supporting the Greek Authorities in Managing the National Reception System for Asylum Seekers and Vulnerable Migrants Factsheets \(SMS\) \(2021\)](#).

3.2. The ESTIA Project for Vulnerable Asylum Seekers

The ESTIA project has benefited more than 76,000 people since its launch in January 2015 ([Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021c](#)). Through the project, urban accommodation and cash assistance have been provided to asylum seekers and refugees based on vulnerability. Since January 2021, the ESTIA project has passed from the UNHCR under the sole management of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum ([Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021c](#)). After asylum seekers receive the recognition decision, they are supposed to exit the project. However, their grace period used to be extended. Table 2 provides an overview of the accommodation capacity and geography and the demographic data of the ESTIA beneficiaries. Table 3 portrays the main figures regarding the cash assistance beneficiaries in April 2021.

Table 2. ESTIA scheme capacity, geography, and demographics.

Capacity (24,376 Total Places)	Facilities/ Geography	Beneficiaries/Geography	Demographics
3732 apartments	59% of the facilities located in Athens	14,431 beneficiaries reside in Attica units	36% of the beneficiaries come from Afghanistan
225 rooms	66% of the facilities located in cities in mainland Greece	4221 beneficiaries reside in Central Macedonia	28% of the beneficiaries have Syrian origin
20 buildings	5% of the facilities located in the islands	1060 beneficiaries reside in Epirus	14% of the beneficiaries are Iraqis
		1200 beneficiaries reside in Thessaly	

Source: (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021c).

Table 3. ESTIA cash assistance beneficiaries in April 2021.

Beneficiaries (201,435 Total)	Beneficiaries/Geography	Demographics
37,518 families	The beneficiaries are located in 110 places	33% of the beneficiaries are Afghans
63,568 eligible refugees and asylum seekers	53% of the beneficiaries reside in Athens	13% of the beneficiaries have Syrian origin
EUD 7.2 million disbursed via cash cards	16% of them reside in Central Macedonia	10% of the beneficiaries are Pakistanis
	15% of the beneficiaries are in the islands	7% of the beneficiaries are from Iraq
		21% of the beneficiaries are women
		48% of the beneficiaries are men
		31% of the beneficiaries are children

Source: UNHCR (2021c).

3.3. Accommodation for Refugees

The most important accommodation (and integration) project in Greece is the HELIOS (Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection) project implemented so far by IOM and its partners. It began in June 2019 and will soon pass under the supervision of the Greek state. It targets the beneficiaries of international protection recognized after 1 January 2018 and enhances their prospects to self-reliance and independent living supporting their exit from the camps, RICs, ESTIA, or IOM FILOXENIA. The beneficiaries of the project receive support to find and rent an apartment and receive a contribution to start-up living and a monthly disbursement for their rental costs. They also participate in information sessions about the leasing procedures and get in contact with apartment owners. They receive interpretation services during the process and assistance in the transportation of their belongings. A total of 31,100 persons have been registered in the program since July 2019. A number of 8302 refugees currently receive rental subsidies, 4979 have been enrolled in integration courses and 4945 in job counseling sessions. A total of 35.16% of the beneficiaries used to stay in camps before enrolling in the project and 30.82% used to be enrolled in the ESTIA project. The majority of the beneficiaries come from the Arab Republic of Syria, followed by Afghans and Iraqis (Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection Factsheet (HELIOS) 2021).

3.4. Local and Bottom-Up Initiatives for the Accommodation of People in Need of International Protection

Local authorities and civil society organizations have been engaged since the beginning of the migrant inflows in housing in various schemes. The Nostos project for example, implemented by four organizations for four years, accommodated 1128 unaccompanied minors and 88 single mothers with their children (Nostos 2020). Some of the NGOs active in Greece are currently joining their forces under the ESTIA urban accommodation scheme and collaborate to provide the beneficiaries with accommodation, education, health, and protection services (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021c). There are several municipalities engaged in the ESTIA project as well (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021c). The municipalities joined forces with NGOs and IOs, as it was obvious at some point that new partners, state partners, should participate in accommodation policies. Thus, several municipalities have joined the consortium through their development agencies to offer accommodation services to migrants and refugees. The city of Athens in particular runs the “Accommodation and Services Scheme for Asylum Seekers” benefitting 4050 people, 1850 of whom were relocated to other European member states while 1650 current beneficiaries reside in 320 leased apartments (City of Athens—ADDMA/Accommodation and Services Scheme for Asylum Seekers n.d.). The city of Thessaloniki leads a consortium with neighboring municipalities, the region of Central Macedonia and NGOs to support the accommodation needs of refugees and help in their integration through the multi-stakeholder program REACT (Refugee, Assistance, Collaboration, Thessaloniki). REACT, with the assistance of the UNHCR, has established a Standard Operating Procedure to be followed from the stage of referrals to emergency support (Ozgunes 2019). The project has already benefited 2188 people (React Statistics 2019). The National Integration Strategy documents the importance of the expansion of the ESTIA project with the engagement of many more municipalities (Hellenic Ministry of Migration Policy 2018).

Despite the aforementioned efforts, there are remaining challenges in the accommodation scheme for people in need of international protection in Greece, which complicate the allocation policy and, as a consequence, the effectiveness of integration policies and the overall management and governance of migration. The overall shortage of places is one of the challenges which is obvious not only in the first reception centers as mentioned above, but also in the LTAS, some of which according to the factsheets of IOM have an occupancy rate exceeding 100%. Fieldwork also illuminated the value of ensuring a smooth transition from the ESTIA project to self-reliance. As the representative of a municipality engaged in the ESTIA project commented, transition of refugees to self-reliance has been challenging, as in many occasions people have to leave their accommodation without having been able to secure a regular income. The HELIOS project is trying to address the latter by providing a safety net, a transition period for assisting refugees in finding accommodation and accessing the job market. However, the contribution of local authorities in the facilitation of transition is valuable as described in field research.

“The transition from ESTIA to HELIOS in beneficiaries residing in Crete is quick thanks to the engagement of local actors so refugees do not stay long without income and support”. (Municipality of Chania, 24 July 2020).

4. Policies and Practices for the Socioeconomic Integration of People in Need of International Protection

4.1. National Level

The Greek (Law 4375/2016 n.d.) provided the asylum applicants, the beneficiaries of international protection, and their families with access to the Greek labor market through either paid employment or self-employment. Moreover, the residence permit holders could also participate in vocational training education programs. However, asylum applicants have faced impediments in opening a bank account needed for their remuneration. It has also been difficult for them to access vocational training programs due to the lack of appropriate documentation (Greek Council for Refugees 2019a). Even though the

legislative framework was favorable, it was not implemented accordingly and the migrant population would still end up searching for an undeclared job position reinforcing the underground economy (Council of Europe 2018).

“There are no wage subsidies or other motives for employers to hire refugees. Asylum seekers and refugees do not have easy access to the necessary documentation to prove their skills and qualifications. They are not eligible for public procurements either” (Directorate of Social Protection, Education and Culture, Municipality of Karditsa, 16 July 2021).

The new Law 4636 of 2019 (Law 4636/2019 n.d.) changed the status of the asylum applicants with regard to their access in the Greek labor market. They can only work six months after they have filed the application if it remains under process. They continue to keep access to vocational training though. The Public Employment Service (PES) in Greece, namely, the Manpower Employment Organization (OAED), is responsible for counseling, vocational training, job matching, and distribution of benefits such as the unemployment benefit

(OECD 2018b). There is no targeted support to refugees though either due to the scarce resources or due to the tight labor market (European Commission 2017).

“Migrant integration strategy is not adequately related to the state’s budget” (Danish Refugee Council NGO, 2 January 2020).

The National Strategy for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) of the Greek state which was adopted by the former government in 2018 has a specific provision for the employment of refugees in the agricultural and manufacturing economic sectors as well as for vocational training courses and certification of qualifications on specific professions (Hellenic Ministry of Migration Policy 2018). It also makes reference to the importance of matching the migrants’ skills with the labor market needs. However, the mapping of qualifications of the newcomers, especially those applying for international protection is a difficult task. It is documented as a long-term goal to be met even at the Reception and Identification Centers (Hellenic Ministry of Migration Policy 2018) with the (EU Skills Profile Tool for Third-Country Nationals n.d.). Apart from the EU Skills Profile Tool, the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (2020), based on the Council of Europe Lisbon Recognition Convention, has been developed to provide reliable information for integration and particularly employment. The document refers to the higher education qualifications of the holder and their work experience and language proficiency as they have been produced from the available documentation and structured interviews.

Regarding the integration of the newcomers in the Greek educational system, the access of immigrants, beneficiaries of international protection, and refugees has been documented as a strategic priority (Hellenic Ministry of Migration Policy 2018). The initiatives the Greek government undertook after the outburst of the migration crisis to improve the integration of the asylum seekers and refugees in the educational system of the country during the school year 2016–2017 include:

- The Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (RFRE), which are a pre-accession training scheme taking place in the afternoon for newly arrived residents of the temporary accommodation facilities (Law 4415/2016 n.d.). A total of 3240 students in 7 Educational Regions residing in 33 accommodation facilities were enrolled in the classes.
- The Refugee Education Coordinators (RECs) as permanent teachers, who have been placed inside the camps throughout Greece to serve as a link between refugee populations and school structures.

It should be mentioned though that standard vaccination of the children is necessary to attend school in the country, so delays in the completion of this prerequisite made it difficult for the majority of refugee children to enroll during the school year 2016–2017 (Kolasa-Sikiaridi 2016).

During the following school year, 2017–2018, there was a massive transfer of families from the camps towards apartments in the cities. As a result, the expansion of the number of the school units that had “Reception Classes” (RCs), which offered language and learning support to students with little or no knowledge of the Greek language, was considered as a necessary step towards facilitating their integration process. For the needs of young asylum seekers and refugees over the age of 15, the “Zones of Educational Priority Reception Classes” in secondary education were reactivated and actions such as the “Rural Education” pilot program for adolescents 15–18 years old, mentioned above, were launched. There were 8000 students in total attending morning or evening classes.

Table 4 illustrates the integration of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in primary and secondary education for the school years 2018–2019, 2019–2020, and 2020–2021. The school year 2019–2020 began with a different leadership in the country and the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. The new Law passed by the Greek parliament in November 2019 ([Law 4636/2019 n.d.](#)) made the enrollment at school obligatory for all children from 5 to 15 years of age and optional for adults. Following that, the integration efforts for the immigrant and refugee population continued with RCs in several school units.

Table 4. Integration in primary and secondary education.

	2018–2019	2019–2020	2020–2021
RFREs	113 (30 in kindergartens)		
Children in RFREs	4577		
RCs in primary	1169	1471	2630
RCs gymnasiums and high Schools	282	304	324
Total number of beneficiaries	12,867		
Asylum seekers/ beneficiaries of international protection	8290		

Sources: ([Ministerial Decision 108909/D1 n.d.](#); [Ministerial Decision 63691/D1 n.d.](#); [ESOS 2019](#); [Ministerial Decision 131701/D2 n.d.](#); [Ministerial Decision 106356/D1 n.d.](#); [Ministerial Decision 162602/D1 n.d.](#); [Ministerial Decision 152661/D2 n.d.](#)).

Apart from the access to labor market and education, the National Strategy for the Integration of TCNs recognizes the need for the enhancement of health care and psychosocial support services for the asylum seekers and the recognized beneficiaries of international protection. Additionally, the strategy includes targeted measures for vulnerable groups of migrants and policies against racism and discrimination phenomena ([Hellenic Ministry of Migration Policy 2018](#)). The ([Law 4368/2016 n.d.](#)) provided asylum applicants and beneficiaries of international protection with a social security number, which gave them free access to healthcare services. The new ([Law 4636/2019 n.d.](#)) abolished the right of the asylum applicants to get a permanent social security number but provided them with free access to healthcare services with a temporary social security number that lasts until the final decision on the applicants’ status is made (Temporary Number of Insurance and Healthcare for asylum seekers).

Access to the labor market, education, and social inclusion for recognized beneficiaries of international protection is facilitated at the national level through the implementation of the HELIOS project already mentioned above ([Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection Factsheet \(HELIOS\) 2021](#)). The project offers mandatory integration courses which last for 6 months (360 teaching hours), consisting of Greek language learning, cultural orientation, job readiness, and life skills. Eligible members of a family to attend the courses are those over 16 years old. It also contributes to the employability of its beneficiaries with integration courses that offer job readiness skills modules, guide the participants through the job search and job application process, and

help them develop soft skills necessary for teamwork, oral communication, and problem solving. The participants in the integration courses could benefit from job counseling sessions. Five individual sessions of one hour each are offered to the beneficiaries to assess their abilities and help them develop a career plan. In fact, job counseling is a prerequisite for the beneficiaries to participate in other employability services. They could also claim the expenses for an official certification exam. Since the project results in a rotation integration mechanism, it could provide useful skills and develop job readiness for a significant part of the refugee population. Last but not least, the sensitization of the host community has been one of the HELIOS objectives and to this end workshops and events have been organized.

4.2. Local Level

At the local level, Greek municipalities have been active in social inclusion activities. They have been engaged in bringing the migrant population closer to the labor market. The municipality of Heraklion in Crete offers job counseling services to the beneficiaries of the ESTIA program. Moreover, the participants receive help in conducting interviews and writing their CV and get in contact with potential employers in an overall job matching effort. As a result, 94 people have participated in job counseling sessions, 35 of them have received job offers, and 18 of them have been employed. The municipality of Nea Filadelfia—Nea Chalkidona also took advantage of the ESTIA program to help the beneficiaries with job counseling sessions ([Cities Network for Integration 2019](#)). The municipality of Athens participates in the “Curing the limbo” project in the framework of which, job readiness training consisting of employment expectations, workplace culture, interview practice, reliability establishment, refugee skills assessment, and potential employers mapping have been developed ([Curing the Limbo. Job Readiness n.d.](#)). Caritas Hellas offers vocational training courses and runs a Centre for Social Integration and Employability as part of the Municipal Market of Kipseli in Athens for social economy initiatives. Through job counseling and information sessions to vocational training, it has benefited 2803 people, 560 of whom have been offered a job ([Caritas Hellas Social Integration Center 2020](#)). The Athens Multifunctional Center for Refugees along with the Hellenic Red Cross offers a Fast Track Employability Preparedness Program to enhance the employment prospects of migrants and refugees ([HRC Multifunctional Centre for Refugees n.d.](#)). There are also pilot programs for skills’ mapping which have been evolved by local authorities in the framework of EU, national, or private funded projects.

“We developed a pilot project to map the skills of bilingual people, define their career orientation, prepare their CVs and help them search for available job positions. The employers at the local level expressed their interest in hiring refugees but the refugee population at the local level hasn’t always been ready to respond due to psychological issues, lack of knowledge of the Greek language or their unwillingness to stay permanently in the region”. (Educational Development Agency Ploigos, 21 July 2021).

Local initiatives have been established to support integration in education as well for people in need of international protection. The municipality of Athens formed the “Migrants Integration Center” which offered integration courses in Greek and English language learning and IT skills and had 242 beneficiaries until October 2019. The municipality of Thessaloniki runs the Dia-drasis project which includes morning and afternoon classes for the development of social skills of children between 2–6 years old. It also offers supporting learning classes for older children to facilitate their integration in the formal secondary education. A total of 23 children have attended the bilingual courses and 60 the supportive learning classes. The municipality of Karditsa took a step further and established an Arabic school, the second one in Greece, to support the learning of the children’s mother tongue in order to enhance their prospects to learn a second language as well. A total of 62 children have benefitted from this initiative. The municipality of Larissa offers eight classes of Greek language for adults and two classes of English language for teenagers. The municipality of Nea Filadelfia—Nea Chalkidona has provided the local

refugee population with Greek language courses having benefitted 60 participants. During the summer of 2019, the municipality of Tripoli offered supporting learning courses for children between 6 and 18 years old, benefitting 40 children.

Apart from the aforementioned activities, cities in Greece have contributed to the support of social integration of the newcomers. The Migrants Integration Center of the Municipality of Athens serves as a hub for social welfare and health clinics (OECD 2018b). In this framework, the Melissa Network for Migrant Women in Greece has been activated to promote empowerment, communication and active citizenship supporting refugee women and children (Melissa Network n.d.). The municipality of Heraklion focused on the social integration of the beneficiaries of the ESTIA project through a street art festival. The municipality of Karditsa chose an alternative use of art to bring the migrants closer with the host communities. They organized an Arab-speaking and a French-speaking dance group and a multicultural cuisine event. The city of Larissa facilitated the access of the migrant population to healthcare and social welfare services. In addition, it prepared recreational activities to promote active citizenship and cultural awareness. The cities of Nea Filadelfia—Nea Chalkidona and Tripoli benefitted 780 and 173 migrants accordingly with such actions (Cities Network for Integration 2019).

The commitment local authorities showed to the integration of people in international protection resulted in their engagement in the “Cities Network for Integration” scheme. This local scheme started as a cooperation of the municipality of Athens and Thessaloniki and currently includes 17 municipalities (Supporting the ‘Cities Network for Integration’ n.d.) which exchange good practices. Furthermore, the cities of Athens and Thessaloniki participate in the “Integrating Cities” process, a partnership between Eurocities and the European Commission to promote the local level implementation of the Common basic Principles on Integration (Cities Grow 2017–2019 n.d.).

Besides the Greek state authorities who were trying to address the needs of the newcomers, NGOs have been engaged in offering services to promote the labor market and the social integration of migrants and refugees. The NGO Solidarity Now has established and operated employability services in Solidarity Centers in Athens and Thessaloniki. Through the offer of ICT and language courses and vocational training, it has facilitated the beneficiaries to access the labor market. The Greek Council for Refugees with the support of the World Jewish Relief runs the Cosmos Employment Hub-Step Greece involving services such as skills assessment, job counseling, job matching, career monitoring, language learning, and vocational training (Cosmos Employment Hub Step Greece n.d.). Civil society organizations have also offered information, counseling, legal aid, protection, and cultural orientation courses as well as non-formal education. Many of the courses include learning of Greek and English languages, guidance through the school enrollment process, psychological support, and supportive learning. The factsheet of the IOM for the Site Management Support mechanism mentions apart from IOM, UNICEF and local actors, some NGOs, namely, Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund, Danish Refugee Council, Drop in the Ocean, Elix, Solidarity Now, and Lighthouse Relief as non-formal education actors in 31 out of 32 LTAS as well (Supporting the Greek Authorities in Managing the National Reception System for Asylum Seekers and Vulnerable Migrants Factsheets (SMS) 2021).

5. Impacts of Allocation Policies on the Socioeconomic Integration of People in Need of International Protection

Combining the findings of desk research with fieldwork results, the authors conclude that allocation and accommodation policies have had differentiated impacts on the social and economic situation of people in need of international protection despite the horizontal national integration policies mentioned above.

To begin with, psychosocial support and legal assistance are offered in all the accommodation facilities (LTAS), while non-formal education services are available in 28 of them. A total of 73.34% of the population holds a social security number, which is a necessary condition for employability and social insurance. A total of 85.4% of the students between 4 and 17 years old are enrolled in public schools. The data with regard to the access of the

LTAS' residents to the labor market present a respectively low integration rate. Only 30.05% of the beneficiaries have been issued a tax identification number, which is mandatory for paying taxes and filing annual tax returns, and just 10.03% of the population has an unemployment card. Moreover, the percentage rates of the sites' population with access to the labor market through the issuance of a tax identification number differ considerably. In the Eleonas site, only 3.60% of the population has access to the labor market despite its location in the capital city center. The rate in Skaramangas is 23.24%, in Malakasa it is a little higher at 24.87%, and in Koutsochero 26.94%. It is even higher in Nea Kavala at 35.32%, in Ritsona at 43.07%, while it is located 20 km away from a tax office and does not have public transportation, and in Serres the percentage reaches 49.63% ([Supporting the Greek Authorities in Managing the National Reception System for Asylum Seekers and Vulnerable Migrants Factsheets \(SMS\) 2021](#)).

On the other hand, according to data provided by UNHCR, until the 7 December 2020, 39% of the asylum seekers residing in ESTIA's facilities had a social security number and 35% had a Temporary Number of Insurance and Healthcare. The school enrollment for children aged 4–17 years old reached 73%. A total of 55% of the people enrolled in the project were issued a tax number. The percentage rate of those having an unemployment card reached 21% ([UNHCR 2020](#)). However, it should be mentioned that the beneficiaries of the ESTIA project receive help to access medical services, to enroll in school, and to pursue employment opportunities ([Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2021d](#)).

“We provide the beneficiaries of ESTIA with psychosocial support, counseling, help with the children's' school enrollment, with the issuance of Tax Number and Social Security Number. We also try to help them find a job. Due to our constant contact, it is easier for them to find information and participate in educational and entertainment activities we organize for the public” (Omnes NGO, 30 September 2021).

Table 5 illustrates an overview of the impacts of the allocation policies on the socioeconomic integration of people in need of international protection as well as the challenges arisen. Taking them into consideration, it can be concluded that there are clear differences between the beneficiaries of urban autonomous accommodation provided by the ESTIA project and the residents of the LTAS located in rural areas or in areas with proximity to city centers. Moreover, there are certain differences between the residents of different LTAS illuminating the importance of space, living conditions, and help provided by state and civil society actors in the field for effective outcomes of integration. An interesting example is the low percentage of Eleonas residents holding a tax identification number despite the fact that it is located in the capital city center where there are probably more job opportunities than in rural areas. A general observation would be that in the ESTIA project framework, apart from the urban residence, the beneficiaries receive more support from local authorities in addressing all their administrative and everyday-life issues, which in turn may facilitate their integration process. Field research has confirmed this conclusion.

Table 5. Overview of the impacts of allocation policies on the socioeconomic integration of people in need of international protection.

Beneficiaries	Labor Market			Education		Social Services			Social Welfare	Travel Documents	
	Tax identification number	Unemployment card	Average distance to tax office	Enrollment in public schools	Non-formal education services	Social security number	Psychosocial support	Legal assistance	Access to health facilities		
LTAS	30.05% (considerable differences between sites)	10.03%	13.49 km	85.4% (12 sites have limited access to public schools due to location)	28 sites	73.34%	X	X	9.19 km Average distance to nearest health facility	No	No
ESTIA	55%	21%	Proximity due to the location in city centers	73%	Usually offered in cities by civil society organizations	39% social security number + 35% Temporary Number of Insurance and Healthcare	X	X	Proximity due to the location in city centers	No	No
Refugees	X	X		X (plus access to universities)	X (HELIOS integration services)	X	X (HELIOS integration services)	X (HELIOS integration services)	X	X	X
Challenges	Unemployment, recognition of qualifications, housing shortage, cash benefits, inadequate living conditions, vocational training, willingness to remain in Greece			Recognition of qualifications, knowledge of Greek language, inadequate living conditions, access to public schools and to distance learning		Bureaucracy, knowledge of Greek language			Bureaucracy	Secondary movements within EU countries	

Sources: [Supporting the Greek Authorities in Managing the National Reception System for Asylum Seekers and Vulnerable Migrants Factsheets \(SMS\) \(2021\)](#); [UNHCR \(2020\)](#); and authors' conclusions from desk and field research.

“Social workers take care of everything in the ESTIA framework and do their best to make ESTIA integration program” (Directorate of Social Protection, Education and Culture, Municipality of Karditsa, 16 July 2021).

Apart from the metropolitan areas such as Athens and Thessaloniki which have actively been engaged in accommodation and integration schemes, 15 municipalities hosting asylum seekers and refugees joined the consortium to be able to exchange good practices, identify challenges, and develop new initiatives. However, there is need for larger cooperation schemes particularly at the local level. As the authors conclude from the research findings, integration initiatives at the local level take place mostly in cities, they are usually organized by municipalities engaged in the ESTIA scheme and attract the interest of ESTIA beneficiaries. This is probably attributed to the close contact of the beneficiaries of the ESTIA project with civil society actors and local authorities, their proximity to the places where the events take place, and their better living conditions that allow for better and more social interactions.

There are several remaining challenges to be addressed by the authorities with regard to the labor market integration of people in need of international protection. The housing shortage usually prevents an optimal dispersal policy implementation based on the proximity to available job vacancies.

“ESTIA benefits the vulnerable migrant population so it is necessary that it offers urban accommodation structures with proximity to healthcare services and public transportation. As a result, ESTIA beneficiaries cannot access available job positions in rural areas” (Development Agency, Municipality of Heraklion, 21 July 2021).

The allowances and cash benefits associated with the access to social welfare sometimes weaken the immigrants’ incentive to participate in the workforce. Moreover, there is low labor market demand and high levels of unemployment in countries such as Greece due to the recent debt crisis and the austerity that followed it.

“Unemployment in Greece pushes refugees towards other European Member States” (Omnes NGO, 30 September 2021).

Furthermore, the language barrier is widely considered as a crucial one in regards to the social inclusion of the immigrants and their effective labor market integration.

“The knowledge of the language of the host country is a prerequisite for integration” (SOS Villages NGO, 20 July 2021).

In addition, the difficulties in the recognition of their qualifications could lead highly skilled immigrants to work in low-skill jobs. The inadequate living conditions, especially at some reception centers, deter people from preparing for joining the labor market and make job readiness assistance necessary. In addition to these, there is an ongoing discussion on linking allocation policies with the needs of the agricultural sector. Indeed, there is a continuous need in Greece for land workers and towards this purpose a memorandum of cooperation was signed between the Ministry of Migration and Asylum and the Agricultural University of Athens for the fast-track training of refugees to work as land workers (Agrotypos 2021). In the framework of the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF), relevant pilot educational projects that trained refugees aged 15–18 to be engaged in agricultural activities had already been implemented in the Regions of Attica and Central Macedonia (Agricultural University of Athens 2018; Aristotle University of Thessaloniki 2018).

Regarding education, it is one of the strongest and most well established integration policies in the country. In particular, primary education has achieved the main target of inclusion of all children (refugees and asylum applicants). NGOs and IOs have a supportive role in this process with afternoon classes and further support of adolescents in exercising the Greek language and acquiring IT skills.

“ESTIA provisions play a crucial role for the success stories in migrant children education and there are clear differences with the LTAS residents” (Regional Directorate of Education, Heraklion, 22 July 2021).

It should be mentioned that during the pandemic, access to education met many restrictions for all children in the country and made clearer the differences between the residents of LTAS and those of ESTIA apartments.

“Equal access to distance learning tools hasn’t been adequately addressed posing further difficulties to migrant children” (Regional Directorate of Education, Heraklion, 22 July 2021).

Besides the above, the most important barrier of all in integration efforts (which was confirmed by almost all interviewees) is the unwillingness of the refugees to remain in the country. Although many NGOs and other grassroots organizations are focusing on addressing the language barrier to facilitate integration, most of the residents in LTAS and the beneficiaries of the ESTIA project plan (or wish) to leave Greece for another EU country due to the perceived inequalities of provisions within the EU asylum system; thus, they are not willing to learn Greek. This is a big problem for the respectively small labor market in Greece, as there are not many multilingual enterprises, etc., which could hire non-speaking Greek employees.

6. Conclusions

A proactive and inclusive integration policy that targets all groups of migrants could be a win-win situation for the migrant population and for the host countries as well. The European Council on [European Council on Refugees and Exile \(2017\)](#) supports the UNHCR’s position that the EU Member States should increase their spending on integration schemes and invest at least 30% of their annual AMIF budget to support integration practices. Moreover, a report of the council (2017) highlights the crucial role that the migrants’ access to education programs, labor market, and social support services plays in their integration outcomes.

As pointed out in this paper, integration outcomes due to the current allocation policies in Greece are two tier/two speed: on one hand, the beneficiaries of the ESTIA accommodation scheme, and on the other hand, the populations in the camps (LTAS). The integration process for the first group is easier as living conditions are far better. Of course, the ESTIA project was designed and introduced for the most vulnerable populations. Cooperation between Greek authorities, NGOs, and IOs has been very important for facilitating people in need of international protection in accessing all the services. However, access to them hasn’t been equal resulting in ESTIA beneficiaries having more opportunities than the residents of the LTAS.

Regarding the differences driven by the status of the people in need of international protection, asylum seekers, and refugees benefit from the same programs and support, they have access to primary health care and access to children’s education. Main differences are that in the case of recognized refugees, they can access all educational levels (including universities etc.), visit other countries as tourists, and have all medical and social welfare under the same terms as Greek citizens. The new Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 refers to integration as a precondition for a cohesive and prosperous society and formulates specific key policy priorities that also include the aforementioned action areas ([European Commission 2020](#)). Access to basic services, inclusive education, and labor market integration are among the action pillars of the Greek social integration model, which aims to respect diversity, ensure social equality, and promote social cohesion. However, formal national integration efforts focus on access to healthcare and education. Access to the labor market has not been adequately addressed so far. A more active role of the local communities (municipalities, grassroots organizations, etc.) in designing allocation policies, managing housing to avoid segregation and facilitate integration, promoting equal access to basic services, and reducing bureaucracy would make a significant difference to this respect,

as the local communities are in a better place to identify local needs and restrictions with regard to labor market, education, and social services, as well as communicate their plans and deliver their services to the local population. Finally yet importantly, the proximity and close contact between ESTIA beneficiaries and local stakeholders offers the ground for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the local integration efforts since it is easier for the stakeholders to gather feedback on the outcomes of the socioeconomic integration and adapt their plans.

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