

EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

STUDY IN FOCUS: INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN GREECE, HUNGARY, ITALY

BACKGROUND

In the years 2015-2016, almost 2.5 million first-time asylum seekers arrived in the EU. Due to their geographical position, Greece, Hungary and Italy were main entry points and have experienced unexpected and unprecedented inflows of asylum seekers and migrants. Moreover, all three countries show similar features having an impact on their capacity for integration: They are transition countries with little pre-existing experience in the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees. Further, they are facing more difficult socio-economic conditions compared to the main destination countries Austria, Germany and Sweden.

FOCUS OF THE STUDY



This study [Integration of refugees in Greece, Hungary and Italy](#) presents a comparative overview of recent policy developments in the reception and integration of refugees with a view to progress achieved in the last three years and main challenges encountered. It also analyses the role of European funding and changes in perceptions of key stakeholders, political actors and society (see also country studies: Annex 1) [Greece](#), Annex 2) [Hungary](#), Annex 3) [Italy](#).

To cover the variety in Europe, a second comparative study [Integration of refugees in Austria, Germany and Sweden](#) analyses developments in main destination countries with more experience in integrating migrants and better socio-economic conditions.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Trends in inflow and recognition

Italy is the main entry point on the Central Mediterranean route and received the peak of arrivals during 2016 and the first half of 2017. In 2016, it became the second country for number of asylum applicants and number of unaccompanied minors in the EU28. Asylum applicants are mainly from Africa, with the largest group from Nigeria.

Greece is the main entry point on the Eastern Mediterranean route and the number of asylum applicants peaked in 2016 when Greece became the first EU country for number of asylum applicants compared to population (with almost 5 applicants for every 1000 inhabitants compared to 2.5 in the EU28 average). The share of women, and of children below 18 is very high (almost 40 %), reflecting the large number of family arrivals from Syria and Iraq. Unaccompanied minors represent instead a smaller share (12 %) among minors compared to the EU28 average.

Hungary is the main entry point on the Western Balkan route. It received a record number of first-time asylum applications in 2015 (14 % of the EU total), and the highest number of asylum applicants compared to its population (almost 18 applicants for every 1000 inhabitants) in that year. Following the closing of its borders, the number of asylum seekers sharply dropped in 2016. The largest asylum applicants groups are from Afghanistan and Syria.

Asylum applicants in 2016. Absolute values and compared to the population

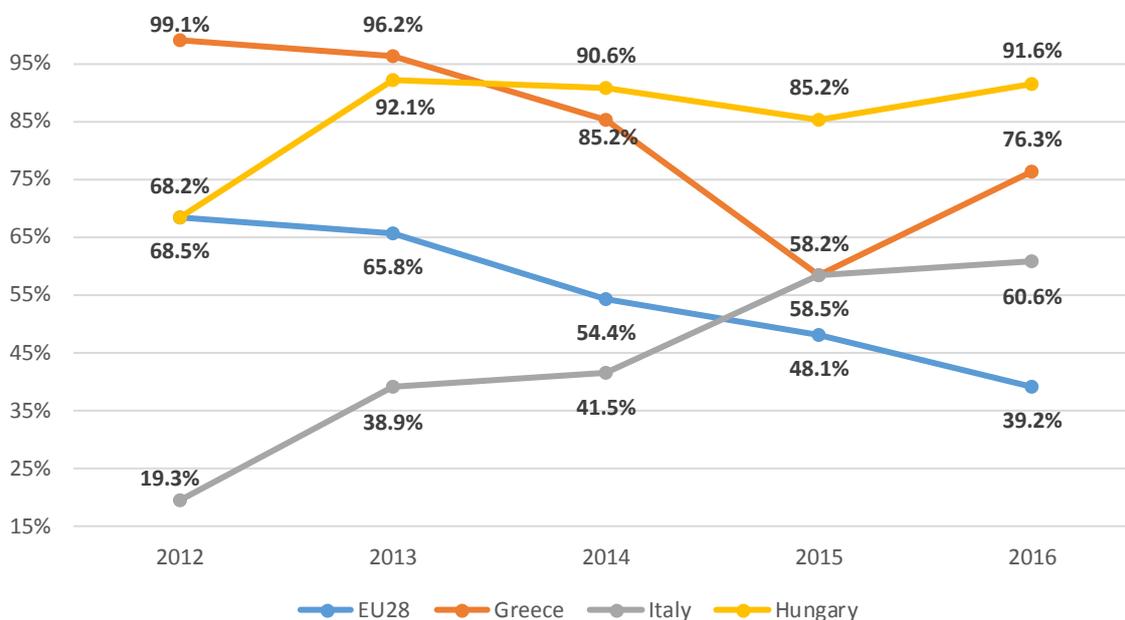
Country	Asylum applicants			Applicants per 1000 population *		
	2014	2015	2016	2014	2015	2016
European Union (28 countries)	626 960	1 322 825	1 260 910	1.2	2.6	2.5
Germany	202 645	476 510	745 155	2.5	5.9	9.1
Greece	9 430	13 205	51 110	0.9	1.2	4.7
Italy	64 625	83 540	122 960	1.1	1.4	2.0
Hungary	42 775	177 135	29 430	4.3	18.0	3.0
Austria	28 035	88 160	42 255	3.3	10.3	4.9
Sweden	81 180	162 450	28 790	8.4	16.7	2.9

Source: EUROSTAT data (migr_asyappctza) (demo_gind)

(*) Relative to population as of 1 January.

These countries show **higher and growing rejection rates compared to the EU average** (39.2 %) in first-instance decisions on asylum applications, ranging from 60.6 % in Italy, to 76.3 % in Greece and 91.6 % in Hungary. These differences reflect both the composition of asylum seekers and the approach adopted, with Italy showing a rather open approach in recognition rates compared to the **very restrictive one in Greece and especially in Hungary**.

Evolution of rejection rates in first-instance decisions, 2010–2016



Source: EUROSTAT, http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asydcfina&lang=en

It is difficult to assess the specific labour market conditions of asylum seekers and refugees, because **most available data do not allow distinguishing between refugees from other immigrants**. An exception is the EU-Labour Forces Survey (LFS) ad hoc module, 2014. **These data shows that refugees tend to improve their labour market condition with time** and in some cases (as in Italy) present both higher activity and employment rates compared to non-EU immigrants. However, **the labour market integration of refugees is in general much slower compared to the other migrants** and in the **short-run refugees are likely to present worse employment conditions** than economic immigrants.

2. Changes in legal and policy approaches

Differences in approaches also emerge in the integration of asylum seekers and refugees. While **in all the three countries, recognised** refugees and beneficiaries of international protection are **entitled to labour market and social support** under the same terms as natives, **Greece** and especially **Italy** also implemented measures to improve the integration of asylum seekers **from the early stages of the reception process** while **Hungary**, instead, **reduced public support**.

All the three countries support, to a different extent, **labour market integration** through language training, employment services and adult training programmes. For asylum seekers, instead, eligibility for labour market measures is different. While in **Greece** asylum seekers can look for a job as soon as they are registered for application, in **Italy** they have to wait 60 days from application, and in **Hungary** they cannot work until they are recognised as refugees. As for actual measures, **Italy** is showing a clear move towards a structured integration approach, while in **Greece** implementation is particularly difficult, and in **Hungary** integration measures are left to the intervention of NGOs.

Social integration follows a similar pattern. While in **Italy** it is increasingly based on small-scale projects managed by local authorities, in **Greece** and in **Hungary** implementation is mainly left to NGOs, with the support of EU funding. The three countries adopted new measures to safeguard the rights and welfare of unaccompanied minors.

Italy and Greece also took steps to improve **access to primary health care**, especially for vulnerable groups. In **Hungary**, asylum seekers, refugees and persons with subsidiary protection status are also entitled to free primary health care, but only for a fixed period.

There are however **drawbacks in the implementation of these integration measures**. One is the **shortage of concrete integration programmes**, so that in practice labour market integration measures are often not available. A second issue is the **lack of coordination** among employment services and institutions in charge of integration policies. **Delays in registration procedure** is a further problem. The **gravity of the crisis** is another factor reducing employment opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees.

All the three countries show **problems in the provision of accommodation and housing**. Although asylum seekers are accommodated in reception centres during application procedures, the provision of affordable housing for recognised refugees and beneficiaries of international protection is constrained by lack of funds and housing shortages, especially in urban areas.

Overall, notwithstanding the improvement made, the **effective implementation of reception and integration measures is still inadequate**, particularly in **Greece** and **Italy**, due to their weak administrative capacity and little experience in the management of large inflows of asylum seekers and refugees.

3. The role of EU funding

Being transit areas, **the considered countries are incurring in high short-term fiscal costs for the reception of asylum seekers**, while the long-term costs of integration are instead likely to be lower than in destination countries. This however implies a lower possibility of gaining the long-term returns from investment.

The main issue regarding funding is the **long-term sustainability of programmes and their limited extent in terms of coverage**, as in these countries it is largely based on the use of EU co-funding. The main fund used is the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (**AMIF**), supporting the first stage of the integration process. In **Italy**, its use is focused on strengthening the reception system, particularly on first reception and early-integration measures. In **Hungary**, AMIF supports access to education, language and training courses, activation and social inclusion measures for vulnerable persons. **Greece** instead registered delays in the implementation of AMIF-related actions.

The **European Structural and Investment Funds**, and particularly the ESF, plays an important role in Italy and Greece to support longer-term integration policies, covering education, employment and non-discrimination policies. The ESF is however not specifically targeted to asylum seekers and refugees, but to all migrants and disadvantaged groups.

4. Development of the political climate and public perceptions

The unprecedented rise in arrivals in small border territories has ignited **anti-immigrant attitudes in public opinion, fomented by anti-immigration and anti-Europe movements**. This deterioration in public attitudes and political opinion is likely to have **very negative long-run consequences** in terms of social cohesion and political climate, especially in those countries, like Italy, where the migration issue is at the centre of the upcoming political election debate. The share of respondents with negative feelings towards immigration from third countries is higher than the EU28 average, ranging from 81 % in **Hungary**, to 70 % in **Greece** and 69 % in **Italy**

Differences however emerge in the content of the **media campaigns and the political debate** as well as in the role played by **anti-immigrant parties** in the government (e.g. Hungary).

These countries also share a **growing perception in the public opinion of being 'left alone'** in handling the refugee crisis and of the need for a stronger **common European policy on migration**.

5. Challenges and policy recommendations

Among the main challenges faced by the three countries are: the **lack of experience and capacity** in the integration of asylum seekers and refugees; the **lack of funding** ensuring the long-term sustainability of programmes and extended coverage; the **shortage of housing and accommodation facilities**; the **increasing negative attitudes** towards asylum seekers and refugees.

Existing research and evaluations suggest that effective integration policies benefit not only immigrants, but also the receiving society. However, the capacity to manage effective integration policies depends very much on the possibility to **govern migration flows** and to avoid massive increases over a short time span concentrated in few territorial areas. The main **policy implications** thus relate to:

- ✓ how to **share the reception burden** and to promote a fairer distribution of asylum seekers across Member States;
- ✓ how to **improve the countries' intervention capacity**, supporting MSs and local actors in the actual implementation and monitoring of reception and integration measures;
- ✓ how to **provide continuous funding** for reception and integration programmes.

To address these issues, a **greater coordination and cooperation between European institutions and Member States** is crucial. This implies a **greater EU role in supporting a fairer distribution of asylum seekers** across Member States and **more effective reception and integration measures** through a stronger focus on integration in the European Agenda for Migration. Further, an effective multilevel governance and support to upgrade administrative and institutional capacity at national and local levels is needed, also through the exchange of experiences and good practices. Finally, it should be considered to share the costs of integration across and within Member States, eventually through creating an ad hoc EU Integration Fund.

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Contact: Poldep-Economy-Science@ep.europa.eu; This document is available on the Internet at: www.europarl.europa.eu/supporting-analyses

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