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**A Paradox in today's Europe?
Greece's Response
to the Syrian Refugee Crisis**

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Executive Summary

Since the summer of 2015, the ongoing conflict in Syria has made itself felt in Europe through the unprecedented number of Syrian refugees reaching its borders wreaking havoc on European Institutions, pushing to the limits the solidarity among member-states, overloading national services and budgets, raising security concerns and fueling heated debates over asylum policies and integration. Events have particularly impacted an already overburdened Greece. This paper will examine Greek responses toward Syrian refugees, taking into account historic ties between the two nations, the ongoing recession, the rise of right wing extremism, and public emotions about the plight of families displaced by conflict and oppression.

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Introduction

Since 2015, over one million refugees and migrants have paid smugglers to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Greece. With unemployment hitting 23.3% in April 2016 (the highest in the European Union)¹ and the economy in full-blown recession, registering a 25% decline of gross domestic product from 2009 and into 2016,² it seems a paradox that Greeks would display such a show of sympathy and support for the daily waves of thousands that had to be rescued from sinking boats, to be received and registered on Aegean islands a few miles off the Turkish coast, and then transported to cities across the country.

This paper will examine how Greek reactions to the refugee crisis developed against a backdrop of domestic economic and social hardship, the rise of the extreme right, the election of a left-leaning government with a conservative coalition partner, wider political instability, an unraveling solidarity between members of the European Union, and terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, and Germany.

From migration to mass movement of populations: The record arrivals of 2015

In 2015, there was a sudden spike in mass migration to Europe. The Syrian civil war had been raging since 2011, and until the summer of 2015, displaced Syrians primarily sought refuge in the neighboring countries. The exodus of Syrians was initially slow. In 2011, small numbers began to seek out familial relations in order to learn about and move to neighboring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. They rented homes and put their children in school, but still continued to travel back and forth to Syria. In that period it was thought that the Syrian conflict would not last long. Gradually and by 2012, the number of refugees grew and began to necessitate the provision of services. Businesspeople were perhaps among the first who sold assets and relocated to countries close to home to continue their activities.

It was the escalation of violence in Aleppo in the summer of 2012 that pushed the first major wave of people -about 200,000 - to leave almost from

the outset³. Still, though there were notable instances of individual boats carrying refugees to Europe in previous years, the influx beginning in summer 2015 was sudden and drastic. Today, Syrian refugees are considered the second-largest refugee population in the entire world⁴ and the crisis has only worsened inside the country. Looking back at the press coverage of the time, the rapidity by which the situation changed over that historic summer becomes painfully clear as is the fact that European governments and peoples seemed to have been caught unawares.

On June 9, 2015, the Greek newspaper Kathimerini published UNHCR data that estimated that “more that 48.000 refugees, particularly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, have arrived this year and until now on the Greek islands. This number has already surpassed the approximately 43.500 arrivals by sea for all of 2014. Lesvos continues to receive the biggest number of refugees reaching a near total of 19.000. Hundreds are leaving the islands on a daily basis after they are identified and registered.”⁵

Two months later, on August 6, 2015,⁶ refugee arrivals to Greece were estimated at 124.000. One month after that, on September 10 the new figures for refugees and migrants in Greece were 309.356 and 121.139 in Italy. Moreover, the estimates were that 2.748 had drowned attempting to cross the Mediterranean to safety⁷. By September 7, 2015, the EU was already in the thick of quota setting for the number each member state would agree to take to ensure fairer burden sharing.⁸ In mid-September there were both pro and anti refugee demonstrations taking place throughout Europe. By October 20th⁹, UN figures for refugees entering Greece had reached 500.000. By December 2015, it was estimated that Germany had received over 1 million refugees in 2015. This number was subsequently revised downwards by German authorities to 890,000 people.¹⁰

Arrivals to Greece peaked in October 2015, a month that saw over 200,000 refugee arrivals. By the end of 2016, the total number of people for 2016 stood at 173,450, according to UNHCR Greece data snapshot report of January 2017.¹¹ The cost of refugee crisis on the Greek economy, even though Greece is just a ‘transit’ country, was estimated at 0.3 % of gross domestic

output, or an annual cost of over \$675 million¹² according to the head of the Bank of Greece, Yannis Stournaras. Following the agreement with Turkey and the border closings in the north, Greece is now housing approximately 60.000 refugees,¹³ requiring additional housing and services further pressuring an already flailing economy.

The Greek Paradox Explained

It may seem astonishing that under these conditions of reactionary behavior among many of Greece's EU partners, mounting security threats, financial constraints, growing regional geopolitical instability and an internal acrimonious political conflict over how to handle the economic crisis, both the Greek people and their leading political parties have shown maturity, self-constraint, and a constructive approach to the handling of the refugee crisis, taking care not to inflame negative sentiments but still addressing popular concerns. Both Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and opposition leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis have made statements reflecting not only a deeper concern over the humanitarian aspect of the crisis, but also the need to move from logistical management to a new political and policy framework requiring global collaboration.¹⁴ This is particularly important given that a March 2016 panhellenic telephone survey showed that 70% of those polled believed the movement of refugees to be a more permanent phenomenon, while only 29% thought that this was a temporary problem.¹⁵

On November 13, 2015, a series of coordinated terror attacks in Paris killed 130 people and injured 368. ISIS claimed responsibility. In the 2016 report prepared by Frontex, the EU Agency for the management of cooperation between national border guards securing its external borders, the "irregular migratory flows could be used by terrorists to enter the EU."¹⁶ In the case of the Paris attacks more specifically, the report indicated that two of the terrorists had entered through Leros and had been registered. Frontex, furthermore, underscored that "As the vast majority of migrants arrive undocumented, screening activities are essential to properly verify their declaration of nationality. False declarations of nationality are rife among nationals ...With a large number of persons arriving with false or no

identification documents ... there is a risk that some persons representing a security threat to the EU may be taking advantage of this situation.”

Because the Paris attacks cast light on important security risks caused by the refugee crisis, the public discourse shifted. Many politicians and heads of state found an excuse to publicly refuse to accept more refugees, citing the link between the refugee crisis and terrorism. Among those who first spoke against accepting refugees were leaders in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and a number of governors in the United States. Walls and barriers made their appearance in Hungary, the Austria-Slovenia border, while barbed wire rolled out by FYROM on its border to Greece.¹⁷

Greece at the crossfire

Domestically since 2010, Greece has been trapped in an economic whirlwind; the first casualty of the sovereign debt crisis. It has yet to recover its footing and return to growth. This instability and rapid deterioration of living conditions for the Greek people combined with extraordinary rates of unemployment have had social and political impacts that are ongoing and difficult to predict. 2015 was an especially difficult year for the Greeks and their economy. Elections in 2015 brought to power a coalition government led by a left wing party SYRIZA and a more conservative right wing partner ANEL.

Both parties had stoked the hopes of Greeks that somehow the impossibly difficult economic measures that had been implemented could be overturned through renegotiation. They insisted that there was some plausible alternate plan that the newly elected government could introduce to its European partners to both maintain Greece in the eurozone and reduce domestic hardship. This outcome was not to be realized. Protracted negotiations, the imposition of capital controls, the ousting of finance Minister Varoufakis, a referendum that produced one result in the ballot box and another politically followed by new elections in the fall of 2015, only served to heighten Greece's plight.

Moreover, the protracted crisis gave rise to the significant growth and influence of the extreme right wing. Initially viewed as a passing reaction to a difficult reality, its electoral record has proven it more durable. In the 1980s Golden Dawn was established as a movement and only became a party in 1993. It was propelled into being by neighboring FYROM's (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) decision to use the name 'Macedonia' as its sovereign state name after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The issue gave rise to unprecedented nationalistic overtones in Greece making it the perfect fodder for Golden Dawn and its recruiting mechanism.

While not immediately successful at the ballot box, Golden Dawn organized itself along nazi party lines and when the wave of migration and ghettoization of the historic center of Athens led to growing Greek flight and criminality, they stepped in to purportedly fill a security gap, while indiscriminately attacking migrants. The change in the heart of Athens was a result of a newer wave of illegal migrants from Asia and Africa that began to arrive after 2000. This particular group of migrants created marginalized ghettos in contrast to the 1990 waves from Albania and the Balkans who integrated and lived throughout the city. Perhaps it was the sheer size of the arrivals, the difference in race, religion and culture but certainly the impact that this had on the city was very strong and resulted in Golden Dawn winning a seat on the municipal council of Athens drawing 5,29% in the polls, in 2010.¹⁸

Until 2012, Golden Dawn had not had success in countrywide elections. In the European parliamentary elections of 2009 it only won 0.46% of the popular vote and in the national elections of 2009 it won 0.29%. Then in May 2012 when the Greek economy was already in the thick of its troubles and the government had signed the first memorandum with its lenders, Golden Dawn won 6.9% in the general election and 21 seats in Parliament. In the elections that followed, one month later it maintained its high percentage and won 18 seats. The party maintained its strength in a new round of general elections in the fall of 2015 garnering 7% of the vote.¹⁹

Golden Dawn's birth has not happened in a vacuum. Increasingly right wing parties are growing throughout the European Union. And while Golden Dawn seems to have a strong influence, other results farther north are even more disconcerting. Some most recent election results across Europe show how far the right has come: Sweden Democrats 13%, The Finns 18%, Danish People's Party 21%, Freedom Party (Netherlands) 10%, National Front (France) 14%, Freedom Party (Austria) 35.1%, Jobbik (Hungary 21%), Swiss People's Party 29%, Alternative for Germany (4.7% and growing), Our Slovakia 8%, Northern League (Italy) 4%, Golden Dawn 7%, ELAM (Cyprus) 3.7%.²⁰ Moreover, on July 1, in Austria, the court annulled the result of the presidential election in which the candidate of the far-right Freedom Party, Norbert Hofer, lost by less than 1% of the vote. As a result Austrian politics were thrown into chaos and there was fear that the new election might lead to the first far right Head of State in the EU in the late fall of 2016. In the end, this did not transpire although general elections in 2018 constitute the next challenge. Curiously enough, Greece and Italy, countries that are the points of entry for refugees and migrants, do not yet show the levels of popular support of the far right that is taking over richer countries in the north. There is growing anxiety, however, with numerous national elections coming up that migration will further fuel the growth of the extreme right across the Union making its voice ever more divisive and inflammatory. Adding fuel to the fire was the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States who has caused an uproar after issuing executive orders 'temporarily' suspending the refugee program and 'temporarily' barring citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the US.²¹

Although right wing extremism maintains a strong presence in the Greek Parliament, the country continues to be led by the SYRIZA- ANEL coalition after the most recent election of September 2015. SYRIZA was the first left-wing party to win the majority vote after the return to democracy in 1974. From a meager 4.59% in 2009, its electoral power grew to 36.34% by January 2015 and dropped less than 1% in the election of September 2015 to receive 35.46% of the vote²². Yet, it could not go it alone. It found a partner in ANEL a small new party that splintered off New Democracy (a center-right

party) and provided SYRIZA with the necessary support to win the confidence vote in Parliament. Since taking over, Alexis Tsipras and his SYRIZA party (which is an amalgamation of different left wing groups) have had to make painful economic cuts and pass bills that in previous times would have been unthinkable especially given their ideological leanings.

Yet, if they cannot escape the obligations to Greece's lenders, they can exhibit their ideological rigor in other issues. One of these has been the refugee crisis. As a party of the left, SYRIZA was ideologically adverse to classifying migrants into refugees and economic migrants. It did not believe in closed camps. The Prime Minister himself, in fact, framed the handling of the refugee crisis in the form of a dilemma. Greeks had a choice to either demonstrate their humanity or allow for the extreme right to emerge victorious.²³ He further underscored that, "It is crucial to have local societies on our side, and equally critical to maintain Greek society's desire to stand by the refugees."²⁴ In the beginning and out of an adherence to party orthodoxy, SYRIZA intentionally ignored the widespread civilian concerns -that were in no way linked to the far right - over questions of security and possible adverse social impacts that the wave of mass migration was having on ordinary people.

The ideological nature of SYRIZA's position toward migration was best expressed by Alternate Minister Tasia Christodouloupoulou (a human rights lawyer) who became responsible for migration policy in January 2015. This particular cabinet Minister had been in favor of the opening of borders and the tearing down of the wall built in Evros on the border of Greece and Turkey that had been a major entry point into Greece and the European Union. She expressed her support for the integration of illegal migrants and was favorable in amending citizenship laws to make them more reasonable especially for children of migrants born in Greece.²⁵ These positions reflected the more radical SYRIZA of 4.5% and not the leading political force in Greece which had drawn on voters from the entire political spectrum. Furthermore, these kinds of policy positions, put ANEL, SYRIZA's coalition partner, in a difficult position forcing them to keep a low profile on this matter so as not to threaten the government viability but creating internal strife between the two leaders Tsipras and Kammenos.

Furthermore, in 2015, Minister Christodouloupoulou had requested that illegal migrants be released from the closed camps, focusing on the “emblematic” Amygdaleza camp of Athens²⁶ (only those accused of a crime continued to remain there). They were then free to move around Greece and were treated as refugees (most claimed to be from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan). As the system for fingerprinting and the identification process became overstretched, waves of migrants took advantage of these developments to head north toward Germany. At that point in time European borders were still open. The change of policy proved music to the ears of smugglers who now felt that they could more easily turn the shipments of people toward Greece that provided a much easier access point. As the number of refugees soared, Christodouloupoulou declared that “There are no longer migrants. All who enter our country are refugees... People are not garbage, and Greek society must learn that it shares responsibility when there is a war going on in its neighborhood and there will be consequences.”²⁷ Christodouloupoulou received much criticism for both her approach to migration and often careless statements as well as for her handling of the crisis. She was widely accused of, in effect, giving a green light to smugglers to attempt entry into the EU. She was removed from her position in September 2015.

Waves upon waves of people, however, began to cross the Aegean. Coupled with Angela Merkel’s humanitarian response to the plight of the Syrians, the wave turned into a tsunami. The tide of support at the time was such that even German industrial companies declared themselves willing and able to hire refugees. The head of Mercedes, for example, stated that “Some people believe that immigration endangers a country’s future perspectives. I’m convinced that the opposite is the case. Taking in more than 800,000 people who need our help is undoubtedly a herculean task for Germany. But in the best-case scenario, it can also be a foundation for the next German economic miracle... Just like the millions of guest workers were for our economic miracle of the 50s and 60s.”²⁸ It was amidst this chaotic situation and these precarious conditions that the Greek state and the Aegean islands closest to Turkey found themselves overrun by refugees.

From the beginning and even in their darkest hour, most Greeks felt a particular bond with the Syrians. The exodus brought back memories of the Asia Minor catastrophe of 1922 when Greeks left a burning Smyrna under chaotic conditions abandoning everything behind seeking to find safety in the lands of mainland Greece. Many from the Pontos area had also fled Turkish persecution and found refuge in Syria.²⁹

Until the moment that the mass influx of Syrian families reached their shores, the war in Syria had largely been a news item for most people. In fact by 2012, and although the dead were already estimated to have reached 100,000, the conflict remained underplayed in the press and seemed to be far away from European shores. Displaced Syrians had first opted to move to Lebanon (1.1 million), Jordan (635,324 million) and Turkey (2.5 million) to wait out the war and escape death and destruction.³⁰ By 2015 violence had reached a crescendo, fighting intensified, the economy worsened, and men and boys were increasingly dragged into the fight knowing the only way they would likely return was in a coffin. Thousands decided to make a run for it. The men and boys fled first because they were in the most imminent danger. Syria became a country of women. The men did not dare leave home for months for fear of being snatched by either warring side. When it became impossible to escape they fled from their homes directly toward Europe.³¹ According to a UNHCR survey 86% of respondents were internally displaced in Syria before starting the journey to Europe. More than 85% of respondents came directly from Syria and were not living in another country before coming to Greece³². These developments spurred average Europeans to begin paying closer attention to the bombings in Aleppo and Homs.

The pictures of the drowning women and children filling the Aegean waters sent a shock-wave throughout Greek society. In the minds of average Greeks, Syrians were viewed as fellow Mediterranean people, with a long civilization, people who were both closer in culture and temperament, warm, family oriented, professionals that lived in a modern, organized largely functioning country (albeit under a dictatorial government) and therefore more familiar.³³ When asked about how they thought of Syrians, interviewees generally answered that they viewed Syrians as more educated, family people

and, though primarily Muslim in faith, more secular and easier to identify with culturally. Greeks knew that before the war, Syria was home to large Christian populations and communities lived in relative harmony. Greeks tend to separate Syrians from the other migrants - even from those who could qualify for asylum.

In a poll conducted in January 2016, two out of three Greeks responded that they feel compassion 38% and sadness 29% for the plight of the arriving refugees in 2015.³⁴ The sympathy toward the refugees polled at 84% and hit 90% when those asked came from families that had been refugees themselves. Women and those holding a university degree also exhibited the highest percentages of sympathy for the refugees. Political leanings also played a role and for those who described themselves as belonging to the center and left sympathy reached 90-91% versus those in the right wing which polled at 66%. In that same survey, six out of ten Greeks polled had somehow contributed in assisting refugees with food (39%), clothing (31%), medical supplies and sanitation supplies (11%), monies (10%), children's toys (7%), supplies (such as tents, blankets etc.) 5%, and personally volunteering (4%). Those who most contributed were the urban and suburban dwellers (62% and 61%) versus those living in rural areas (45%) given that it is in cities like Athens where refugees were first brought from the islands. In interviews, volunteers have re-affirmed that ordinary people showed regular and generous support by driving to various sites, dropping-off supplies, particularly when the northern borders closed and people were first stranded and desperate.³⁵

In response to the crisis, refugee camps were set-up to accommodate the influx of the arriving masses. Some were organized like the Elaionas camp in Athens that had the necessary infrastructure to operate quickly and more or less efficiently. This was an initiative taken by the Municipality of Athens that has been amongst the most pro-active in helping to deal with the refugee crisis even though technically it does not have direct jurisdiction on the matter. Others facilities were the exact opposite such as the site at the old Greek airport 'Ellinikon' which has been condemned both within Greece and internationally as being sorely inadequate for the housing of so many people.

What was supposed have been a temporary solution for a few months until March 2016 continued to operate into 2017.³⁶

With the passing of time, it became clear that the Greek state alone would not be able to effectively respond to the complexities on the ground. In that instance, local and international NGOs stepped in to assist. While one expects international NGOs to have the experience of crisis management, what was important in the case of Greece is that local NGOs, because of the economic crisis, had already launched programs to offer basic services for Greece's growing ranks of unemployed and vulnerable populations. This had become possible because of the ongoing recession that dictated a need for new social programs when state services began to falter. Building up these competencies had furthermore required the training of a younger generation of Greeks in providing the kinds of services that were now found to be important in dealing with the influx of refugees. These facilities and the expertise of the previous years allowed Greek relief organizations not only to provide services quickly but to tap into international donor networks and receive the assistance needed to provide the services necessary. Today, EU funding is mostly distributed through International Organizations and NGOs a fact that strengthens the capacity building of the private and non-governmental sector missing, however, the opportunity to also strengthen state services and personnel directly.

Another aspect that stood out in Greece's handling of the refugee crisis was the presence and influence of the 'solidarian' movement. In Athens, for instance, two buildings, the City Plaza Hotel and the decommissioned Fifth Lyceum School in the Exarchia neighborhood that were abandoned, empty and locked were "broken" into and taken over by a group of activists offering an alternative stay to refugees who chose to come there. The City Plaza, for example, was turned into an Accommodation Centre for Refugees in April of 2016, where according to the 'solidarians' that helped set the project in motion, "refugee families from different nationalities, together with hundreds of people of solidarity are working collectively for the cleaning, repairing and organization of space."³⁷ It has been described as a project of "self-organization and solidarity, as a center of struggle against racism and

exclusion, for the right to free movement, decent living conditions and equal rights.”³⁸

While there are differing definitions and understandings about what constitutes the ‘solidarian’ movement, there are two important elements that differentiate it from the philosophy of refugee camps: self-organization and ideas and practices of direct democracy. Refugees residing in these two facilities cook for themselves (using raw materials that are provided to the facility by external donors), clean their space, help with repairs according to their expertise and capabilities, and organize educational programs together with external volunteers. They partake in their own life all the while waiting to hear about their relocation possibilities. This is a very different approach to a camp like Elaionas, for example, where the state provides the catering, the schooling, the activities, the health services etc. and refugees wait more passively for others to decide their fate.

Solidarity is a term that is used increasingly often by a whole range of organizations to indicate support, compassion, understanding, and togetherness. The ‘solidarian’ movement, however, appears to reflect a stronger political viewpoint in its undertakings. It is a term that tries to capture the views and aspirations of a heterogeneous group of people that share some common thoughts about how to respond to a series of needs through self-organization and the incorporation of notions and principles of social justice. ‘Solidarians’ are not simply volunteers. They are part of a movement that imagines the formation of another kind of society. They are concerned with the growing alienation particularly in a large city like Athens which has resulted in the break down of social ties and sense of community. This has turned neighbors into strangers as a result of the persistent economic crisis and the deterioration of conditions of daily life that make people more inward looking. Instead of retrenchment and isolation, ‘solidarians’ propose action and the building of societal bonds. Many of those who have embraced this alternative to the “professionalized” volunteerism of the NGOs are politically associated with the left or even with the anarchist movement which is why they do not depend on state assistance in their endeavors. By offering this alternative to the refugees, Greek ‘solidarians’ also distinguish themselves

from Golden Dawn's promotion of solidarity offered exclusively to Greeks pitting them against the threat of the "other."

Thus far, the state has been tolerant of these kinds of take-overs/squats with respect to their legality and continues to assist the refugees with the legal process of relocation. There is a tacit understanding that these facilities respond to a need because there are not yet adequate and appropriate housing options for refugees. From visits to the facilities, it is clear that the refugees living there are both empowered and engaged. They have regained some of their "humanity" and agency after their harrowing experience. Difficulties do exist and self-organization amongst different ethnic groups comes with its own challenges. Some groups feel more privileged because they know that they will receive asylum at the end of the process while others will not qualify and will be repatriated instead. Nonetheless, the 'solidarian' movement is another reflection of how the difficulties in Greece have in some segments of the population given rise to an alternative paradigm to passivity, offering engagement as an alternative to inaction and alienation and stirring strong feelings and conversations about social justice under increasingly more global and economically difficult circumstances.

Greek ties to the Arab World

Some of this Greek goodwill toward Syrians may be attributed to the deeply held belief that Greece -particularly in the years after the restoration of democracy in 1974 - had consistently sought to strengthen ties with the Arab world and in particular the MENA region. In 1947, Greece voted against the partition of Palestine in the UN General Assembly and had sided with Arabs on the Palestine issue consistently for decades. The socialist government of Andreas Papandreou moreover, was particularly vocal in its support of the Palestinian cause. This policy choice sprung also from the fact that Greece sought to counterbalance Turkey's regional influence, its strong bonds to Israel, and its desire to ensure its energy supply.

The professed closeness of Greece to the Arab world, however, has proven more shallow³⁹ that one would have expected given its impact on the ground. Greece never sought to truly maximize its ties with the wider MENA

region and the Gulf. There was a moment in time, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, when the good will was there and ties could have been expanded. Syrians came to Greek universities to obtain degrees; the Arab speaking Orthodox Church sent its priests to theological schools in Greece, thus learning modern Greek and building up connections; and there was training of military staff in Greek academies as well. A considerable number of Syrians stayed and eventually got legal residency permits, particularly during one of the mass waves of legalization begun in 1998.

The geopolitical landscape was once again changed by the 911 attacks against the United States. In 2002, the initial list of countries included in George Bush's "Axis of Evil" was expanded to include Syria. On the US State Department site, this period is described as a time of "worsening relations" (2003-2009) because of Syria's interference in Iraq and Lebanon, its human rights record, and its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. In 2009, however, the US began to review its policy toward Syria in search of a common ground of cooperation in order to reduce growing tensions in the Middle East.⁴⁰ The change of the international climate over Syria was the moment that Greek-Syrian relations could have re-started in earnest. It unfortunately coincided with the beginning of Greece's own economic meltdown. As a consequence, the window of opportunity proved to be too short and the timing wrong.

By 2011, and because of the Syrian government's violent response to popular protests the Arab League, the EU, Turkey, and the US expanded economic sanctions against the regime.⁴¹ The EU in particular suspended its cooperation with the Syrian Government under the European Neighborhood Policy and gradually extended restrictive measures to pressure the Syrian Government to end violence and to encourage a political solution to the conflict⁴². Greek-Syrian relations were once again caught in a conundrum and faltered yet again. Nonetheless, a handful of Greek companies had attempted investments in Syria. METKA of the Mytilineos group in 2011 was responsible for comprehensive projects in energy (engineering, procurement, construction)⁴³. Intracom signed an agreement with Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE), which was the main

telecommunications network in Syria. In the beginning of 2007, Palaplast, an irrigation systems company in cooperation with Syria Yacoub Co. group invested in Syria. Also the Atermon construction company, along with Siemens, won a bid for the construction of a new power plant. Another company specializing in agricultural products, Spyros Spyrou, was chosen by the Agricultural Ministry of Syria to jointly deploy a program for corn production. Finally, a number of Greek companies specializing in construction materials, irrigation systems, plastics, chemicals, etc. were selling to the Syrian market through local representatives.⁴⁴

Today Greece's foreign policy toward Syria and the war is in line with that of the European Union. According to the official site of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Embassy in Damascus suspended operation in July 2012 for security reasons. The Syrian Embassy in Athens suspended its operation in December 2012.⁴⁵ The description of bilateral relations with Syria posted on the official Ministry site are not only short, but filled with platitudes: "Relations between the two peoples are historically very warm. Greece, with sincere interest and concern, is participating in the international community's efforts to achieve a political solution to the ongoing bloodshed in Syria, in the belief that there is no military solution that will safeguard the interests of the Syrian people and stability in the region." Nonetheless, it is also clearly stated that in the opinion of the Greek state, "President Assad has been de-legitimized and should facilitate, through his departure, the building of a peaceful future for all Syrians, regardless of ethnic or religious community."⁴⁶ Moreover, Greece has taken care to include a special reference to the importance of "Syria's Greek Orthodox community – the faithful of the Patriarchate of Antioch – which is the largest Christian community in Syria and [reflects] an historically strong bond between the Syrian and Greek peoples."⁴⁷

The situation at this moment

There is no denying the fact that the crawling speed by which the European Union deals with the repercussion of mass migration and the ongoing refugee crisis will take its toll on Greece that is unable to alter its

geography nor handle the human tide alone. Arguably, Greeks too will become more impatient and reactionary. Still the fact that both the Greek government and the Greek people continue to tolerate and manage the crisis in the middle of their own very difficult situation speaks volumes compared to the reaction of other European member states.

The Danish parliament, for example, has approved a controversial law allowing authorities to seize cash and valuables exceeding 1,000 British pounds to help pay for the stay of refugees. The original amount that had been proposed was to confiscate any cash and valuables worth over 300 pounds but this figure was changed upward after international uproar.⁴⁸ Hungary, moreover, flatly refused to participate in the relocation agreement. Not only that but it held a referendum on October 1, 2016 about whether or not the country should accept refugees. While 98% of the people who voted said a resounding “NO,” the referendum was declared null and void because over 50% of the voters did not go to the polls to vote.⁴⁹ In January 2016, the Prime Minister of Slovakia Robert Fico was quoted as saying that, “Not only are we refusing mandatory quotas, we will never make a voluntary decision that would lead to formation of a united Muslim community in Slovakia.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, Afghans, for example, that are the largest group of asylum seekers in Norway, as are Somalis in Finland and Denmark are among the largest groups of failed asylum seekers being returned.⁵¹

In the Czech Republic, the danger of Muslim migration is the frame for the discussion of the refugee crisis. President Milos Zeman warned that Czech society “will be robbed of the beauty of our women, because they will be covered head to toe in burka.” He has also claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood orchestrated the exodus so that Muslims can take control of Europe.⁵² The Czech Prime Minister announced in March 2016 that his country would accept some refugees taking them however directly from Turkey to fulfill part of its quota.⁵³ The Czech Republic had pledged to take 1,100 migrants from Italy and Greece and a further 1,691 through the redistribution quota of 120,000 refugees across the EU. This EU policy was only approved by qualified majority in September 2015. The Czech Republic along with Hungary, Romania and Slovakia voted against the decision.

Finally it has been agreed that another 40,000 refugees would be distributed on a voluntary basis.⁵⁴ Moreover, other high-income countries that include Russia, Japan, Singapore and South Korea have not offered any resettlement places raising questions about whether mass migration has registered internationally as a truly global problem.⁵⁵

The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants that was adopted by the UN General Assembly on September 19, 2016, perhaps marked the beginning of a global political shift to - at the very least - negotiate a compact for the safe, orderly and regular migration system to be approved by 2018. If anything, the refugee crisis as it unfolded after the summer of 2015 has served as a clear indication that new guidelines will be indispensable both for the treatment of populations on the move and for a more equitable sharing of the burden it incurs to host nations.⁵⁶ It is too soon to say whether effective policy making will be the product of this summit or whether it may remain a declaration of good intentions.

In Greece, the continuing lack of a solid and accepted European plan of action stokes anxieties about whether refugees who stay in the country will be able to adapt to their new home. In April of 2016, polling numbers showed 65% of respondents thought that refugees would probably not be able to integrate in Greek society even though 62% said that there were no refugees in their neighborhood, 14% answered that there were some, and 16% very few.⁵⁷ According to UNHCR figures issued on September 1, 2016 thus far the accommodation capacity in support of relocation which is receiving its funding from the EU has provided 53% of the 20,000 places which has been the goal for 2016.⁵⁸ As of January 15, 2017, according to data from the UNHCR January 29, 2017 report, a total of 7,441 persons have been relocated to EU Member States and Switzerland which is lower than the 6,000 person monthly target that has been set up by the EU Commission. These numbers constitute approximately 11% of the 66,400 target of persons that are to be relocated from Greece by September 2017. The EU has not been deaf to the growing concerns that are a result of these kinds of delays. In fact, in September the Union announced that it was going to double emergency aid⁵⁹ to Greece to help improve living conditions for refugees and migrants that

have been stranded there awaiting news about their fate. 115 million euros would be provided above and beyond the 83 million euros that was allocated earlier in 2016.

This fall, 20,000 refugee/migrant children (from the 38 official refugee centers) began school. The Ministry of Education spent the summer feverishly preparing. It estimated that 800 receiving classes would be necessary to accommodate the large number of children.⁶⁰ Though there have been difficulties and delays ranging from logistical problems to isolated parent reactions because of 'health concerns' combined with a dose of 'veiled' xenophobia, in the end, all children currently in Greece will be enrolled in classes this school year.

Nevertheless, the clock is ticking and time is of the essence. On August 4, 2016, the Greek Minister Responsible for Migration issued a warning. If the EU-Turkey agreement on curbing the flows of migration collapses, then Greece will go through a very difficult period because Europe continues to be unready to handle these kinds of developments.⁶¹ The Minister stated bluntly that Greece "cannot solve the refugee crisis. It can only undertake crisis management."⁶² According to the statements by Minister Mouzalas, there are approximately 60,000 people stranded in Greece at the moment but this number continues to grow. Of those 30,000-40,000 are eligible for asylum and have the right to be distributed throughout the EU. Nonetheless, resettlement has been an uphill battle and there have been many delays because of the reluctance of member states to live up to their obligations. Thus far, the agreement with Turkey is still largely holding-up stemming the influx of people although the continued political instability there combined with the growing violence in Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria has already impacted arrivals that are now exceeding 100 persons/day.

The total number of refugees and migrants that the hot spots can technically accommodate is 7,450 persons but the number of refugees is closer to 14,000.⁶³ The overcrowded conditions and long waits are aggravating an already tense situation. There have been growing tensions at different island locations resulting in the burning of a significant part of the Morea camp in Mytilene

and growing protests by the local population on the island of Leros. Management difficulties and the slow process of relocation together with overcrowded conditions are taking a heavy toll on both hosts and refugees/migrants.⁶⁴ Moving refugees off the islands is a tricky endeavor because of constraints that emanate from the EU-Turkey agreement, as Minister Mouzalas explained to Greek Parliamentarians in September 2016.⁶⁵

In August, a cited non-paper issued by the German government reflects Berlin's growing concern that the agreement between the EU and Turkey may have reached its breaking point. In fact, according to *Der Spiegel* magazine, the plan B that Germany is considering includes upping the financial pressure on Greece to help better guard the seaways along with the EU's monitoring agency Frontex to prevent the massive influx of people from Turkey.⁶⁶

The noose is tightening around Greece's neck and while it remains first on the chopping block if a new massive wave of migrants reaches its islands with nowhere to go, Europe's future also hangs in the balance both as a collective and on a nation-state basis. In August 2016 in Greece, Prime Minister Tsipras gave the UN Chief a life jacket found, like thousands of others, on the Greek islands belonging to migrants who crossed the Aegean Sea with the hope of reaching Europe. In a dramatic tone he stated that: "It's a symbolic gift, a life-saving tool for thousands of refugees who arrived in the Greek islands after crossing the Aegean Sea."⁶⁷ 2,200 incidents of search and rescue leading to the rescue of 74,000 people by the Hellenic Coast Guard only in the summer of 2015 were made possible through OTE Group's donations to maintain 52 Coast Guard vessels,⁶⁸ proving once again the dire state of public finances and highlighting the fact that Greek companies did indeed step-up to assist during this humanitarian crisis. Notwithstanding Greece's good intentions and paradoxically positive handling of the refugee crisis, if massive population movements are truly the next major global challenge then a global plan is now necessary to help stabilize an imminent and no longer temporary explosive situation.

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