

Transformation of the migration policy of Greece in 2019-2021

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INFORMATION

Article history:

Submitted: 30 November 2022

Accepted: 18 August 2023

Published: 15 September 2023

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to present a series of measures taken by Greece that focused on reducing migratory pressures and to demonstrate that these measures resulted in fewer irregular migrants reaching the Greek coast. This hypothesis is tested by analyzing individual solutions introduced by the government of Kiriakos Mitsotakis in the period 2019-2021, partially taking into account 2022. The conclusions indicate that the state can effectively reduce the migratory pressure and irregular inflow of migrants by undertaking specific legislative actions and active border protection. The effects of the Greek government's actions were already visible in 2020, and their proof was not only the lower number of migrants, but also the redirection of the migration route towards Italy and Cyprus. The article contributes to research on contemporary, irregular migration to the European Union and indicates the possibilities that the country of first entry has at its disposal in order to reduce high migratory pressure.

KEYWORDS

Greece, migration pressure, migration policy, Kiriakos Mitsotakis



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Introduction

In 2015 and 2016, Greece became the main country through which illegal migrants entered the European Union. The Greek islands and the Turkish-Greek border became the epicentre of the migration crisis. The Greek government became responsible for the reception of migrants, their deployment

in centres, their upkeep and the processing of requests for international protection. Migration pressure began to decline after the European Union and the Turkish government signed an agreement on 16 March 2016 under which all migrants arriving in Greece after 20 March 2016, were to be sent back to Turkey. As a result of the concluded agreement, the number of migrants fell from 177,000 in 2016 to 36,000 in 2017. However, in the following years, more and more migrants arrived in Greece, and the migration pressure kept increasing. The New Democracy party emerged victorious in the 2019 parliamentary elections, vowing to implement changes that resolve the Greek migration problem and mitigate its effects.

This article aims to present a series of actions undertaken by the government led by Kiriakos Mitsotakis, which were focused on reducing the migration pressure, and demonstrate that these actions resulted in a smaller number of irregular migrants reaching the Greek shores. This hypothesis is tested by analysing individual solutions implemented by this government between 2019 and 2021, with partial inclusion of data from 2022. The conclusions show that the state can effectively reduce migration pressure and irregular influx of migrants by taking specific legislative measures and implementing active protection of the border. The effects of the actions taken by the Greek government were already visible in 2020, and they were evidenced not only by the lower number of migrants, but also by the redirection of the migration route towards Italy and Cyprus.

The first part of the article discusses the legislative changes introduced by Mitsotakis government. These included a number of regulations addressed to migrants, including their stay on the territory of Greece, the possibility of entry and the processing of asylum applications. The next part describes the changes in the functioning of the centres, mainly on the Greek islands. Reducing the number of people staying at migration camps and shifting the migration burden from the islands to the interior became a priority for the government. This was all the more important because the inhabitants of the islands demanded a solution to the problem. They protested against the migrants and the government's plans to create new facilities on the islands. Agreements between the government and the authorities of individual islands regarding the creation of new, closed facilities for migrants were preceded by several months of negotiations. Subsequently, a change in the tactics of protecting the Greek border was described. The coast guard began sending migrants back to Turkish territorial waters, which was reported for the first time in 2020. Greece denied the allegations, stressing its right to protect its maritime and land borders. The next part focuses on crime related to the smuggling of

migrants across the border, demonstrating that it takes an organised form and that criminal groups are involved in the transport of migrants. In addition to the measures focused on tightening migration policy, the government tried to improve the situation of minors, especially those who were unaccompanied in Greece, by creating special places for them in appropriate facilities and refraining from their detention in custody. This work also describes secondary migration movements from Greece to Germany. They were the result of the new migration policy introduced by the government; the foreigners who obtained asylum in Greece moved to Germany. This, in turn, caused greater problems for the German government. All the reflections are completed with an analysis of the results and with conclusions.

In this paper, investigation was based on an analytical and empirical model. Comparative analysis and the analysis of existing documents were mainly used. The exploration of documents included a press review and analysis of information provided by NGOs and the Greek government through their websites, press releases and newsletters. Out of Greek journalist media, the articles of the daily newspaper *Kathimerini*, the Athenian-Macedonian news agency *Amna*, the Greek City Times media group and the Greek TV channel *Ert* were used. They were of informative nature. These are nationwide media that often deal with the subject of illegal migration to Greece. International media and their reports on Greek politics were also used. These were articles by CNN, BBC and Reuters. Such a selection of source materials allowed for a thorough analysis of the actions taken by the Greek government to combat illegal migration to the country.

The terms irregular or illegal will be used alternately in relation to the migration process and migrants in this article, in accordance with the meanings contained in the Dictionary of the Polish Language. *Uniwersalny słownik języka polskiego* (*The universal dictionary of the Polish language*) edited by Stanisław Dubisz gives the meaning of the adjective *illegal* as “unlawful, without legal force, not recognized by law, unlawful, informal, secret”, while *irregular* means “not based on rules, principles, deviating from them, incompatible with them” [1, p. 957-958].

The article contributes to research on contemporary illegal migration to the European Union and indicates the possibilities available to the country of first entry in order to reduce high migration pressure. At the same time, it emphasizes the congruence of actions and the consequences in their implementation in the still unstable migration situation in the Mediterranean.

1. Legislative changes

During the migration crisis in 2015 and 2016, Greece bore the main burden related to the influx of illegal migrants, their placement in centres, maintenance and relocation to other countries. That was until an agreement was reached between the EU and Turkey to stem the flow of migrants on 16.03.2016. The agreement stipulated that all illegal migrants who arrived in Greece after 20.03.2016 would be returned to Turkey. This was supposed to take place in full compliance with EU and international law, with collective expulsions being excluded. It was an emergency and extraordinary measure aimed at restoring public order in Greece. The migrants arriving at the Greek islands were to be registered and their asylum applications accepted for consideration. In the event that they did not apply for asylum, or their application was rejected, they were to be returned to Turkey. The costs of return journeys were to be borne by the EU. It was also decided that for every Syrian sent back to Turkey, Turkey could resettle another Syrian citizen to the EU, taking into account the susceptibility criterion. Priority was given to those migrants who had not previously entered nor tried to enter the EU illegally [2].

Although the influx of migrants to Europe decreased in the following years, Greece was still the country of first entry into the EU for migrants, and migration pressure persisted at a high level. More than 177,000 migrants arrived in Greece in 2016, more than 36,000 in 2017, and more than 50,500 in 2018 [3]. The way out of the difficult situation in which the country found itself was to develop a cohesive approach to migration management. Such an opportunity appeared in July 2019, when Kiriakos Mitsotakis became the prime minister of the government after the general elections, in which the New Democracy formation gained a majority in the parliament.

The new government announced stricter migration and asylum policies aimed at reducing the number of arrivals, increasing the number of returns to Turkey and boosting border control measures. This was necessary for several reasons: the centres on the islands were overcrowded, the procedure of granting asylum was excessively long, and the migration pressure remained high. The government's actions had to focus on relocating migrants from overcrowded centres on the islands to the mainland part of Greece, combating the still high migration pressure and regulating the migrants' residence.

Three days after taking power, the government repealed the decree on assigning social security numbers to asylum seekers. Instead, it was decided that any immigrant who applied for asylum in Greece would receive a temporary social security number (PAAYPA), providing medical care for 6 months after the

application. If the asylum application was not granted approval, PAAYPA was to be automatically deactivated, while if international protection was granted, the temporary number turned into AMKA number, a permanent social security number used by all Greek citizens [4]. Such a solution was intended to ensure financial control over the costs of health care for migrants, which in turn was supposed to facilitate the proper allocation of European funds.

National asylum laws were amended in November 2019 by the International Protection Act and other regulations (IPA, L. 4636/2019). It entered into force on 01.01.2020 and replaced the previous provisions on asylum and reception of migrants. The new law introduced less extensive possibilities of appeal after rejecting the application for international protection, extended the duration of stay for asylum seekers in centres (from three to eighteen months) and changed the definition of vulnerability, limiting the concept of vulnerability in the post-traumatic stress clause, which – in the opinion of the new cabinet – had so far been abused, and the reference to it facilitated obtaining international protection. The regulations also expanded the list of third countries (of origin), considered safe, to which migrants could be returned.

The government also planned to speed up the processing of applications for international protection, especially since their number increased from over 72,000 at the end of September 2019 to over 97,000 by the end of February 2020. To this end, the new rules extended the use of the border procedure when examining applications. The act also introduced new procedural formalities and facilitated rejection of applications. The Prime Minister also promised to speed up readmission: so far it had been about 16,000 per year, but in 2019 the number of people sent back was only 9,700.

The commissions dealing with appeals against rejected asylum applications were to consist of one or two judges. This was a change to the previously functioning rules, whereby the commission consisted of three members – two Greek judges and an independent expert, trained by UNHCR. It was also decided to increase the number of border police officers by 1,200 new posts and to set up closed registration and deportation camps on the islands in the eastern Aegean Sea. It was also announced that border controls would be strengthened. The enactment of the new law was met with a reaction from the Council of Europe, which expressed concern about some of the provisions. Of particular concern to Human Rights Commissioner Dunja Mijatović was the prolonged detention of asylum seekers in facilities and the risk of a shallow assessment of applications, which, in the Council's view, could harm the rights of migrants and refugees [5].

The Prime Minister decided to establish the Ministry for Migration and Asylum [6]. The decision was taken due to the constant influx of migrants and the inefficiency of the asylum system, which could not keep up with processing applications, as migration issues had been transferred by the previous government to a department, operating within the national ministry of civil protection. The established ministry was also intended to help implement the government's new migration policy.

The government also reduced the *Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation* (ESTIA) program, which guaranteed cash benefits for asylum seekers and refugees and provided housing for about 20,000 people. The new IPA law has reduced the period for granting cash allowance to recognised refugees from 6 months to 1 month (as of March 2020). The HELIOS project was launched, on the other hand, from which more than 12,000 refugees benefited between July 2019 and July 2020. It included courses and integration activities, employment assistance, and subsidies for renting accommodation [7].

In February 2020, an amendment was submitted to the parliament stipulating that non-governmental organizations involved in providing assistance to migrants had to provide a list of all their members and employees, along with information on where the person works and what activities they perform (what they do and where). Organizations failing to comply with this obligation were to have their permit for conducting operations revoked. Such action was based on suspicions that the organizations were assisting illegal migrants to reach Europe, thus further stimulating illegal migration movements.

The amendment, which was part of the Ministry of Citizen Protection's draft law on civil protection and crisis management, also provided for the creation of a special fund with an annual budget of 25 million Euros for municipalities where migrant facilities are located. It was to be used to finance their activities and support local communities receiving migrants. The money was intended to compensate municipalities for the costs incurred by migrants without their having to spend money from municipal taxes. The amendment also allowed for the conversion of certain public and municipal real properties and unused military bases into facilities where migrants would be placed before being deported to their country of origin.

Four months after the entry into force of Act 4636/2019, on 10.04.2020, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum presented a draft of a legal act "Improvement of the migration legislation", aimed at accelerating asylum procedures and facilitating the implementation of the new legislation [8]. The law specified which applications for international protection could be rejected as unfounded and introduced a set of provisions defining the grounds for detaining

asylum seekers and third-country nationals. The draft legislation was adopted by the parliament on 9.05.2020. As a result of the legislation, the persons who were recognised as refugees were granted a one-year residence permit, with a renewal option for a period of two years. In the case of a negative assessment of an application for international protection, the person was to remain in pre-departure detention, even if they had submitted a subsequent (appeal) application, an application for revocation, and/or an application for suspension. If the appeal was rejected, the Independent Board of Appeal issued a decision ruling that the migrant in question return to their home country [9].

On 11.10.2020, the Minister of Migration and Asylum Notis Mitarachi announced changes in the access to social funds for persons applying for refugee status. An obligation was introduced for persons who applied for international protection whereby they had to open a bank account and apply for a temporary national insurance number [10]. The Prime Minister stressed that in November 2020, 82,000 people were receiving welfare benefits. Assigning numbers was supposed to pave the way for smooth social integration, but in reality, it was aimed at structuring and controlling the money spent.

Another important change was the abolition of financial assistance for applicants pursuing international protection who were not accommodated in facilities subordinated to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum on 01.07.2021. Those who lived outside the facilities had to apply for accommodation in available facilities in order to receive assistance. In 2021, this group numbered 25,000 people. Aid was to be paid after verifying the presence of migrants in an appropriate facility.

2. Changes in the facilities

In mid-November 2019, the government announced that it would close all *Reception and Identification Centres* (RIC) on the islands and replace them with closed facilities where migrants would be housed throughout the asylum process. The previous government of Alexis Tsipras established six Reception and Identification Centres (RIC) on the Aegean islands and in the Evros region. In the centres to which the migrants were directed, registration and identification was conducted, information was collected, medical examinations and further administrative procedures were carried out. According to the Law No. 4375/2016, newly arrived migrants were to stay in RIC for a maximum of 25 days. However, the centres located on the islands acted not only as registration centres, but also as accommodation for asylum seekers and

those undergoing return/readmission procedures. In reality, the migrants' stay lasted longer than 25 days, until the completion of asylum and readmission procedures [11].

The law introduced by New Democracy provided for the closure of RIC and the establishment of new closed detention centres, not only on the islands but also on the mainland. Four closed pre-expulsion detention centres (Petrou Ralli, Amygdaleza, Xanthi, and Drama Paranesti) had already been operating in Greece for many years [11]. This proposal was initially met with opposition from local authorities and residents. The islands demanded relocation of the migration centres to the interior. On 22.01.2020, almost 10,000 people demonstrated on Lesbos under a slogan: "We want to regain our islands". The demonstrators demanded solutions to the problems they had been experiencing for the past five years: constant migration pressure, an increasing number of people staying in camps, and overloaded infrastructure. The proposal of the government forcing through the idea of building new centres on Lesbos and Chios was met with fierce resistance from the local residents: there occurred clashes between protesters and the police. It seemed that the tolerance of ordinary Greeks towards refugee camps, especially on the islands, had been exhausted, and every attempt to relocate them was met with fierce opposition and protests from enraged communities near the new sites for the construction of facilities.

In September 2020, Covid-19 outbreaks occurred in the centres located on Chios, Samos and Lesbos. On 17.03.2020, due to the spread of the pandemic, the government ordered the closure of all centres on the islands. This order was gradually extended and was cancelled in some centres at the end of September 2020. As a sign of protest against this decision, the Moria camp on the island of Lesbos was set on fire in September. After it had burned down, around 10,000 people were left homeless. The Greek authorities informed that the fires had been deliberately set off by a small group of residents of the overcrowded camp after isolation and closure orders were issued to combat the Coronavirus outbreak. After the Moria fire, the Greek authorities created a temporary facility in the Kara Tepe area, beginning the process of relocating refugees and immigrants. The verdict in the arson case came in 2021 – the Mitylene Juvenile Court imposed a five-year prison sentence on two Afghan minors accused of starting the fire. In addition to the two minors, their four other compatriots who were found to be of legal age were accused with the same charges [12]. In June 2021, each of them was sentenced to 10 years in prison [13]. In November, a fire broke out in the centre on the island of Samos, but it was possible to extinguish it without causing much damage.

Faced with the difficult situation on the islands, the government's goal was to transfer migrants from overcrowded centres to the interior. From July 2019 to March 2020, almost 30,000 people left the islands, but at the same time new people were still arriving. The prime minister asked EU member states to relocate 4,000 unaccompanied minors staying in Greek camps. Only one member state responded to his appeals. Finally, in March 2020, the European Commission announced a plan to relocate minors, committing to relocate 2,000 people. Before the fire in the Moria refugee camp, only about 200 people had been relocated, although in its aftermath many countries made a commitment to accept minors.

In October 2020, the Minister of Migration and Asylum Notis Mitarachi stressed the need for a European solution to the immigration problem after a meeting in Brussels with the European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson. He stated that the problem of illegal migration to the EU is not only a problem of Greece but also of Europe and therefore requires a European solution. During the discussion on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, he said that the new agreement is intended to act restrictively on migration flows and support countries of first reception/entry, because Greece, and in particular the five islands in the Aegean Sea, had borne the main burden of the migration crisis of recent years [14].

At the same time, talks were underway in the country to create safer and more strictly controlled reception centres for migrants on the Aegean Islands. In November, the Minister of Migration and Asylum Notis Mitarachi announced the construction of better-equipped camps on the islands of Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Leros and Kos. The camps were supposed to be ready by the autumn of 2021, and asylum seekers were to stay in them for no more than six months [15]. On the topic of funding, the Minister Mitarachi and EU representative Beate Gminder (Deputy Director-General in charge of the Task Force Migration Management in the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs of the EU) signed a co-financing agreement for the construction of new, closed and controlled facilities on Samos, Kos and Leros. The amount of co-financing of these projects is 121 M euros and it is fully covered by the European Union. Priority was given to the construction of new facilities on Samos and Leros.

On 10.12.2020, the Governor of the North Aegean Region Konstantinos Moutzouris discussed these issues with the EU representative Beate Gminder. During the conversation, he emphasised economic and social losses suffered by the residents over the years and the need to completely relieve the Aegean Islands. According to the Governor, the residents of Lesbos, Chios and Samos did not have any significant support and had not received compensation for

the damage they suffered when the migration changed their daily lives for the worse. He stressed that the influx of migrants from Turkey was still unpredictable. Therefore, on Lesbos a centre for several thousand people could not be established, but only a small registration centre where migrants would stay for a few days [16].

As mentioned earlier, the proposal to build centres was met with opposition from the local residents. The representatives of local governments, the church and local communities announced that they would block the creation of new centres for migrants near the land border in the Evros region and on the island of Leros in the Aegean Sea. In Evros, the plan envisaged was almost tripling the capacity of the contemporary centre from 600 to 1,500 people. Local municipalities feared that this move would lead to similar situation that had been observed at the border during the peak of the crisis in 2015, when such camps were scattered along the border [17].

In January 2021, local municipal authorities agreed to create a new closed facility on Chios, citing “an urgent need to limit the flow of refugees and immediately create the necessary facility outside the urban zone” [18]. The municipal council of Mytilene, the largest city on Lesbos, also gave its consent by a vote of 16 in favour to 15 against. The facility was supposed to be small and placed at a distance from the city, but the agreement did not specify its exact location or capacity. The same decision stated that the operation of the new facility meant the end of the operation of all current centres and even of renting apartments in and around the city of Mytilene.

Both decisions were met with protests from the residents of Lesbos, who claimed that the centres for foreigners were nothing more than “concentration camps” that permanently change the character of the islands [19]. They called for the elimination of migrant camps, arguing that such facilities on the islands should only serve the identification and registration of migrants. Protests also took place on the island of Chios. The demonstrators demanded closing centres and constructing a facility for no more than 500 people, the aim of which would be to identify and register migrants before relocating them to the continent.

The wave of protests that swept the Aegean Islands also reached the border region of Evros. In February 2021, the Minister of Migration and Asylum Notis Mitarachi was pelted with stones, eggs and plastic coffee cups during his visit to a refugee centre in the Orestiada region in the northwest of the country. The local residents gathered to express opposition to the plans to enlarge the centre and create additional accommodation in it [20]. Finally, in March 2021, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum announced that it was withdrawing from

these plans. The reaction of the local community, which organized rallies and protests, and the position of regional authorities were crucial in changing the government's plans.

At the end of March 2021, the camps on the islands were visited by the Commissioner Ylva Johansson, who informed of additional funds for the construction of new facilities for migrants. After the fire in Moria refugee camp in September 2020, the EU unlocked 121 M euros for the construction of three smaller reception centres on the islands of Samos, Kos and Lesbos. The facilities were to be completed by September 2021. In addition, 155 M euros were allocated for the construction of reception centres on Lesbos and Chios. The EU Commissioner stressed that the number of migrants staying in the centres on the Greek islands had decreased but described it as "still unsatisfactory". She added, however, that the EU "is making huge improvements in this area" [21].

In May 2021, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum reported that for the first time since the migration crisis in 2015, fewer than 10,000 people were staying in Greek camps on the islands [22]. At that time, the minister determined the direction chosen by the government as an appropriate one. In September 2021, new centres were opened on Samos, in November on Lesbos and Kos, and the opening of closed and controlled facilities on Lesbos and Chios was planned for 2023. In November 2021, the government decided to build two more Reception and Identification Centres in the north and south of Greece to register the biometric data of the foreigners who had not previously registered at any facility. Some migrants who arrived in Greece did not register at the centres but went to a police station to obtain a pass there, which gave them 30 days to register at the asylum office. From that moment, the people who appeared at police stations were to be transferred to Reception and Identification Centres.

3. Pushback of migrants

In the face of the lack of transfers to other member states and the constant tension in relations with Turkey, Greece decided on the tactics of active border protection. In 2020, allegations arose about the pushback of migrants by the Greek coast guard back into Turkish waters. In one case, Danish media reported that a Danish patrol boat operating in the Aegean Sea had received orders from Frontex commanders to push back 33 people into Turkish waters. The crew refused to obey the order and brought migrants to the island of Kos. In

August 2020, Germany's vice Minister of Defence confirmed two more incidents, including the return of migrants who arrived in Chios to Turkish waters at the end of April. UNHCR requested that the Greek government investigate the cases and respect the maritime law.

In October 2020, Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency launched an internal investigation following media reports by "Bellingcat", "Lighthouse Reports", "Der Spiegel", "ARD" and "TV Asahi", according to which Frontex was involved in repressions aimed at preventing migrants and refugees from reaching Europe via the Greek islands, i.e. pushing migrants back towards Turkey. "Bellingcat" informed that the video indicated that Frontex boats "were actively involved in one incident on the Greek-Turkish maritime border in the Aegean Sea, present at another and had been in the vicinity of four other ones since March" [23]. These reports were said to have been confirmed, among others, by photographs and recordings of the Turkish coast guard. The EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson requested that Frontex clarify the incidents. The agency responded then that the dispute between Turkey and Greece over their maritime borders had hampered its operations in the Aegean Sea, stating that Greek and Turkish coastguard vessels had often been involved in hazardous situations in the narrow stretch of waters between the two countries, which was said to have affected search and rescue operations in the area.

To clarify the matter, Frontex executive director Fabrice Leggeri was questioned in the German parliament, but his testimony did not clarify the doubts. Luise Amtsberg, the Greens' spokeswoman on refugee policy and a member of the Bundestag's interior affairs committee told the Berliner Zeitung that Leggeri had been unable to address many of the concerns about Frontex missions in the Aegean Sea, but it had become apparent that the inability to control these operations was the problem. The Left-wing spokeswoman Ulla Jelpke spoke to Der Spiegel about the overwhelming evidence for the illegal pushback of boats carrying refugees, while the FDP parliamentary group's spokeswoman on migration policy Linda Teuteberg demanded that Frontex be given more powers: "We need an effective European border guard that respects humanitarian obligations while effectively fighting illegal migration and organised crime" [24].

4. Smuggling of migrants from Turkey

The government also had to deal with crime aimed at smuggling illegal migrants. In October 2020, the activities of a criminal group that organised the smuggling of migrants came to light. Foreigners, mainly Pakistani citizens, with residence and work permits in Greece, within a few months created a fleet of 232 used cars in total, which was used to transport illegal immigrants from the border region of Evros to Thessaloniki and Attica. The main figure involved in this was a Pakistani citizen owning a total of 32 vehicles. 26 of those were purchased between July and September 2020 from private individuals or motor vehicle dealers. The transport cost ranged from 800 to 1200 euros [25]. In a different case, in November 2020, officers of the Igumenitsa Port Authority arrested sixteen foreigners, mainly Afghan citizens, and a Turkish citizen who was their smuggler. The migrants were smuggled in a truck semi-trailer [26].

In addition to smuggling foreigners, Greece struggled with instrumentalization of migration, which in turns was used by Turkey as a means of exerting pressure in order to achieve specific goals, the most common of which were destabilisation or chaos. In December 2020, Greece called upon Turkey to prevent illegal attempts and border crossings. For instance, they pointed to an example of Somali citizens whose illegal migration seemed to be coordinated, according to the Greek government. Prime Minister Kiriakos Mitsotakis said that 142 of the 214 migrants who arrived on Lesbos in November came from Somalia. Citizens of this country arrived in Turkey legally (on the basis of a student or medical visa), and then tried to enter Greece illegally. Mitsotakis stressed that “there should be no doubt; this is not about geopolitics; it is about illegal human trafficking into the European Union. We are simply asking Turkey to honour their commitments by helping us to proactively manage and reduce illegal migration” [27].

An investigation conducted by the Greek security and intelligence services revealed the existence of an organised criminal group which managed smuggling of illegal migrants from Somalia to Greece via Istanbul. The investigation allowed for locating and preventing attempts at illegal migration by 2,500 illegal migrants from Somalia who wanted to enter Greece from Turkey. The migrants who managed to get to Lesbos or Chios from Turkey paid between 500 and 800 euros for the transport. They entered Turkey on the basis of false documents from a training and research hospital or the Municipal University of Mogadishu. The existence of such documents was confirmed by Frontex. Issuing student or medical visas required invitations from Istanbul universities or, respectively, hospitalisation records from Turkish hospitals, which also

turned out to be faked. In addition, an analysis of the deposit accounts of Somali immigrants indicated that two Islamic NGOs helped in the visa application process, as well as during the trip to Istanbul and then to Greece. One of them was based in the United Kingdom and the other one in Turkey. The investigation focused on the islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos, because at that time illegal migration from Turkey led to these islands. Other investigations into the smuggling of illegal migrants also covered involvement of NGOs in humanitarian aid. Some of them had been accused of helping with illegal border-crossing in the past [28].

5. Support for minors

In November 2020, the Deputy Minister for Migration and Asylum Georgios Kumutsakos and the Danish State Secretary for Development Policy Trine Rask Thygesen signed an agreement to provide about three million euros of financial support to unattended minors staying in camps in Greece. The agreement was intended to be in force from November 2020 to April 2022, and the funds were to be allocated for creating an accommodation base, as well as educational, training and integration programs with the Greek society.

Other measures introduced by the new government included discontinuing the practice of holding children and adolescents seeking asylum, who arrived without their parents or guardians to Greece, in police custody. The practice so far had been to detain minors in custody often together with unrelated adults, which was condemned by migrant rights organisations and the European Court of Human Rights. The system had been in place since 2001, according to its assumptions it was intended to be temporary, but usually would turn into a long-term stay due to the lack of available places in children's facilities. In early 2019, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in favour of nine minors aged 14-17 from Syria, Iraq and Morocco who arrived in Greece in 2016 and spent weeks in police custody before being placed in appropriate facilities. At the end of March 2020, 331 unaccompanied minors were in Greek custody; this number was reduced to zero by 14.11.2020 and those children were transferred to long-term or temporary facilities. In December 2021, a decision was made to create new facilities for minors; an agreement on this matter was signed between the Ministry for Migration and Asylum and the International Organisation for Migration.

Another angle of the problem with minors was related to overcrowded refugee camps on the Aegean islands. The ministry stated that from mid-February

to August 2020, 960 of them had been transferred from the islands to facilities in the interior of the country, other European Union countries or joined their relatives. Another group of 733 minors was transferred from island camps to mainland facilities or hotels in September and October [29].

Another dimension of assistance for children was the programme of relocation to Germany. In December 2020, the Ministry for Migration and Asylum announced the end of the program, thanks to which more than 1,000 people, including 612 children [30], were transferred to Germany. The program included the transfer of people with serious illnesses and was implemented despite the coronavirus pandemic.

6. Secondary migration to Germany

Secondary migration, i.e. the movement of migrants from Greece to other EU member states, remained a particular problem not only for Greece, but also for Germany. It was very often the case even after the foreigner had obtained refugee status. This was influenced by the low social support and pull factors in other EU Member States (presence of family or rules for the payment of social benefits). One of the countries towards which migrants headed most often was Germany. The phenomenon was so frequent that the German police decided to deploy German officers at Greek airports. Their aim was to prevent secondary migration to Germany. Their job was to check the originality of the documents and the purpose of the journey, as well as to stop those who were going to Germany to apply for asylum there in Greece. In 2020, German police reported that 5,200 people attempted to travel by plane from Greece to Germany without valid documents. This reflected a slight decrease compared to 5,800 detainees in the previous year. Most of the migrants were using forged documents or documents belonging to other people. Another 2,300 people wanted to fly to other member states (Belgium, Austria, France). A federal police report on the activities of German officers in Greece described the smuggling of migrants from Greece as “particularly significant”. Eight German police officers were deployed at Athens and Thessaloniki airports, with more deployed in other locations in 2021. In addition to internal border controls, 84 German police officers were serving in Greece under the auspices of Frontex. They secured the external border in the Aegean Sea, as well as the Turkish-Greek land border [31].

Secondary migration concerned not only people who tried to enter Germany on the basis of false documents, but also recognised refugees in Greece.

The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) stated that in 2020 a total of 7,100 asylum seekers in Germany had previously been granted refugee status in Greece. In January and February 2021, around 2,100 people applied for asylum to the German migration authorities, despite having already received protection in Greece. The case was quite problematic for the German asylum system, as migrants who obtained refugee status in Greece and crossed into Germany could not be sent back to Athens. This was ruled by a German court, which stated that returning a refugee would carry a “serious risk of inhuman and degrading treatment” [32]. Stopping secondary irregular migration has therefore become a priority for the services.

7. Other measures

In October 2020, other measures, indicated by the government, intended to curb the influx of illegal migrants were underway. On 17.10.2020, Prime Minister Kiriakos Mitsotakis, during a visit to the Ferres area, said that a new fence would be built along the north-eastern border with Turkey to stop illegal migrants from entering Greece. The project was expected to be completed in April 2021. The steel fence with barbed wire was to be 5 m high and 27 km long. Eight observation towers were also to be built along the fence. It was announced that 400 additional guards would be employed to patrol the border. After the fence was built, it was decided to extend it. It was to be built along the entire length of the land border in the Evros region, and it was also decided to modernise and strengthen the surveillance system.

The government also announced the creation of a safe country of origin list. It was supposed to speed up issuance of decisions on the granting of international protection. The Ministry announced that the list would be drawn up on the basis of European Union, national and international law, with input from international scholars, lawyers and political scientists, as well as ministerial officials. In January 2021, as recommended by the Secretary-General for Migration Policy, Pakistan and Bangladesh were added to safe countries of origin, being locations from which a large number of immigrants come to Greece. At the same time, Ghana, Senegal, Togo, The Gambia, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Albania, Georgia, Ukraine, India and Armenia received such status. In addition, Turkey was recognised as a safe country of origin for international protection applicants from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Somalia. The citizens of these countries submitted two-thirds of all asylum applications in Greece. According to the Greek decision, these people were not exposed to

any risk in Turkey due to their religion, nationality, race, political beliefs or social status. The decision was linked to a change in legislation the government was working on in July 2021, which would speed up the return of migrants from Greece to Turkey.

In November 2020, the Minister of Migration and Asylum Notis Mitarachi admitted that the whereabouts of some 32,000 migrants whose asylum applications had been rejected were unknown. Speaking at a press conference, he said that the authorities did not know what had happened to the migrants after their asylum applications had been rejected, given the existing problems with migrant returns. He did not exclude that many of those who had been in Greece illegally had made their way to other EU countries [33].

8. Analysis of results

A large-scale influx of illegal migrants to the Greek Aegean islands began in 2015. The final destination of the migrants was Western European countries, mainly Germany. Initially, Syrian nationals constituted the largest proportion of asylum seekers; over time, nationals of other countries from the Middle East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa or South Asia also reached Hellenic shores. The agreement between the European Union and the Turkish authorities limited the migration flows and the agreement has remained in force, although there were tensions in the relationship between Greece and Turkey related either to the issue of migration or hydrocarbon resources in the Mediterranean. Kiriakos Mitsotakis took the helm in the government in 2019. He changed migration policy, launching a large-scale measures to comprehensively address the problem of illegal migration. Among the measures applied the following should be listed:

- changes in social security,
- introduction of limited possibilities of appeal after a negative decision on an application for international protection,
- acceleration of processing of applications for international protection,
- increasing the number of full-time positions in the border police,
- establishment of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum,
- shortening the period for granting cash allowance to refugees,
- introduction of restrictions on the receipt of financial assistance,
- introduction of additional requirements for non-governmental organisations operating in Greece,

- construction of new closed and controlled facilities for migrants on the islands and in the interior,
- active border protection with the application of migrants’ pushback to Turkey,
- abolition of the practice of detaining minors in police custody, financial support for unaccompanied children,
- construction of a fence in the Evros region along the Greek-Turkish border,
- creating a list of safe countries of origin to minimise formalities at readmission.

The policy introduced resulted in a reduction in the number of migrants reaching Greece and its islands. In the years 2015-2019, their number remained at a high level, since 2020 there has been a decrease in migration pressure. In 2015, more than 861,000 migrants arrived in Greece, in 2016 more than 177,000, in 2017 more than 36,000, in 2018 more than 50,500, in 2019 more than 74,600. In 2020, a few months after New Democracy took power, it was possible to make this number drop to 15,600 and to 9,100 in 2021. The fluctuation of the number of migrants arriving in Greece between 2015 and 2021 is shown in Figure 1.

In 2020, the number of migrant arrivals dropped by 87% in the Greek islands and by 62% in the Evros border region in northern Greece compared to the previous year. The number of refugees and migrants accommodated in suitable facilities across the country was reduced by 93,000 to 65,000 particularly due to the closure of hotels – 57 such facilities were closed in 2020 [35]. A year

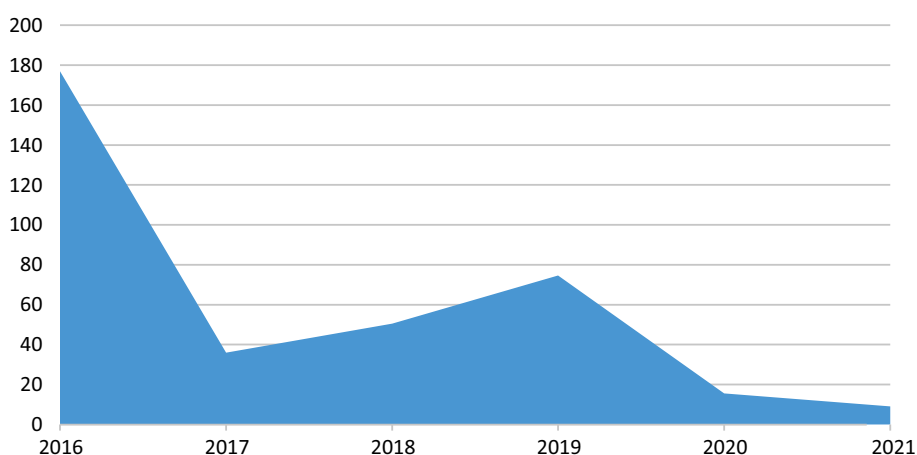


Fig. 1. The number of migrants arriving in Greece in the period of 2016-2021 (in thousands)

Source: The author’s own elaboration based on UNHCR data [34].

later in 2021, the number of migrants arriving in the Greek islands reached its lowest level since the migration crisis. At that time, more than 4,300 people arrived from Turkey. This is a decrease compared to 9,700 migrants arriving in the islands in 2020 and almost 60,000 in 2019 [36].

It should be noted that in 2020 the number of migrants who arrived in all EU Member States decreased. In total, almost 95,000 newly arrived persons were registered. This was the lowest number since 2013. The biggest decrease, despite the increase at the beginning of the year, took place on the eastern Mediterranean route, where 17,500 illegal migrants were recorded (this route was also used by migrants to reach Cyprus, Bulgaria and Italy). On the remaining central and western Mediterranean routes there was an increase compared to 2019, which meant that Mitsotakis government's policy brought tangible results.

The necessity to solve the migration problem was also caused by a high number of applications for international protection. In 2020 almost 37,900 of such applications were submitted in Greece, which placed the country in 4th place in terms of the number of applications filed by migrants. The largest number of applications was submitted in Germany – 102.5 thousand, it was a quarter of all the submitted applications. Spain came just behind Germany (86.4 thousand, i.e. 21%), followed by France (81.8 thousand, or 20%), Greece (37.9 thousand, or 9%) and Italy (21.2 thousand, or 5%). In total, 80% of all applications for international protection were submitted for the first time in these five Member States [37].

Despite the introduced solutions, the constant migration pressure from the Turkish direction persisted to constitute a problem in Greece, as did the hybrid threat from Turkey, which could instrumentalise illegal migration and use it to achieve ad hoc political goals. Non-governmental organisations have also been accused of providing assistance and facilitating illegal migration. In July 2021, ten people were charged with providing assistance to migrant smugglers. Under the cover of humanitarian activities, these people communicated with a criminal group through the use of closed online groups and communication applications [38].

Although Mitsotakis' migration policy was criticised by NGOs (particularly the active form of border protection consisting in pushbacks of migrants), while taking action to reduce the migration pressure the government could not fail to take into account the will of the people, mainly the inhabitants of the islands, who demanded the reduction of migration movements. The special lower VAT rate introduced by the previous government was not enough to mitigate the effects of the migration crisis. The islanders were opposed to

the creation of permanent facilities, but demanded temporary registration centres from which migrants would be transferred to the interior.

Conclusions

The problem of overburdening the countries of first entry/reception, situated on the external borders of the EU, was discussed in December 2020 by Prime Minister Kiriakos Mitsotakis with the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson. Both sides agreed that Member States situated on the outskirts of the European Union should not be solely responsible for managing the migration problem and that solutions based on the principle of solidarity are needed. Meanwhile, EU solidarity was leaning more towards border protection rather than relocation. There was no agreement to it among all the Member States. The solution consisting in relocating arriving migrants already appeared in September 2015 during the migration crisis, but the program expired two years later. The topic returned in the Pact on Migration and Asylum proposed by the German Presidency, but again it was not accepted by all countries.

In the case of Greece, the high number of refugees from Syria residing in Turkey remained an additional risk factor. A study carried out by the Centre for Research on Migration and Integration of the Turkish-German University in Istanbul (*Syrian Barometer*) indicated that more than half of the 3.6 million Syrian citizens residing in Turkey did not want to return to Syria. The report showed that the percentage of Syrians who said “I will never return to Syria” was 16.7 percent in 2017. In 2019, it increased to 51.8 percent [39]. In this situation, border protection and consistent migration policy were a remedy for Greece to alleviate the difficult situation that had arisen over the years.

As a result of strict border controls and the reports of the pushbacks of migrants to Turkey’s territorial waters, migrants began to choose other routes along which they attempted to reach the European Union. In 2021, migration movements were observed on the so-called Calabrian route, which led from the Turkish coast to Italy, to the region of Calabria or to the Italian islands. In 2021, 11,600 migrants entered by this route – four times more than the year before, and their share in the total number of migrants who arrived in Italy amounted to 16%. In 2022, it increased to 20% (16,000 by the end of October 2022). The second alternative path was the route leading to Cyprus. In 2021, almost 12,000 migrants arrived in the island (twice as many as the year before), while 9,100 migrants arrived in Greece. This trend continued in 2022 with

13,000 migrant arrivals in Greece and 15,500 migrant arrivals in Cyprus by the end of October. Therefore, as a result of the Greek government's policy, part of irregular migration movements was redirected to other alternative routes.

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Transformacja polityki migracyjnej Grecji w latach 2019-2021

STRESZCZENIE


Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie szeregu działań podjętych przez Grecję, które skoncentrowane były na ograniczeniu presji migracyjnej oraz wykazanie, że działania te przyniosły skutek w postaci mniejszej liczby nieregularnych migrantów docierających do greckich wybrzeży. Hipoteza ta testowana jest za pomocą analizy poszczególnych rozwiązań, wprowadzanych przez rząd Kiriakosa Mitsotakisa w okresie 2019-2021 z częściowym uwzględnieniem 2022 roku. Wnioski wskazują, że państwo może skutecznie obniżyć presję migracyjną oraz nieregularny napływ migrantów poprzez podejmowanie określonych działań legislacyjnych oraz aktywną ochronę granicy. Efekty działań rządu greckiego widoczne były już w 2020 roku, a ich dowodem była nie tylko niższa liczba migrantów, ale również przekierowanie szlaku migracyjnego w kierunku Włoch oraz na Cypr. Artykuł wnosi wkład w badania dotyczące współczesnej, nieregularnej migracji do Unii Europejskiej i wskazuje na możliwości, jakimi dysponuje państwo pierwszego wjazdu w celu ograniczenia wysokiej presji migracyjnej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE Grecja, presja migracyjna, polityka migracyjna, Kiriakos Mitsotakis

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Acknowledgement

No acknowledgement and potential funding was reported by the author.

Conflict of interests

The author declared no conflict of interests.

Author contributions

The author contributed to the interpretation of results and writing of the paper. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical statement

The research complies with all national and international ethical requirements.