



Country study

Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

Greece country profile

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April 2023

Key messages

Both public and political narratives about migrants have been exceptionally negative in Greece since the large wave of immigration from former Communist countries in the early 1990s. Negative attitudes are based mainly on fears that migrants will exacerbate unemployment and fiscal challenges, increase insecurity and threaten cultural identity.

Migration narratives have become more complex and charged since the arrival of over a million transit migrants and refugees in 2015–2016, at a time of ongoing economic turmoil. The arrivals exposed the inadequacies of a domestic asylum system still in its infancy, and the shortcomings of the EU's regional system for refugee-hosting.

Concerns about being manipulated by Turkey and let down by the EU have been a key motivation and justification for the expansion of hostile and securitised policies and narratives.

For public narratives on migration to shift, genuine EU solidarity in asylum-hosting is needed, as well as attention to Greek citizens' underlying economic concerns. Given mistrust among politicians and in the media, there is a key role for trusted civil society actors and a progressive private sector in helping to recognise and maximise the contributions the young, diverse migrant population can make in the context of Greece's ageing society, challenging economic circumstances and still-high emigration rates.

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About this publication

This briefing presents an overview of the key features of migration and asylum policy in Greece, recent trends in migration patterns and public perceptions and political narratives towards refugees and other migrants. This work is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation aimed at supporting public and private stakeholders interested in engaging with migration and displacement.

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1 History of migration in Greece

For most of the 20th century, Greece was primarily a country of emigration (Kasimis and Kassimi, 2004). The first major emigration wave was already under way at the start of the century, following a decade of economic decline in the 1890s (ibid.). Between 1890 and 1914, almost one-sixth of the Greek population left the country, mostly for the United States and Egypt (ibid.).

A subsequent mass movement (in both directions) occurred as a result of the Greco-Turkish war in 1919–1922 (Hirschon, 2003). Following an unsuccessful offensive by the Greek army and rapid subsequent retreat, a humanitarian crisis in the contested Anatolia region prompted over one million Christian refugees to flee to Greece (which at the time had a population of only around five million), in what became known as the ‘Asia Minor Catastrophe’ (Hirschon, 2003; Murard, 2022). As part of the 1923 Lausanne peace agreement, the Convention on the Exchange of Populations mandated the forced resettlement of all Greek Muslims to Turkey (around 355,000), and of all remaining Greek Orthodox Turkish citizens to Greece (nearly 200,000, in addition to the earlier million) (Hirschon, 2003).¹

A second large wave of emigration occurred after the Second World War. Over a million Greeks departed, mainly for Western Europe, Australia, the United States and Canada between 1950 and 1974 (Kasimis and Kassimi, 2004).² This was driven by both economic and political motivations, in the context of Western European calls to fill post-war labour market gaps, the Greek Civil War (1946–1949) and military rule (1967–1974) (ibid.).

Many Greeks returned home in the mid-1970s, after the 1973 oil crisis triggered increasingly strict immigration policies in Western Europe due to reduced labour demands and increased economic instability (Kasimis and Kassimi, 2004). Return migration was further spurred by the growing appeal of Greece following its transition to democracy in 1974, and the potential economic opportunities offered by Greece’s entry into the European Economic Community in 1981 (ibid.).

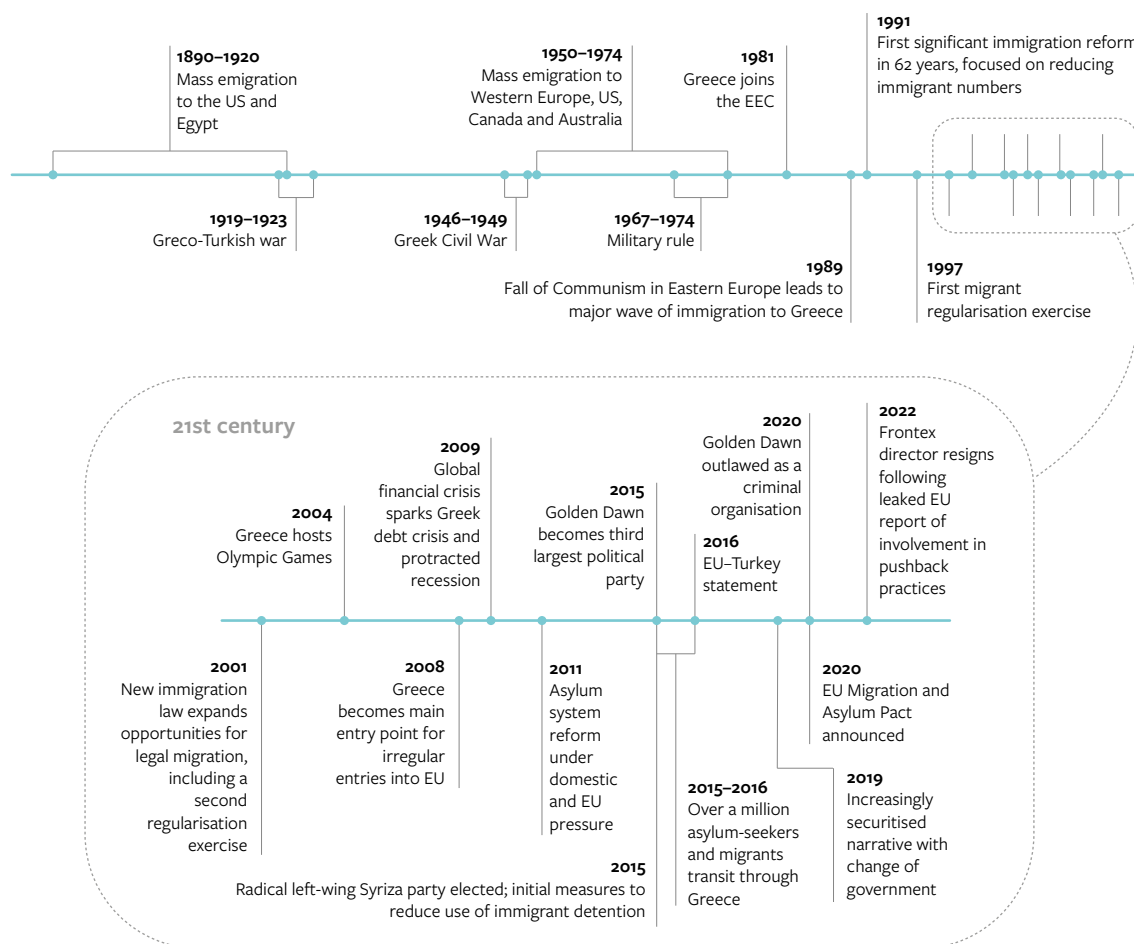
Geopolitical changes after 1989 saw Greece become a destination for international migrants for the first time, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and other communist regimes in the region (Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2005). This prompted a large influx of migrants from Eastern Europe, particularly neighbouring Albania and other Balkan countries (ibid.). Greece received the highest percentage of immigrants in the European Union (EU) in relation to its labour force in the

1 The compulsory exchange did not apply in a few cases, most notably for the Muslim community in Western Thrace, and the Greek Orthodox population in Constantinople/Istanbul.

2 Around 65,000 Greek refugees also moved to the former Soviet bloc, due to their association with the (defeated) communist faction in the Greek Civil War (Kiprianos et al., 2003).

1990s – though most were undocumented until large-scale regularisation began in 1997 (Kasimis and Kassimi, 2004). Even today, Albanians constitute by far the largest nationality of registered immigrants in Greece (Dimitriadi, 2022).³

Figure 1 Migration timeline, Greece

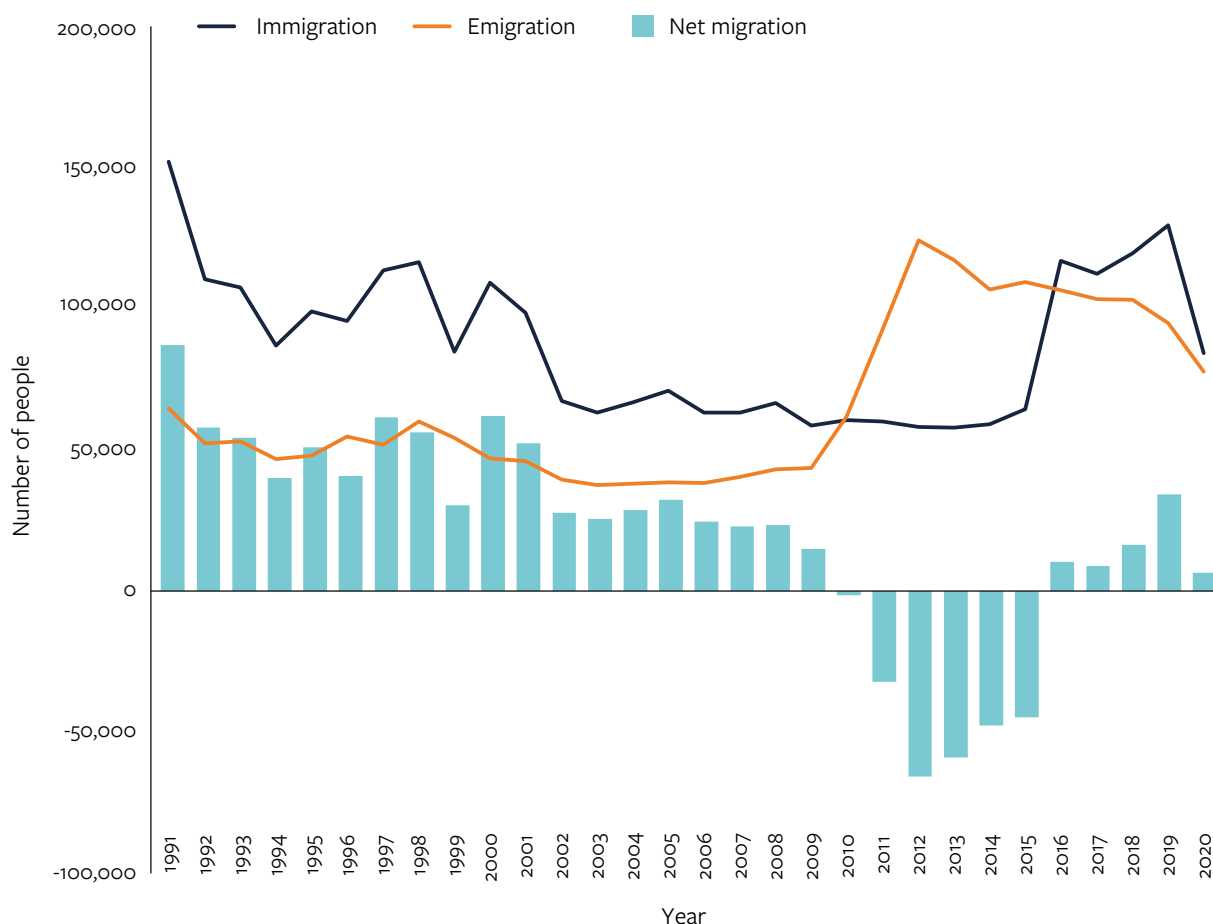


Particularly after the development of the Schengen Area during the 1990s, Greece also became a notable transit country, receiving large numbers of immigrants from further afield, many of whom arrived irregularly across the Turkish border or via the Aegean islands (Kasimis, 2012). By 2008, Greece had become the main gateway for irregular EU entries, largely from Africa, Asia and the Middle East (ibid.). Some were deported or refused entry, and others temporarily detained in increasingly overcrowded conditions. A small number applied for asylum in Greece, where they

3 As of December 2020, there were 316,964 registered Albanians with valid stay permits (plus many others of Albanian descent who had gained citizenship over the previous three decades). The next most common immigrant nationalities are citizens from other EU countries (191,118), as well as Chinese (23,770), Georgians (22,103), Pakistanis (19,568), Ukrainians (16,913), Russians (14,063) and Indians (12,317) (Dimitriadi, 2022).

faced a long backlog and exceptionally high rejection rate (UNHCR, 2011). Most arrivals sought to pass quickly on through Greece to elsewhere in the EU (meaning they were generally not well documented in official immigration statistics, shown in Figure 2).

Figure 2 Migration trends, 1990–2020



Source: Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2021

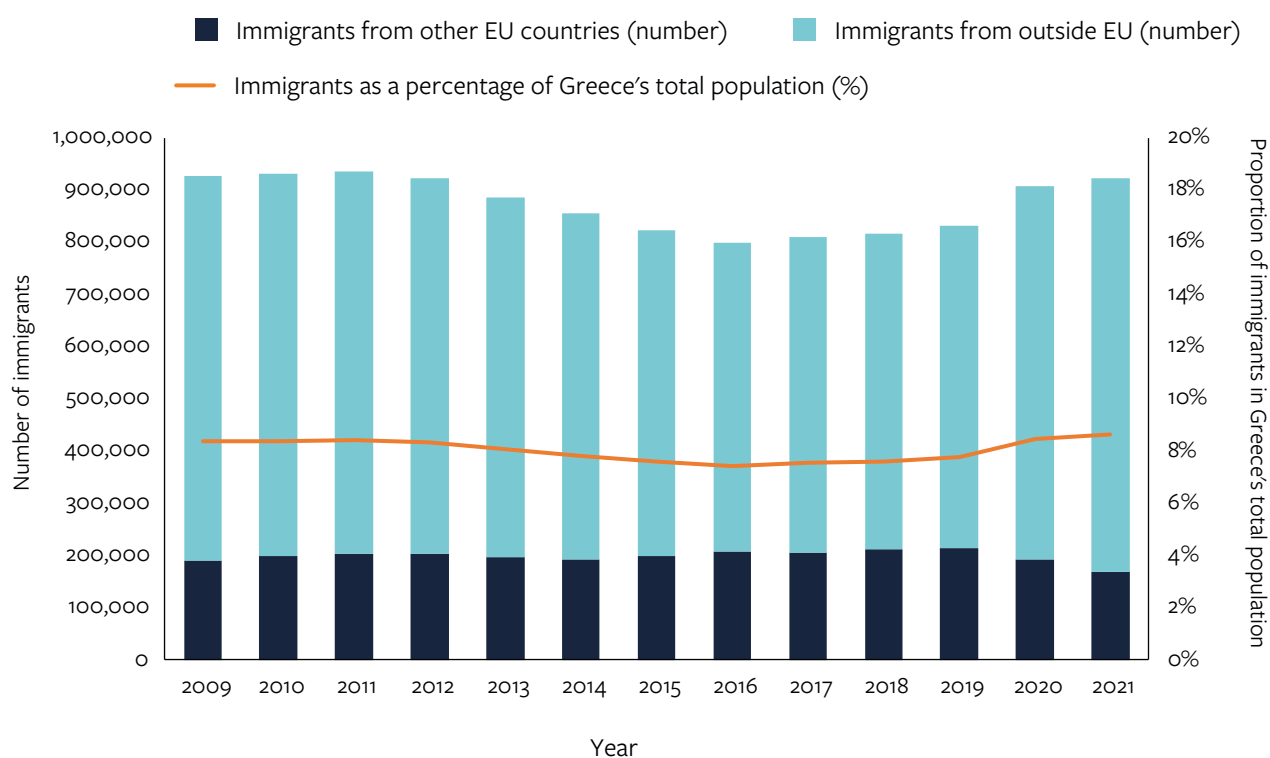
The global financial crisis hit Greece in 2009, triggering one of the worst economic crises of any Western state in peacetime (Pratsinikis, 2022). GDP fell by more than a quarter; unemployment increased from 7% in 2008 to 28% in 2013 and has remained high (11.6% in December 2022 – nearly double the EU average and second only to Spain) (Dixon et al., 2019; Eurostat, 2023). Greece's social, health and other public expenditure were drastically cut under the austerity policy required by the so-called 'European Troika'⁴ to bail Greece out of its debt crisis (Dittmer and Lorenz, 2021). At least 500,000 citizens (alongside many immigrants) left Greece in the decade after the recession hit, including many highly educated workers (Pratsinakis, 2022). This accelerated an existing

4 The European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

‘brain drain’ of highly skilled professionals, and has also played a key role in shrinking (and ageing) Greece’s population. The population declined by 3.5% in the past decade, and Greece is expected to be the oldest country in the EU by 2030 (Ioannou, 2022; Reuters, 2022).

As the economic crisis became protracted, the number of registered immigrants in the country fell, and the proportion of immigrants in Greece’s total population also declined slightly (although that percentage has not moved much from 8% between 2009 and 2021, as shown in Figure 3). While some left the country in search of better prospects, others likely remained but became irregular (and therefore unregistered) after losing their jobs and associated work and residence permits (Anagnostou, 2016).

Figure 3 Estimates of non-Greek residents in Greece, 2009–2021



Source: Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2022

In 2015 there was a sudden and enormous increase in new irregular arrivals, with 850,000 people crossing the Mediterranean into Greece in a matter of months. The vast majority were fleeing violence in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (UNHCR, 2018). Less than 5% of arrivals stayed in Greece (and therefore counted as immigrants in Figure 3 above): most continued quickly on to seek asylum further north in Europe.⁵

⁵ At the end of 2017, around 50,000 refugees and migrants remained in Greece out of around 1 million arriving in total since 2015 (UNHCR, 2018).

Figure 4 Sea and land arrivals into Greece, 2015–2022

Source: UNHCR, 2022a, using data from Hellenic Police and Hellenic Coast Guard

The EU–Turkey statement in 2016 (discussed further in the next section) resulted in a rapid decrease in new sea arrivals – but also in migrants travelling onward to other European countries, thereby substantially increasing the number of people registered for asylum in Greece (UNHCR, 2022b).⁶

Since 2020 there have been much lower numbers of both land and sea arrivals to Greece (GCR, 2022; UNHCR, 2022a). This decrease can in part be explained by the Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions (Frontex, 2022). However, as discussed in the next section, it may also be a result of the expanded use of unofficial pushback strategies on Europe’s borders (Refugee Rights Europe and End Pushbacks Partnership, 2021; GCR, 2022).

A recent development in Greece’s immigration trajectory is the arrival of 21,000 Ukrainian refugees in spring 2022 who were fleeing the Russian invasion (UNHCR, 2023). Under the EU-wide Temporary Protection Directive, Ukrainians were granted asylum in Greece through a simplified process that dealt with their claims and enabled their arrival within three weeks of an online pre-registration system being set up (GCR et al., 2022).

⁶ For example, the population of registered asylum seekers increased from 26,122 in 2015 to a peak of 105,684 in 2019; this in turn increased the refugee population, which now stands at 147,420 (compared to 10,292 in 2014).

2 Current Greek immigration system and approach

Immigration policy has been slow to develop due to Greece's long-held position as a country of emigration and, subsequently, transit (Triandafyllidou, 2009). In 1991, in response to the sudden immigration wave from Eastern Europe and Greece's inclusion in new EU-wide migration frameworks, the national immigration framework was revised for the first time in 62 years (Apostolatos, n.d.).⁷ The 1991 law introduced new measures to regulate migrants' entry, exit and residence, though in a manner often characterised as restrictive and 'primarily focused on deterring new immigrants from entering and facilitating the deportation of those who were already in the country' (Triandafyllidou, 2009; Traumontanis, 2022: 265).

In 1997, acknowledgement that a large proportion of the migrant population still resided unauthorised in the country – and might remain for some time – led to a first regularisation exercise.⁸ This legalised the employment and residence of 212,860 people, albeit with many implementation challenges (Traumontanis, 2022). The exercise was repeated in 2001 as part of a new law establishing a broader framework for managing immigration. The law established possibilities for legal entry for employment and education, and defined naturalisation conditions for longer-term residents (Triandafyllidou, 2009; Traumontanis, 2022). The gradual recognition of a potential long-term immigrant presence, combined with the need to align with EU migration directives, led to further new legislation in 2005 – which again included a regularisation programme, as did the law that modified it in 2007 (Anagnostou, 2016).

In 2010, more attention began to be paid to migrant integration, including the need to align with EU integration standards (Triandafyllidou, 2014; Anagnostou, 2016). A new law was passed to enable naturalisation for second-generation children and local election voting and participation rights for third-country nationals (Dimitriadi, 2022). These changes proved controversial and were ruled unconstitutional in 2013, but the naturalisation reforms were reintroduced (in a modified form) soon after the radical left-wing party Syriza came to power in 2015 (Skleparis, 2017; Dimitriadi, 2022). Even so, Greece continues to rank below the global average in the Migrant Integration Policy Index, and well below its Southern European counterparts, largely because ad hoc strategies for migrant integration have seen limited implementation (MIPEX, 2021; Traumontanis, 2022).

7 The legal framework in effect prior to 1991 dated back to Law 4310 from 1929 'on the settlement and movement of foreigners in Greece, police control, passports, expulsions and displaced persons', which had been subject to only one relatively minor modification in 1948.

8 This followed the example of other Southern European countries such as Italy and Spain, both of whom had already conducted multiple large-scale regularisation exercises, starting in the mid-1980s (Levinson, 2005).

The period between 2008 and 2014 was also marked by a heightened focus on border control and asylum system reform in response to increasing irregular and asylum seeker arrivals (Triandafyllidou, 2014; Dimitriadi, 2022). EU pressure and criticism – culminating in a 2011 European Court of Human Rights ruling on the deficiencies of Greece’s asylum system – added to the impetus for asylum reform (European Database of Asylum Law, n.d.). This led to a 2011 law setting new standards for the reception of irregular migrants, legislating for distinct treatment between asylum seekers and irregular migrants, and mandating the government to process more than 45,000 backlogged asylum applications (Papageorgiou, 2013; Triandafyllidou, 2020).

On taking office in February 2015, Syriza had various plans to address outstanding concerns around Greece’s immigration policy (Cheliotis and Xenakis, 2021). Within weeks, measures were taken to reduce the use of immigrant detention, improve conditions in detention sites and limit the maximum period of detention (Koutsouraki, 2017). However, further reforms were cut short by the arrival of large numbers of migrants in summer 2015 and the subsequent EU push to reduce onward transit to the rest of the EU, which effectively created a large backlog of asylum seekers and other migrants in Greece (Skleparis, 2017). Under the EU–Turkey statement of 18 March 2016, all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands would be returned to Turkey, unless they were individually found to have an admissible asylum claim (European Council, 2016).

The EU–Turkey statement triggered new domestic legislation in Greece. A 2016 law provided the basis for rendering asylum seekers ‘inadmissible’ if they had previously transited through ‘safe third countries’ (EU, 2013; GCR, 2017). Greece has deemed Turkey a safe third country for Syrian asylum seekers since 2016 (despite reports of their arbitrary arrest and deportation from Turkey back to Syria) (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In 2021, Greece declared Turkey to be a safe third country for asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Somalia (applicable to asylum seekers anywhere in Greece, rather than just those entering via the Aegean islands, which was the remit of the 2016 EU–Turkey statement) (IRC, 2022).

The 2016 law also established an exceptional and temporary measure to fast-track border procedures for applicants arriving on the Eastern Aegean islands. This has been criticised for compromising procedural guarantees in international, European and domestic law, resulting in a greater number of rejections with restricted access to the right to appeal (GCR, 2022a). The 2016 law was also criticised for expanding the use of closed reception facilities, laying the framework for the continuous detention of irregular migrants during processing of their claims (Cheliotis and Xenakis, 2021).

Box 1 Greece's citizenship and asylum policy

Greek citizenship policy

To be naturalised, the applicant must have lawfully resided in Greece continuously for the seven years preceding application. This is applied to both refugees and other migrants despite the legal obligation under the Geneva Convention to make every effort to expedite naturalisation for refugees (GCR, 2022b). The applicant must be at least 18 years old, have not been convicted of a crime in the previous 10 years and face no pending deportation procedures. They must hold an accepted residence permit and must demonstrate economic independence, knowledge of Greek language, history and culture, and adequate integration. The process is often very slow (on average four years according to a 2018 estimate) (ibid.).

Greek asylum policy

Initial asylum applications must be registered in person at Reception and Identification Centres, where applicants then temporarily reside (often in 'closed controlled' facilities) while their application is being submitted – a period which legally should not exceed 25 days (Ministry of Migration and Asylum, n.d.; GCR, 2022a). Geographic restrictions prohibit applicants on the islands from leaving for the mainland, and in many cases also from leaving the centre (GCR, 2022a). If the applicant is assessed to have transited through a 'safe third country', they may be deemed inadmissible and required to leave the country. In practice, protection and logistical concerns, combined with Turkey's refusal to accept returns since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, meant that many asylum seekers deemed inadmissible have remained in limbo in Greece, often detained in overcrowded facilities (IRC, 2022).

For those whose asylum applications are submitted, case processing by law should not exceed six months, though there are provisions for extending this period, with the 2019 International Protection Act stipulating that examination of the application should not exceed 21 months in total (GCR, 2022a). More than half (58%) of applications pending at the end of 2021 had been pending for over a year. In most cases the asylum interview had yet to take place (ibid.).

Those who have applied for or received international protection have the right to public education and healthcare (with some restrictions on secondary care) (Ministry of Migration and Asylum, n.d.), but access is low in practice, including due to limited resources and lack of interpreters (Tramountanis et al., 2022). Refugees (and asylum seekers, after six months) have the right to work, but labour market access is constrained by high unemployment rates and difficulties in opening bank accounts and receiving tax registration numbers (ibid.).

The asylum system underwent extensive change in 2019 after the election of a new government led by the centre-right New Democracy party. These reforms aimed at the further securitisation of Greek borders, increased returns to Turkey and a reduction in arrivals (GCR, 2022a; Dimitriadi, 2022). The new legislation – the 2019 International Protection Act (IPA) and subsequent amendments – has been extensively criticised, including by UNHCR and the Greek Ombudsman. It has been criticised for further lowering protection standards, making it more difficult for people to obtain international protection, and significantly expanding provisions for detaining asylum seekers, including increasing the maximum time limit from 3 to 18 months (UNHCR, 2019; GCR, 2021; Tramountanis et al., 2022).

Since 2019, there have also been increased reports of illegal pushbacks⁹ of migrants to Turkey (BVMN, 2020a; Amnesty International, 2021; GCR, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022), with the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants stating that ‘In Greece, pushbacks at land and sea borders have become de facto general policy’ (UNHCR, 2022c: 7).¹⁰ At the land border, migrants have allegedly been violently turned away by Greek officials, while in the Aegean there have been reports of migrants being abandoned in unseaworthy vessels, vessels being towed back to Turkish waters, and shots being fired into the air or water (BVMN, 2020a).

Box 2 The EU response to the ‘refugee crisis’ in Greece

The so-called ‘European refugee crisis’ that started in 2015 has demonstrated the shortcomings of the Common European Asylum System and the limits of European asylum solidarity (Karageorgiou, 2021). Despite calls from Greece and other border states to reform the ‘Dublin system’,¹¹ the EU has not yet been able to adopt a mechanism for ensuring the fair allocation of asylum seekers across member states (Vallianatou, 2022). Political consensus has been elusive, due largely to opposition from Eastern European countries and some others with low current levels of asylum applications (Welfens et al., 2022).

-
- 9 Pushbacks describe refusal of entry at the border as well as expulsions of individuals from a state territory without an assessment of their personal protection needs and with disregard for basic procedural guarantees. They violate international and EU law by disregarding the right to seek asylum (Stefan and Cortinovis, 2021).
 - 10 There is also widespread evidence of such practices being used in other European countries, see Refugee Rights Europe and the End Pushbacks Partnership (2021).
 - 11 The Dublin III regulation establishes the criteria and mechanisms for determining which EU Member State is responsible for examining an asylum claim made in the EU. It allows Dublin Member States to send requests to other Member States to ‘take back’ asylum applications (subject to time limits). The criteria include the principles of family unity, possession of residence documents or visas, irregular entry or stay and visa-waived entry. In practice, the most frequently applied criterion is irregular entry, rendering the Member State through which the asylum-seeker first entered the EU responsible for examining their claim (Wilkins and Macdonald, 2019).

In the absence of a region-wide policy, the EU has turned to stop-gap measures to try to reduce the flow of migrants into and through Greece, and to alleviate some of the burden on the country, including through increased financial assistance and operational support for border control and asylum-hosting (Dittmer and Lorenz, 2021; Vallianatou, 2022). Border management has also been externalised to countries just outside the EU (exemplified by the 2016 EU–Turkey statement).

The EU's response to shortcomings in migration policy and management in Greece has been mixed (Karageorgiou, 2021). On the one hand, EU actors have criticised violations of migrants' rights, most recently with the European Commission threatening in February 2023 to pursue legal action against Greece for breaching EU reception conditions and qualification directives. On the other, the EU has praised Greece for being 'Europe's shield', and has been complicit in many of its policies and practices (Rankin, 2020; Karageorgiou, 2021). For example, Frontex has been accused of involvement in illegal pushbacks of asylum seekers, as documented in a recently leaked report by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) which prompted the resignation of the Frontex director in April 2022 (ECRE, 2021; HRW, 2022). Some of the Greek actions that have been criticised for lowering protection standards resulted directly from either EU funding or EU policy, notably the EU–Turkey statement (Cheliotis and Xenakis, 2021).

While the EU has clearly played a key role in shaping Greek policy and practice, the same can also be said in reverse, with Greece arguably serving as the EU's 'asylum policy laboratory' for trialling approaches that are then implemented at the regional level (Karageorgiou, 2021). Several analysts have commented that the EU Migration and Asylum Pact (announced in 2020) essentially institutionalises EU-wide a number of formal and ad hoc Greek measures to deter migration and limit fair and effective processing of claims (Panayotatos, 2020; Karageorgiou, 2021; Vallianatou, 2022).

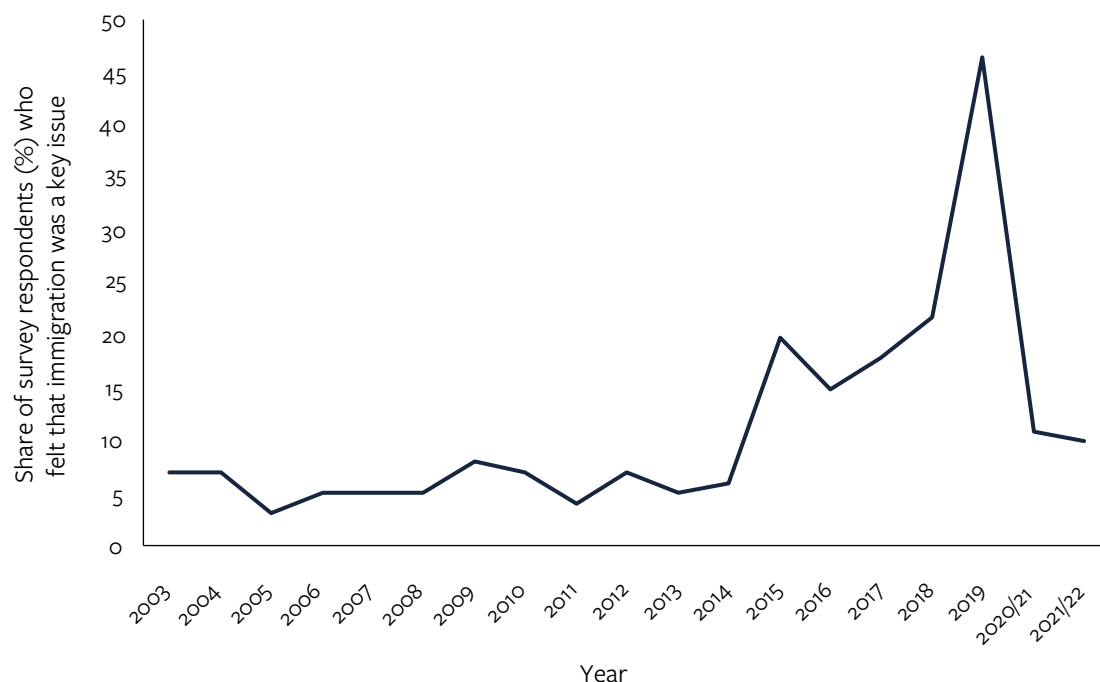
There are also concerns about increasing police violence towards refugees and migrants residing in Greece (RVRN, 2022). The authorities have also been accused of laying criminal charges against asylum seekers (for alleged smuggling) as well as a wide range of actors involved in assisting them or in reporting abuses (Stefan and Cortinovis, 2021; Smith, 2022; Stamatoukou, 2022). Similar practices have been noted in other European migrant-receiving countries such as Spain and Italy (Lopez-Sala and Barbero, 2019; UN News, 2023).

In relation to Ukrainian refugees, Greece's policy is directly and explicitly governed by the activation (for the first time) of the EU-wide Temporary Protection Directive. Under this directive, Ukrainian refugees have the immediate right to seek employment and healthcare, and government ministries have proactively provided food, accommodation, mental health support and information (Antigone, 2022; GCR et al., 2022). The general contrast in approach between Ukrainians versus earlier arrivals has led to charges of a 'two-tier refugee system' in Greece, and more widely across Europe (GCR et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2022).

3 Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

Despite frequently being the main entry point for irregular migrants into the EU, the salience of immigration as a public concern in Greece has remained relatively low compared to many other countries in Europe (see Figure 5). The proportion of the population considering immigration a top-two concern reached 20% in 2015, when over 850,000 migrants arrived on Greek shores, but this was still much lower than peaks at that time of 39–76% in many other Southern, Western and Northern European countries (Holloway et al., 2021a; Holloway et al., 2021b; Holloway et al., 2021c; Holloway et al., 2022; Bailey-Morley and Kumar, 2022). The lower levels are perhaps unsurprising given the context – amid a major economic recession, austerity policies and Greece’s potential departure from the EU (‘Grexit’), immigration was not the most pressing public issue, particularly since migrants were expected only to be passing through.

Figure 5 Salience of immigration as a key issue in Greece



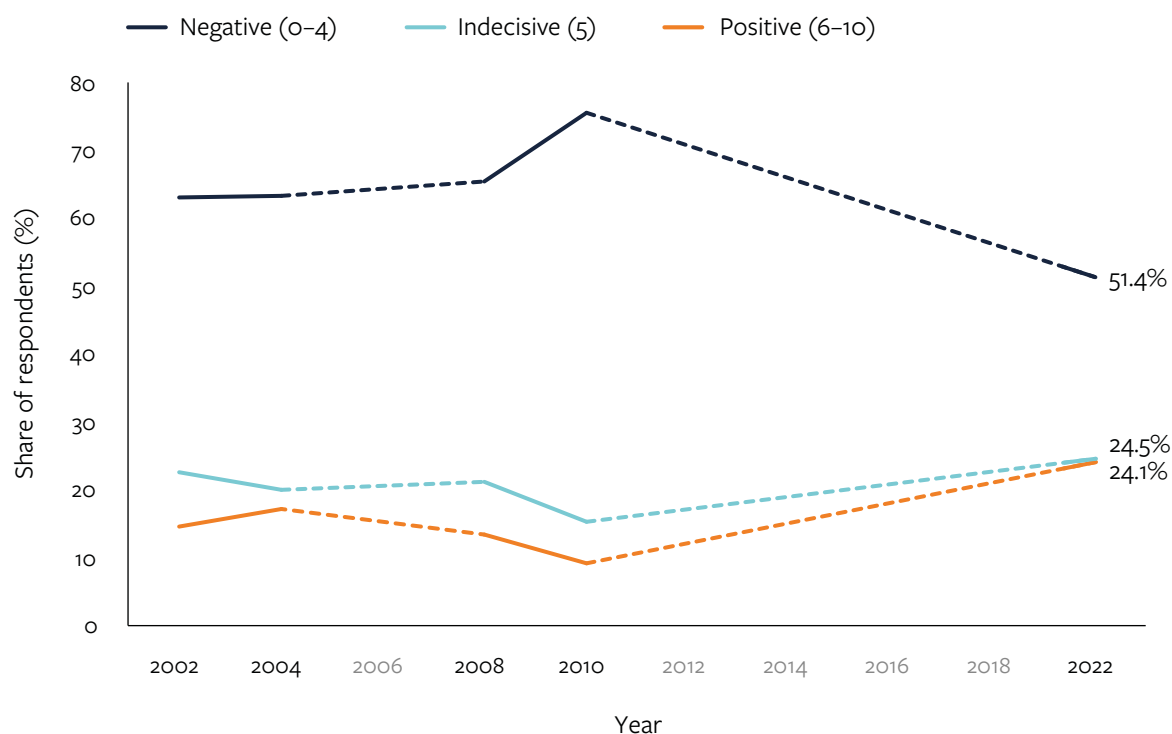
Note: This graphic shows the percentage of people answering ‘immigration’ to the question ‘What do you see as the two most important issues facing Greece today?’ Annual data is presented, with data taken mainly from autumn surveys, although the Eurobarometer surveys were delayed due to Covid-19, with the autumn 2020 and 2021 surveys shifting to winter 2020–2021 and 2021–2022.

Source: European Commission, n.d.

Salience did, however, rise to an unprecedented 47% in 2019, well above other European countries at the time. This may in part relate to the increased political visibility of the topic, notably the escalation of tensions in Greek–Turkish relations following Turkish President Recep Erdogan’s threat in September 2019 to ‘open the gates’ for refugees to enter Europe if Turkey did not receive more international support (including for hosting Syrian refugees) (DW, 2019). Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, immigration has ceased to be a dominant concern; in the recent Eurobarometer survey from summer 2022, Greeks identified the most important issues facing the country as rising prices/inflation/cost of living, at 55%, followed by the economy (33%), health (21%) and unemployment (20%) (European Commission, 2022a). Immigration ranked as the seventh most important issue, at 9%.

The lack of salience of immigration over time does not, however, reflect high acceptance of immigrants among the Greek population. On the contrary, while Eurobarometer data from 1989 suggests that Greek attitudes towards foreigners were among the most tolerant in Europe in the late 1980s, attitudes became consistently and strikingly negative shortly afterwards as the number of immigrants increased (Kiprianos et al., 2003). In a survey over four consecutive years from 1991 to 1994, the proportion of people declaring that there were ‘too many’ immigrants living in Greece increased from 29% in 1991 to 45% in 1992, 57% in 1993 and 69% in 1994 (Voulgaris et al., 1995, in Kiprianos et al., 2003). Between 85% and 90% agreed that foreigners increase unemployment and that many are a danger to public security (*ibid.*). Fuelled by negative political and media portrayals (discussed further in the next section), several other national and local studies over the course of the 1990s document similar examples of growing negativity (Kiprianos et al., 2003). By 1997, Eurobarometer data showed Greek citizens to be the most likely of any European country to declare that immigration had ‘reached its limits’. In the 2000 Eurobarometer survey, Greeks, more than other European citizens, affirmed that ‘the presence of people from minority groups is a cause of insecurity’ (*ibid.*).

Conducted for the first time in 2002 and repeated on four other occasions in Greece, the region-wide European Social Survey has similarly shown that negative attitudes towards immigrants have continuously far exceeded positive attitudes – at much higher rates than many other countries in Europe (European Social Survey, n.d.). From 2002 to 2008, over 60% of Greeks reported that immigrants made Greece a worse place to live (see Figure 6). Two years later, 75% of the population responded that immigrants made Greece a worse place to live, against the backdrop of a biting economic recession and growing support for extreme-right parties and their anti-immigrant discourse.

Figure 6 Attitudes towards immigrants: do immigrants make Greece a worse or better place to live?

Note: This data has been extracted from the European Social Surveys. The survey scores respondents from 0–10 only and records ‘don’t know’ answers. We have classified survey respondents who scored 0–4 in their answers to the question ‘Do immigrants make Greece a worse or better place to live?’ as holding ‘negative’ views, those scoring 5 as being ‘indecisive’ and those scoring 6–10 as holding ‘positive’ views. ‘Don’t know’ answers are excluded from the analysis shown here. Due to non-inclusion of Greece in certain survey rounds, there is no data available for 2006, 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018. Wave 10 of the ESS should have taken place in 2020 but was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The most recent data available is from fieldwork conducted between November 2021 and May 2022, published in December 2022.

Source: European Social Survey, n.d.

While the 2022 survey showed a substantial decrease in negative attitudes, such views were nevertheless still held by around half the population – again, higher than in many other European countries including Spain (19%), Portugal (20%), France (27%) and Italy (43%). The latest immigration-focused Eurobarometer survey from November/December 2021 also suggests a persistence of negative attitudes to the present day: 60% of Greek respondents thought that immigration was more of a problem than an opportunity for the country – second only to Cyprus (61%) out of the 27 EU Member States (European Commission, 2022b).

There is also evidence that attitudes towards immigrants are nuanced especially depending on the perceived motivation and duration of their stay, meaning attitudes have varied significantly as the

so-called ‘refugee crisis’ played out on Greek shores. While some Greek citizens, particularly those with extreme-right political affiliation, maintained hostile attitudes throughout the period, several studies also note a strong ‘humanitarian narrative’ and ‘solidarity movement’ (Kaitatzi-Whitlock and Kenterelidou, 2017; Oikonomakis, 2018; Paschou et al., 2022). According to Papataxiarchis (2022:167), irregular border crossers during the 2015 crisis ‘stopped being conceived as “illegal migrants” and were instead re-classified as “refugees” ... a politically innocent and sympathetic category’, deserving of solidarity and reminiscent of Greek Christians’ exodus from Anatolia during the 1922 Asia Minor Catastrophe. A Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey by Pew Research found that 69% of Greeks supported taking in refugees, compared with just 17% who supported more or about the same number of immigrants residing in their country (with Greece having the highest gap between these responses of any country surveyed) (Rasmussen and Poushter, 2019). In a nationwide Ipsos phone survey from the same period, 67% of respondents believed that Greece has a tradition of ‘solidarity and compassion’ for welcoming refugees (Dixon et al., 2019).¹² Over half (56%) were recorded as feeling ‘warm’ towards refugees, as opposed to 17% who felt ‘cold’ towards them (ibid.).¹³

Positive attitudes towards refugees are far less prevalent when it is posited that arrivals may remain in the country for the longer term (Papataxiarchis, 2022). According to Dimitriadi and Sarantaki (2018:22), Greeks were ‘in favour of a humanitarian response to the refugees but not their presence in the country’. This is illustrated by a 2016 survey of Lesvos residents; while 60% reported having helped asylum seekers, only 38% accepted their permanent settlement on the island (Rontos et al., 2017, in Thravalou et al., 2020). Support for refugees started to dwindle and tensions emerged – on the islands and in the country more broadly – after the EU–Turkey statement reduced the level of onward movement and led to a more continuous presence of asylum seekers and refugees in Greece (Gatopoulos, 2022; Papataxiarchis, 2022). In a nationwide survey conducted by TransSOL in November/December 2016, over half of Greeks said that fewer Syrian refugees should be admitted (Kalogeraki, 2022). In the latest Eurobarometer survey from November/December 2021, Greece was the only EU country where more than half of the population *disagreed* with the idea that fostering migrant integration is a necessary long-term investment for the country (European Commission, 2022b).

When considering the sources that inform public views, Greeks declare a much lower reliance on traditional media than people in many other countries, being the least likely in the EU to report using traditional media to obtain information on migration matters, and instead having the highest reliance on discussions with friends and family, with an above-average dependence on social

12 Ipsos was commissioned to conduct this phone survey with a representative sample of 2,000 Greek citizens, as part of a larger study by the international NGO More in Common, in partnership with the international NGO Social Change Initiative.

13 The study examined the strength of in-group and out-group feelings through a series of questions including a ‘feelings thermometer’. Respondents were asked to express their feelings about other individuals or groups in terms of ‘warm’ or ‘cold’ feelings (Dixon et al., 2019).

media sources (European Commission, 2022b). Greeks' trust in the media was also found to be exceptionally low (18%) in the early 2018 nationwide survey by Dixon et al. (2019), as was trust in civil society organisations and in the government and political parties more broadly.

In relation to the stated reasons for Greeks' negative attitudes, three main factors stand out. First, there is a pronounced fear that migrants will be a drain on already scarce resources and employment opportunities. As discussed earlier, these views were already evident with the first major wave of immigration in the early 1990s (Voulgaris et al., 1995, in Kiprianos et al., 2003). The ongoing effects of recession mean that economic concerns have continued to influence attitudes towards more recent arrivals. A 2016 Pew Research Centre Survey found that 72% of Greeks believe refugees to be a burden because they take Greek jobs and social benefits – a higher percentage than recorded in Southern European counterparts (Wike et al., 2016). In the early 2018 nationwide survey conducted by Ipsos for Dixon et al. (2019), only 21% of Greeks believed that immigration is good for the Greek economy, while 51% believed that immigration is bad due to the costs to the welfare system and the draining of resources that could be used for Greeks. In a December 2021 survey by the Greek research institute Eteron, foreigners were one of the top five reasons selected by citizens as a cause of inequality in Greece (in 30% of cases), based on the belief that 'immigrants have access to state benefits while poor Greeks do not' (Ioannidis, 2022).

Anxiety about crime, security and terrorism has also shaped negative views, dating back to the first large immigration wave (Voulgaris et al., 1995; Kiprianos et al., 2003). In relation to more recent arrivals, fear over security/terrorism was the most prominent reason for a decrease in sympathy for refugees between 2015/16 and 2016/17 rounds of surveys conducted by the Tent Foundation, well ahead of concerns about economic cost (Tent Foundation, 2017). In the 2017 World Values Survey data, 67% of Greek respondents believed that immigration increases the crime rate and 64% believed it increases terrorism (well above the global average of 48% and 44% respectively across respondents in 64 countries) (World Values Survey, n.d.).

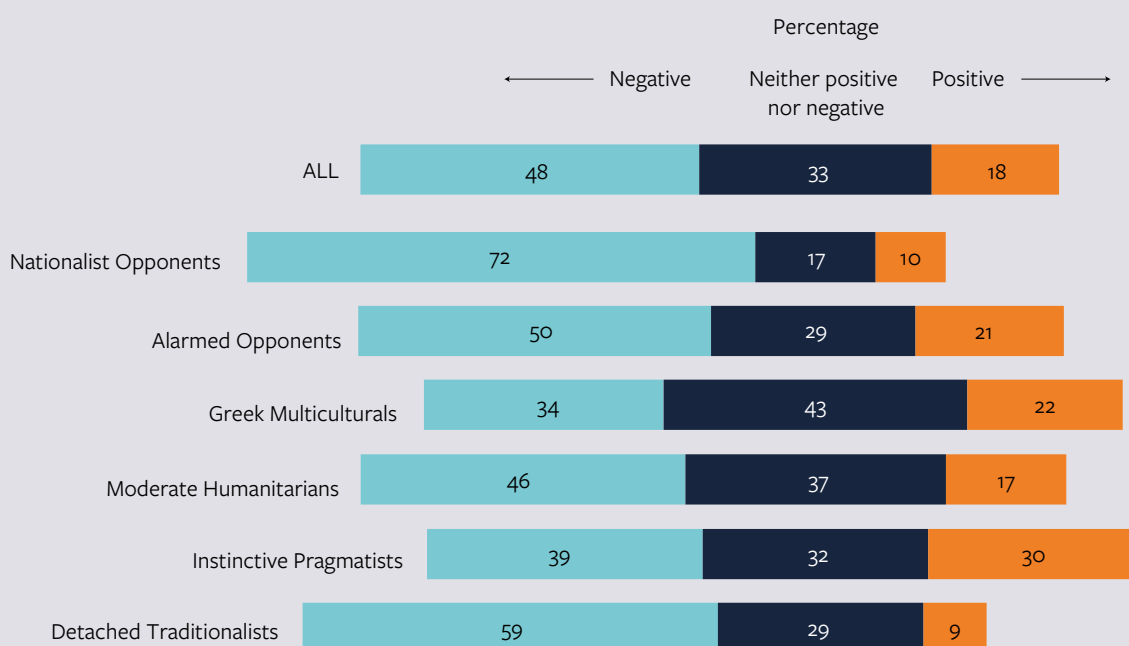
A third major driver of negative attitudes is socio-cultural, including religious concerns. Studies of the first immigration wave in the early 1990s note that the prevailing collective image of Greece was of an ethnically homogenous society, its cultural or religious traditions threatened by the migrant 'other' (Kiprianos et al., 2003; Triandafyllidou, 2009; Triandafyllidou and Kouki, 2014). This translated into widespread discriminatory behaviours, leading some Albanians to try to hide their background by taking Greek names, pretending to be Christian or being baptised (Murard, 2022). Research on more recent immigration responses finds some continuation of this trend, with notable reluctance to accommodate the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of Muslims (Tent Foundation, 2017; Lipka, 2018). In a nationwide survey in early 2018, 57% of Greeks believed that Islam and Greek society are incompatible (Dixon et al., 2019). However, only 14% support a policy of never accepting Muslim refugees. This suggests that, rather than outright opposition, concerns about Muslim immigrants may reflect a general preoccupation with the need for immigrants to

adjust to the Greek way of life. In the latest Eurobarometer survey, Greek respondents were more likely than any other EU country to say that immigrants need to share cultural traditions and speak the national language in order to successfully integrate (European Commission, 2022b).

Beyond these aggregate statistics, it is useful to explore the ways in which attitudes and concerns regarding immigration differ within the population. The most comprehensive analysis of this to date was conducted by More in Common based on data from early 2018 (Dixon et al., 2019). The study divided the Greek population into six social groups according to their beliefs and values around their identity and relationship to the outside world (see Box 3).

Box 3 Segmentation of the Greek population and attitudes towards immigration

Does immigration have a positive or negative impact on Greece?



Source: Dixon et al., 2019

Greek Multiculturals (20% of the population): Younger Greeks and those with the highest levels of education and income and least religious affiliation. This group feel least proud of their Greek identity and are highly distrustful of the EU and Greek government. The most concerning issues for this group are high unemployment and inequality. This is the most likely group to believe that immigration is good for the economy, and is particularly welcoming of refugees.

Moderate Humanitarians (28% of the population): Younger Greeks, the majority of whom are religious and have an income similar to the national average. This group is the most optimistic about the state of the Greek economy and society and their prospects. They hold warm feelings towards migrants, refugees and Muslims and empathise greatly with refugees, but are not convinced that immigration particularly benefits Greece economically or socially.

Instinctive Pragmatists (19% of the population): Middle-aged Greeks, the majority of whom are religious. Members of this group have low levels of education and a similar pattern of income to the national average, but with slightly more in the lower income range. This group holds above-average confidence in Greek institutions, is least likely to support Greece distancing itself from the EU and is more positive about the economic benefits of immigration. This group is particularly concerned about Islam and is very concerned about national security.

Detached Traditionalists (15% of the population): Older Greeks, the majority of whom are religious, with lower levels of education and similar income patterns to the national average, but with slightly more in the lower range. They are highly religious and protective of Greece's religious heritage. They are less likely to have a clear political identity, though they do believe that traditional parties care about them. They view immigration negatively and are more likely than average to agree that immigrants have made it more difficult for Greeks to get jobs.

Nationalist Opponents (15% of the population): Middle-aged and older Greeks with the lowest levels of education and income and the highest proportion of religious members. This group feel intensely proud of their Greek identity and fear its disappearance. They are pessimistic about the economy and society. This group are highly distrustful of the government, the EU and Turkey. They hold consistently 'cold' feelings towards all migrants, refugees and Muslims and see no positive effect from immigration.

Alarmed Opponents (3% of the population): Middle-aged and retired, often religious and with lower levels of education and income. They are negative about the state of Greece and hold strong authoritarian tendencies. They believe that, if large numbers of migrants continue to arrive in Greece, citizens should start protecting shores and borders themselves. They hold generally hostile views towards migrants and see no positive effect from immigration.

Source: Dixon et al., 2019: 14-17

4 The dominance of negative and securitised narratives

Xenophobic political discourse has been starkly evident since the first major immigration wave into Greece at the end of the Cold War, with a securitised narrative emerging to justify restrictive policies (Karyotis and Patrikios, 2010). Politicians presented the 1991 migration law as central in protecting national interests against the ‘problem’ of increasing immigration and the perceived threat to public safety (*ibid.*). In 1993, the Minister of Public Order stated that ‘the indicators of Albanian criminality are increasing constantly’ and his successor contended that ‘aliens [foreigners] are responsible for an increase in crime rates’ (Karydis, 1996: 131, in Karyotis and Patrikios, 2010). These negative narratives were also prevalent in the Greek media, which has sometimes been described as a ‘transmitter’ of the government’s discourse (Triandafyllidou, 2002; Karyotis and Patrikios, 2010).

Political and media narratives surrounding migration shifted at the turn of the millennium, partly in a bid to present Greece as progressive and welcoming in the lead-up to its hosting of the 2004 Olympic Games (Triandafyllidou, 2002; Karyotis and Patrikios, 2010). Ministers began to downplay previous public statements about the risks of criminality, and there was greater recognition of the economic contribution of migrants – including for the construction of Olympic infrastructure, which would not have been possible without the immigrant (notably Albanian) workforce (Dimitras, 1999, in Karyotis and Patrikios, 2010). In 2000 the government announced that it would build a mosque and Islamic cultural centre in time for the Olympics ‘in the spirit of the multi-cultural democratic Europe of which Greece is a part’ (Smith, 2003).

The promotion of this more visible multicultural image, including of the Islamic faith, sparked unease and some vocal opposition from the Greek Orthodox Church. Although not explicitly critical of immigrants, the head of the Church, Archbishop Christodoulos, expressed concern that immigrants posed a threat to Greek national identity (which has long been equated with Greek Orthodox Christianity) (Karyotis and Patrikios, 2010). Christodoulos vehemently criticised the decision to remove a declaration of faith from state identity cards (a label which was felt to enable discrimination against non-Orthodox individuals, including immigrants). He argued that the government ‘want to make Greece publicly pretend to be atheistic so that it will be recognised as progressive’, and in doing so appeared to be ‘denying its history and traditions, which are Greek Orthodox’ (Gilson, 2000). At the prospect of the Islamic cultural centre, Christodoulos warned that ‘its existence contains dangers which are known from similar centres in other European countries’ (Smith, 2003, in Karyotis and Patrikios, 2010). The perceived security threat posed by Islam was invoked by alluding to recent attacks in Europe by Islamic extremists, as well as the trauma of the 20th century conflicts between ‘Muslim Turkey’ and ‘Christian Greece’ and the oppression of Greeks by Muslims under Ottoman rule (Sakellariou, 2017). This anti-Islam, and more generally anti-multicultural, narrative was shared by many political figures, from fringe

extreme-right movements to the centre-right New Democracy party (in opposition from 1993–2004, and in power from 2004–2009) (ibid.). The controversial mosque was therefore not built until many years later, under the coalition government led by the radical left Syriza party (Lakasas, 2020).

The economic crisis delegitimised the mainstream Greek political establishment and led to the rapid growth of narratives from extreme ends of the political spectrum (Triandafyllidou and Kouki, 2014). The extreme-right Golden Dawn party surged in popularity, going from no parliamentary seats in the 2009 elections to 18 in 2012 and 21 in 2015, making it the third-largest party in parliament (Dixon et al., 2019). Golden Dawn ran on an explicitly anti-immigrant and anti-Islam platform, using migrants as scapegoats for Greeks' economic hardships and casting Muslims as a principal threat to Greek society and identity (Triandafyllidou and Kouki, 2014; Sakellariou, 2017). Golden Dawn's platform glorified the idea of racial purity, and played a major role in fuelling xenophobic narratives and violence (Galariotis et al., 2018). As well as attacking left-wing and anarchist representatives, the group organised armed attacks on migrants in the street and paid young Greeks to participate in the violence, leading to a documented increase in organised violence against refugees and migrants (Social Change Initiative, 2021; RVRN, 2022). These attacks were underreported by the Greek police and media, and for years went largely ignored by the government (Social Change Initiative, 2021).

At the same time, an anti-racist, pro-migrant counter-narrative was also emerging. Civil society actors joined together in 2011 to record the impact of extreme-right violence on migrant communities and expose the brutalities taking place and the government's inaction (Social Change Initiative, 2021). This exposure eventually helped generate public and political outrage. Golden Dawn leaders went on trial in 2015 following the murder of left-wing activist and rapper Pavlos Fysaas by a Golden Dawn supporter. Over the course of the five-year trial the party lost its electoral support and parliamentary seats, and was eventually declared a criminal organisation. The party's leader and seven former Golden Dawn MPs were given prison sentences of between 10 and 15 years (ibid.).

While the economic recession and austerity saw the rise (and later fall) of the extreme right, it also propelled the sudden leap to power of the radical left party Syriza, whose discourse on migrants was far more positive. On entering office in February 2015, Syriza advocated for reduced use of immigrant detention, and argued that 'no migrant is illegal' (Nestoras, 2016; Skleparis, 2017; Cheliotis and Xenakis, 2021). With the sudden wave of new arrivals in the summer of 2015, Syriza capitalised on the grassroots refugee solidarity movement to celebrate Greek citizens' humanitarian actions as a mark of national character and pride (Papataxiarchis, 2022). With this new form of patriotism, the government tried to rebuild the country's national and international image against the backdrop of failed debt negotiations with European creditors (ibid.). Although some note the perpetuation of xenophobic stereotypes in the media (Pelliccia, 2019), others have

highlighted the more sympathetic and humanitarian portrayal of refugees by the Greek media in comparison to more securitised media narratives in many other European countries (Fotopoulos & Kaimaklioti, 2016; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Cinalli et al., 2021; Paschou et al., 2022).

This positive narrative was ultimately not sustained. As restrictions on onward travel led to a large growth in migrant numbers in Greece, criticism spread of both the migrants themselves and the government's perceived mismanagement of the refugee response (although there was cross-party and media consensus that the EU held the main blame for Greece's predicament) (Dimitriadi and Sarantaki, 2018).

The 2019 elections were won by the centre-right New Democracy party. While immigration had not been a major campaign topic, the party's return to power enshrined a return to a highly securitised narrative around migration. As with previous administrations, the current government has continued to use the lack of EU support to deflect criticism of its handling of migration. The ruling party's political narrative has also continued to tap into anti-Turkish sentiment, both to deflect criticism and to ensure Greece emerges with the more favourable image in the long-standing competition between the two countries. For example, the Minister of Migration and Asylum, Notis Mitarachi, has repeatedly blamed accusations of migrant pushbacks on Turkish propaganda and 'fake news' (Info Migrants, 2022), and justified the expansion of Greece's border fence and surveillance system by arguing that Turkey had become 'an official migrant trafficker' encouraging increased border crossings into the EU (Ekathimerini, 2020; Emmanouilidou and Schmitz, 2022). Both narratives have resonated heavily with the public, who overwhelmingly believe Greece has been badly treated by its European partners and that Turkey cannot be trusted as a partner in managing refugee issues (Dixon et al., 2019). At the same time, Migration and Asylum Minister Mitarachi has welcomed Ukrainians as 'real refugees', revealing the somewhat selective nature of the government's otherwise negative framing (GCR et al., 2022). As with many other countries in Europe, there is little hope that welcoming attitudes and policies towards Ukrainians will be extended to counter the general negativity towards migrants evident in Greece both under the current government and on the part of many previous administrations.

5 Conclusion

For most of the last century, Greece was known as a country of emigration. Immigrants were considered only temporary or in transit – and policy frameworks were designed accordingly. More recently, however, Greece has had to reckon with the realisation that a non-trivial population of immigrants are set to reside in the country on a more permanent basis.

This has been challenging because both public and political narratives about migrants have been among the most negative in the EU. There has been some variation over time – with a significant grassroots solidarity movement supporting refugees en route to Europe in 2015–2016. Overall, however, there has been a persistent fear that migrants will exacerbate Greece's unemployment and fiscal challenges, increase insecurity and threaten the identity of what is largely perceived still to be a homogenous society in ethnic and religious terms.

Since 2015, migration narratives have become more charged and complex, against the backdrop of the Greek debt crisis, bailout and protracted recession, and the sudden arrival of over a million migrants and asylum seekers transiting from Turkey through Greece to elsewhere in the EU. Though the scale of both arrivals and onward transit migration have subsequently decreased, the backlog of people registered as refugees and asylum seekers has grown, reinforcing anxieties about threats to Greek jobs, resources, security and culture. Concerns about being manipulated by Turkey and let down by the EU – in the refugee response, and more generally – have fuelled hostile and securitised policies and narratives, for which migrants themselves have paid the biggest price. As long as Greeks continue to associate migration with threats from aggressive and unsympathetic neighbours, it will be difficult for a positive migration narrative to take hold.

For public narratives on migration to shift, there is therefore a clear need for enhanced EU efforts to equitably share responsibility for refugee-hosting in the region. Beyond international action, there is also a need for domestic actors to step in, to help highlight and maximise the benefits that migrants can bring. Low trust in politicians and the media creates a larger need – and opportunity – for alternative voices, including grassroots civil society initiatives, to work through trusted community networks and social media to help shift perceptions. There is also a clear role for the private sector, to help stimulate economic growth and create jobs, and to highlight the key contribution that the young, diverse and growing population of migrants can make to filling essential workforce gaps in the face of Greece's ageing population, challenging economic circumstances and continued high emigration flows.

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