Integration of Refugees in Greece, Hungary and Italy.

SUMMARY

Abstract

This study presents a comparative overview of policy developments in the reception and integration of refugees in Greece, Hungary and Italy. The focus is on progress achieved in the last three years, the main challenges encountered and the changes in perceptions of key stakeholders, political actors and society.
This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Employment and Social Affairs.

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Original: EN

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Manuscript completed in December 2017
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This document is available on the Internet at:
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SUMMARY

This study presents a comparative overview of policy developments in the reception and integration of refugees in Greece, Hungary and Italy. The focus is on progress achieved in the last three years, the main challenges encountered and the changes in perceptions of key stakeholders, political actors and society.

Dimensions and main features of asylum inflows

These countries experienced unexpected and unprecedented inflows due to their geographical position as main entry points to the EU.

- **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.

- **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.

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 the legal and policy approach

To face the refugees’ crisis these countries had to rapidly set up a reception and integration system from scratch, as none of them had previous experience in dealing with large inflows. In addition, being transit countries, their main policy investments focused on reception rather than integration measures.

Notwithstanding these common issues, the policy approaches have been highly diversified. **Italy and Greece** implemented measures to improve the reception of asylum seekers by expanding their reception capacity, and moved towards a simplification of the application procedures. **Hungary** instead introduced more restrictive measures, building a fence at the borders with Croatia and Serbia, creating detention centres for asylum seekers irregularly entering or staying in Hungary and opposing the EU relocation programme.
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.

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.

The same pattern emerges in social integration, access to free primary health care, and the provision of accommodation and housing facilities.

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.

Integration costs and 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.

Evolution of the political climate

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.

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**.

**Main challenges and policy implications**

**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 MSs;
- 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 MSs** is crucial. This implies a **greater EU role in supporting a fairer distribution of asylum seekers** across MSs, and more effective reception and integration measures through:

- a stronger focus on integration in the European Agenda for Migration;
- an effective multilevel governance and support to upgrade administrative and institutional capacity at national and local levels, also through the exchange of experiences and good practices;
- sharing the costs of integration across and within MSs, eventually creating an ad hoc EU Integration Fund;
- improving data collection and establishing an EU-coordinated information system, also for the monitoring and evaluation of reception and integration measures;
- supporting community building and awareness-raising on the benefits of immigration.