A GREEK PERSPECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN REFUGEE CRISIS

This article attempts to reflect on the so-called European refugee crisis, with a focus on the impact of the closure of the Western Balkan route and the subsequent creation of a number of national refugee crises. One consequence has been the Greek crisis, which was "solved" at its initial stages by the creation of informal refugee camps. The article focuses on the Port of Piraeus camp in Athens and the rise of a transnational civil society to cater to the needs of the people who settled there. Last but not least, a number of insights are shared on the nature of the interrupted journeys of these people.

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From the second half of 2015 until the first months of 2016, refugee flows to Europe dramatically increased as a massive phenomenon of mobility broke out. During this period, which would become known as the European refugee crisis, or alternatively, the migration crisis of Europe,[1] Greece would see its geopolitical and humanitarian role grow in global affairs.[2] More to the point, as long as the so-called European refugee crisis lasted, more than one million people would leave their places of origin to reach countries in Central, North, and North-Western Europe. However, it should not be forgotten, within the context of the European refugee crisis, that these short-lived mobilities towards Europe did not really account for the majority of forcefully evicted or displaced people from the broader region of the Middle East. As it is well known, the majority of these people have found shelter and either temporally or permanently built their lives in neighboring states, most notably, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Nevertheless, European political discourse and media narratives of Europe's so-called refugee crisis do not emphasize this aspect enough. As it appears, the European refugee crisis is notably Eurocentric.

Irrespective of how one chooses to view it, the so-called "European refugee crisis" manifested in the mere collapse of the Common European Asylum System and the de facto non-implementation of the Dublin III Regulation/Convention in the most emphatic way. According to the Dublin System, the member state responsible for the examination of an asylum claim is the first country of entry. Therefore, accountability for the humanitarian "handling" of would-be refugees, as well as the "management" of undocumented migrants lies foremost with Southern European member states. Of course, this story has become increasingly complex through the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which for the case of Greece at least, the Dublin Regulation has not been active for years. Eurocentricism can come in many different forms and geographically within Europe as well. The very logic of the Dublin System reveals a form of a European Northcentricism – this time it is being played out on the "back" of the Southern periphery.

Many explanations have been cited so far, trying to solve the "puzzle" of why so many would-be refugees decided at a specific time to proceed with these acts of mobility. Although I am not so much of a Weberian-influenced sociologist myself, I tend to appreciate Max Weber's contribution to social sciences mostly for his "complicated" and "perplexed" understanding of social reality.

[1] Polly Pallister-Wilkings, "Interrogating the Mediterranean 'Migration Crisis,'" *Mediterranean Politics,* Vol. 21, No. 2 (February 2016), pp. 311-315.

[2] Nell Gabiam, "Humanitarianism, Development and Security in the 21st Century: Lessons from the Syrian Refugee Crisis," *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* Vol. 48, No. 2 (May 2016), pp. 382-396.

According to his line of thinking, social phenomena are outcomes of a number of simultaneously existing influencing factors. Accordingly, these acts of mobility towards Europe were probably the outcomes of the following: the intensification of the war in Syria; the continuous strife in Iraq and Afghanistan; the increasing role of mobile technology, social media, and geographic information systems (GIS); the negative experience of Palestinian refugees in camps and the urge not to be replicated; the politics and policies of both Greek and Turkish governments that (informally) facilitated these movements; the initial response from Berlin; the exuberant development of an transnational economy facilitating these journeys (more commonly known as "smuggling networks"); the eruption of an unprecedented solidarity movement that identified with the plight of these people; good weather; "friendly" global media, etc. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that the "European refugee crisis" violently erupted, and became part and parcel of a much broader crisis of forceful (and not so forceful) displacement, which affected millions of people. However, most of these people are still on the non-European side of the Mediterranean and thus do not evidently constitute part of the "European refugee crisis."

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The Life and Death of the Western Balkan Route

As long as the "European refugee crisis" lasted, populations from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and to a lesser extent from Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Algeria would pass from the Turkish coastline to the nearby Greek islands. More specifically, the islands of Lesvos, Samos, Chios, etc. became stepping stones onto EU soil. From there, they would get on ferries and reach Piraeus. After spending a few hours (or days) in central Athens, they would get into any available means of transportation and head towards neighboring Balkan countries. First by crossing the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Hungary, then also Albania, Serbia, and Croatia, these populations would try to continue their journeys to Central and Northern European countries, most notably Germany, Austria, Sweden, Denmark, France etc. – with supposedly more robust labor markets, generous welfare states, and high levels of prosperity.

Sometimes, these refugee populations would be characterized by different levels of "mixed motivations" that in a way puts into question migration policy's strict division between forced and voluntary migration.[3] For some, the hypothetical clear-cut

[3] Anna Triandafyllidou, "EU migration talks: What EU governments can do to help solve the crisis," *European Policy and Politics,* London School of Economics, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/09/14/eu-migration-talks-what-eu-governments-can-do-to-help-solve-the-crisis/

distinction between economic migration and asylum seeking does not always hold easily, as people on the move could be both refugees and economic migrants simultaneously. Many of them were seeking to join family members who had already settled into Europe's geographical core. In very simple terms, this was the life of the Western Balkan route as long as it lasted.

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The death of the Balkan corridor came as early as March 2016 with the closure of the Greek-FYROM borders due to the bilateral actions of central European governments, notably Austria and FYROM. As a result, people on the move became people in waiting overnight. They waited to see if their European migration dreams would come true, or if they would simply remain "trapped" in their first EU country of entry. It seemed as if the European Asylum System was taking its revenge back through bilateral agreements. Furthermore, after the signing of the EU-Turkey agreement, dreams of mobility were put on hold and the reality of building a life in crisis-ridden Greece sunk in within these formerly trans-passing, now spatially entrapped populations.

Under the weight of such developments and increasing EU pressure, the Greek government built accommodation facilities to house and cater to the needs of these refugee populations. In a sense, with the closure of the Western Balkan route, the "European refugee crisis" came to an end only to be substituted by a number of national refugee crises – one of them being the Greek refugee crisis. As refugee flows substantially decreased, these new national crises became related not with flows anymore but with stocks of would-be refugees, their access (or not) to asylum, and most importantly their integration into society. As a matter of fact, integration became the new buzzword in a number of European countries, as the formerly known European refugee crisis slowly modified into a crisis of refugee integration.

The Rise of a Transnational Civil Society

The first signs of the port of Piraeus becoming an informal refugee camp came as early as September 2015, through the actions of a Greek local solidarity movement called Pan-Peiraiki. As would-be refugees and asylum seekers disembarked from Aegean ships to continue their journeys, local volunteers would distribute refreshments

and snacks to them. Through both the passing of time and political developments, the port of Piraeus quickly transformed from a temporary "pause" along the Western Balkan route into an informal refugee camp, which housed thousands of people. In its heyday, the port of Piraeus sheltered and catered to the needs of approximately 5,000-6,000 individuals. Following such developments, the Port Authorities of Piraeus allocated a number of terminal stations along with a formerly unused warehouse to provide shelter. Accordingly, the E1 terminal housed mainly Syrians, while the E2 and its adjacent warehouse mostly provided shelter to Afghanis and Yazidis. It should be noted that the aforementioned ethnic division was further complicated as Iraqi, Kurdish, and Palestinians were scattered around both terminals. It was interesting that these spaces would be at the very end of the port, far away from the "gaze" of passengers, tourists, and bystanders. Since the closing of the Western Balkan route, the Greek refugee crisis became initially solved through voluntary spatial arrangements. This was most notably illustrated through the emergence of informal settlement camps, of which the two most important were the Piraeus port and the Idomeni camp; the former on the entrance of mainland Greece, the latter on its northern exit.

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As refugee numbers continuously increased, the "Pan-Peiraiki Movement" could not handle the humanitarian situation by itself. They made an open call to the Greeks to assist with the catering of refugees' needs and contacted NGOs, international organizations, and other volunteer bodies who were all prepared to help. As a result, an umbrella civil society formed which included international organizations, foreign and Greek NGOs, professional associations, civil organizations, businesses, football clubs (Olympiakos), nearby Municipalities and, of course, many Greek and international volunteers. As it has been evidenced elsewhere, the European refugee crisis came hand in hand with an explosion of civil society's activization.[4] In Greece's case, this civil society engagement was unprecedented and qualitatively different from any of its predecessors. A truly transnational civil society was taking shape for the very first time on Greek soil.

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[4] Maurizio Albahari, "Europe's Refugee Crisis," *Anthropology Today,* Vol.31, No. 5 (October 2015), pp. 1-2; Anna Triandafyllidou, "Turning the Refugee Crisis into an Opportunity? Current Challenges for Greece and Suggestions for Actions," *Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies European University Institute,* Policy Brief

"When the Port Authorities attempted to persuade refugees to relocate to newly established state facilities, most of my informants were reluctant to lose their freedom of movement and subsequently resisted relocation."

The concept of transnationalism is another academic buzzword of our time. In its simplest form, it connotes the existence of social formations that defy the deeply ingrained national logic of modern statehood and refers to a process of "globalization from below," a globalization carried out by the people.[5] Whatever the definition, the rise of a transnational civil society in the port of Piraeus refugee camp developed into a substitute for state policy – in other words, a globalized civil society emerged in order to fill the void of state "absenteeism." Accordingly, dozens of international organizations and NGOs and hundreds of foreign volunteers became involved. These actors were complemented by a very strong response from Greek society. The working language within the camp was English, while a division of labor emerged between the various actors as each of them offered their expertise and resources whenever needed. These efforts were then coupled by the hundreds of volunteers who felt that the refugee plight, in one way or another, was also their concern. As a result, many synergies were created, but also, some frictions and antagonisms as well. The fact remains that the refugee crisis became a catalyst for the emergence of a truly transnational civil society in Greece, and practically replaced state mechanisms during the first stages of the crisis.

From Mobility to Stasis?

All of the information about the Port of Piraeus refugee camp emanates from ethnographic work that I conducted during the winter and spring of 2015. Accordingly, everything is seen through my subjective eyes and the encounters that I had with people in the port – mostly Syrians. Generally speaking, there was a widespread perception that Greece was a beautiful country and that Greeks were very friendly people, which could come across as a positive stereotype. Nevertheless, most of my informants came to the conclusion that it was really difficult to find employment, as jobs were almost non-existent in this crisis-prone country. However, the death of the Western Balkan route pushed many of my informants to try to leave the camp and look for temporary work, accommodation, etc., thereby integrating into the broader vicinity. It became common practice among Syrians to take the train from Piraeus

[5] Roberto Korczenwicz and William C. Smith (eds.), *Latin America in the World-Economy* (Connecticut: PraegerPublishers), pp. 151–168.

to the city center, both to acclimate themselves to the environment and to seek out opportunities through co-ethnics. Most of the time, these efforts would fail and they would return to the minimum safety that the camp provided, where they did not have to think about food security. After five years of intense economic depression, crisis-ridden Athens was a particularly difficult place to find any form of employment and maintain a dream of local survival, not to mention, integration.

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At the same time, refugees "felt" that the informality of the camp created a sense of freedom, as they could leave or enter at ease without been checked. Slowly, I came to realize that this freedom of movement was extremely significant for my informants as it permitted them to continue dreaming about moving to Europe. For example, when the Port Authorities attempted to persuade them to relocate to newly established state facilities, most of my informants were reluctant to lose their freedom of movement and subsequently resisted relocation. Most of them had second thoughts about leaving the camp in case they became "trapped" again; this time by state mechanisms and rigidities. Many of them were not willing to become "subjects" of the Greek state's care as they consider themselves free-agents, navigating their way through limitations and constraints.

Over time and under the intense efforts of the government and Port Authorities, many people started to relocate to the nearby Skaramangas state facility. As a matter of fact, this facility was one of the best ones in the country as it provided relatively good living conditions. One of the informants who I came to know well, a young Syrian man from Lattakia who was living with his extended family at the port, was seriously considering the move. Of course, that was not solely his decision, as the whole family is involved with deciding to leave the camp or not. One night, my informant and his uncle got a taxi and drove to the Skaramangas state facility to have a look around. As they were not allowed to go inside, they had to base their decision on traveling rumors and social media "talk." Another factor that further perplexed him and his family was that if they wished to apply for asylum in Greece, they had to be based in a state facility in order to be eligible to submit the application. Most importantly, by applying for asylum and becoming would-be refugees, a triad of opportunities supposedly became open to them: the ability to apply for asylum and

stay in Greece; to ability to apply for asylum and join the European resettlement program; and the ability to apply for asylum and family reunification simultaneously should they had a close relative settled in another EU state (in their case this was not an option as they did not have one).

Gradually, applying for asylum in Greece as a means to continue their European journey and hopefully settle in North European countries became the new popular tactic for many Syrians. A few days later, the same young man told me that his family had decided to leave the camp and re-settle in the nearby state facility. By doing so, he and his family would be able to re-settle in a Northern European member state, once the resettlement program was up and running. He also told me that his dream was still to settle in Germany. When I asked him which city, he said that he did not mind as he would consider settling in any German city. These incidents happened at the exact time that the port of Piraeus was quickly losing its residents, who were all leaving it en masse to relocate into state facilities. However, I am not sure if that was the end of their journey, or just another pause along their way. In any case, my ethnography had come to an end and I was ready to go back to my office and return to everyday mundane endeavors. This was the end of my European refugee crisis as I briefly and superficially experienced it in the field.