Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027: an opportunity to enhance the integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Greece[1]

Acknowledgements

Written by Dominika Spyratou (SolidarityNow)
dspyratou@solidaritynow.org

Contributions by Giacomo Manca (ECRE & PICUM), Ismini Karydopoulou (Generation 2.0 for Rights, Equality and Diversity), Melina Spathari (Terre des hommes Hellas) and George Stefanopoulos (Greek Forum of Refugees)

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Introduction

In 2015 an increasing number of refugees and migrants started arriving to Europe via the Mediterranean in order to seek protection and a better life. Five years later, despite intensifying efforts and some positive developments, and although the European Union has announced that the so-called migration crisis is over,[2] the state of emergency in Greece's **reception system** continues, resulting in an unusual 'normalisation' of the situation. The inefficiencies and shortcomings of the reception system have numerous negative results, which are affecting the lives of thousands of asylum seekers and local communities, while also leading to an increase in racist behaviours and even violence against refugees and those who assist them.[3]

Likewise, efforts to **integrate** those who are and will remain in the country have been limited and fragmented. The long-awaited National Integration Strategy,[4] adopted in July 2019, has still not been fully implemented and, for the government that came to power that same month, integration doesn't seem to be a priority, despite availability of funds.[5] Furthermore, Greece still lacks a detailed action plan based on an adequate needs assessment and with specific funding sources. More broadly, **funding management** presents several challenges. These include complex and burdensome funding procedures, as well as the fact that, on the one hand, civil society organisations that work closely with third country nationals (TCNs) and therefore understand their needs, are not being consulted for their input, and on the other hand, the authorities that submit and manage funding proposals are far and disconnected from the field. Proactive efforts to promote collaboration among different migration actors and bridge gaps are yet to be seen.

The sections that follow provide a brief overview of the current structure of EU funds, how Greece has been using them for the integration of TCNs, and existing challenges. This is followed by the expected changes in the funding structure from 2021 onwards. This information provides important context to the policy recommendations that follow, which concern the next funding period and which have the potential to cover existing gaps and improve the framework for the use of EU funds in Greece, if implemented.

Current Multiannual Finance Framework (2014-2020) and integration in Greece

[2] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_1496

[3] https://www.unhcr.org/gr/en/14153-racist-violence-recording-network-serious-concern-over-attacks-against-refugees-and-humanitarian-workers.html

[4] http://www.opengov.gr/immigration/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2019/07/%CE%95%CE%B8%CE%BD%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE-%CE%A3%CF%84%CF%81%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE-%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%B1-%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BD-%CE%88%CE%BD%CF%84%CE%B1%CE%BE%CE%B7_final_.pdf

[5] Indicatively https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/202007_managing-migration-eu-financial-support-to-greece_en.pdf

The Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is the EU's spending plan, which is renewed every seven years and covers different areas of activities, including social inclusion. MFF funds linked to integration include, among other resources:

- The **Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund** (AMIF) which focuses specifically on TCNs and integration measures linked to their reception (language training, civic orientation courses, one-stop shops etc.).
- The **European Social Fund** (ESF), the EU's main instrument for employment and social policy, which has as one of its policy objectives the socio-economic inclusion of disadvantaged groups, including TCNs (e.g. access to the labour market, reducing poverty, promoting social inclusion and health, combating discrimination, etc.).
- The **European Regional Development fund** (ERDF), which invests in social, health, education, housing and childcare infrastructure, as well as actions to regenerate deprived urban areas and reduce isolation of people with a migrant background.

For most of these resources, management is shared between the EU and its Member States. Member States have the primary responsibility of their management, carried out on the basis of programmes agreed with the European Commission (EC). They can also decide how to ensure synergies between ESF, AMIF and other funds, while the EU provides recommendations for such national programmes along with relevant guidelines and support, ranging from transnational meetings to exchanging good practices (such as in the ESF transnational platform)[6], material (for example the *Toolkit on the use of EU funds for the integration of people with a migrant background)*[7] and other means.

In Greece, throughout the current funding period, little coordination has been achieved among different funds and only **a limited number of integration activities have been funded**, frequently in the form of pilot schemes that lack continuity and sustainability. Most integration programmes are run by civil society organisations and are primarily supported by other funding sources.

More specifically, other than funding a rental accommodation scheme for asylum seekers (ESTIA)[8] and a recent integration programme for recognised refugees (HELIOS)[9] one of the biggest integration projects funded by EU resources has been the Integration Centres for Migrants and Refugees (KEMs) in 10 municipalities, which provide specialised services to TCNs, aimed at improving their living standards, access to the labour market and social integration. This is actually the only integration project implemented by the Regional Operational Programmes (ROP)[10] funded by ESF and ERDF, a clear indication that **much more needs to be done at the regional level** in a country where inclusion of migrants and refugees represents a huge social challenge.

[6] https://ec.europa.eu/esf/transnationality/

[7] https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/policy/themes/social-inclusion/integration-of-migrants/toolkit-integration-of-migrants.pdf

[8] http://estia.unhcr.gr/en/home/

[9] https://greece.iom.int/en/hellenic-integration-support-beneficiaries-international-protection-helios

[10] https://www.espa.gr/en/pages/staticRegionalOPs.aspx

Several other programmes have been funded by AMIF and ESF, including large-scale educational activities for migrant children, e.g. evening and integration classes, as well as a pilot agricultural training programme. Furthermore, several projects have been planned for the current funding period, but their implementation has either not started yet or is in its early stages. These include actions to support intercultural mediators, such as training programmes and the development of an intercultural mediators pool, as well as a mapping of integration programmes implemented by each ministry and of stakeholders so that efforts can be better coordinated.[11]

Collaboration among public authorities in Greece has long been problematic. It is therefore not surprising that **synergies between funds and projects are limited** and that what has been achieved is less than what has been planned. **Structural weaknesses of the current MFF pose additional challenges**: lack of flexibility in the preparation of budget lines; extremely complex funding regulations which differ between funds; and the large number of programmes and instruments, which complicates the understanding of rules and procedures of EU funding. More can be done to modernise and simplify the framework, while a change of culture and a more inclusive approach is urgently needed at both national and EU levels.

Next MFF (2021-2027)

The next MFF will include some changes in the management of funds to address existing weaknesses. Allegedly, the number of programmes will be reduced and **integration support will be mainstreamed across many funds**. Also, all funds will be incorporated in fewer regulations to achieve more coordination, cohesion and simplification of procedures and less administrative burden. This means that even more coordination and complementarity between funds will be needed. **AMIF** will maintain a 'target group approach' focusing on integration needs that are specific to TCNs and linked to their reception, whilst the ESF, which will become **"ESF+"** after merging with other funds such as the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) and the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), will provide support for mid and long-term integration in mainstream policy areas. For the next funding period, the EC also aims to enhance the **partnership principle,** which ensures that all partners, including regional and local authorities and civil society, are involved in programme planning and implementation; it is up to each Member State, however, to decide how strictly they will follow instructions coming from the EC.[12]

Unfortunately, the preparation for the next MFF is facing some challenges too. The **European parliamentary elections** in May 2019 and the **delays in forming a new Commission** slowed down MFF negotiations by several months. Uncertainty around **Brexit** also caused significant delays and the eventual departure of the UK - a major net-contributor - from the EU, led to a decrease in funding. The inter-institutional negotiations ("trilogue'') at the EU level on ESF+ and AMIF have been frozen due to lack of clarity on the amount to allocate to different priorities and due to **disagreements among the EC, the European Parliament (EP) and the**

[11] These examples were mentioned in the conference and are not exhaustive.

[12] https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/main-menu/funding/future-eu-funds.
Also for further proposals on how the partnership principle should be reflected in the structure of the AMIF and ESF+: https://www.ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/PICECR-partnership.pdf

European Council. Consequently, Member States' preparation of national programmes on the use of EU funds is also severely delayed, and the next MFF risks starting without the approval of several programmes, potentially leading to gaps in funding.

The outbreak of **Covid-19** in the early months of 2020 caused additional unexpected delays and uncertainty. In March, EC President Ursula von der Leyen announced changes in the MFF proposal to address the fallout of the coronavirus crisis,[13] creating concerns that the allocation of funds to address the ongoing health, social and economic crisis may undermine investment in cohesion policy and social inclusion, including migrant and refugee integration. In late May, a new proposal was announced by the EC with revised commitments for the next MFF budget, including Next Generation EU,[14] a massive programme of grants and loans to address the EU's recovery.[15] Meanwhile, it is uncertain whether an agreement on the next MFF will be reached by the end of 2020.

Despite the challenges, it is of paramount importance that Greece prepares as thoroughly as possible for the next programming period. While the current programming period is ongoing and efforts to implement new programmes should not be abandoned, Greek institutions should also prepare and submit their proposals for the next MFF promptly, taking into account lessons learned and best practices from 2014-2020. This should always be done in consultation with all parties involved in migration management and response. The section below outlines how this can be achieved in more detail.

The way forward for the integration of third country nationals in Greece

General recommendations

Greece has a low fund absorption rate, especially when it comes to AMIF,[16] ultimately leading to a lack of preparedness in receiving and integrating TCNs. For this to change, Greece has to perform better in the next MFF. The competent authorities need to take - but not necessarily be limited to - the following steps:

- Increase **clarity** around EU funding and the MFF, including available funding instruments and priorities at EU and national levels. Regular info-sessions with stakeholders, toolkits and manuals are a few examples of how this can be achieved.
- Increase **flexibility and simplify procedures** and audits for funded entities; eradicate 'layers' of bureaucracy when they are not needed.
- Strengthen **coordination** between programmes and managing authorities to ensure the best possible use of EU funds. Currently, coordination between different EU-funded projects is proving extremely difficult due to fragmentation of responsibilities across the Greek administration.

[13] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_20_554

[14] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_940

[15] Despite the huge impact that this envelope could have on Cohesion Policy, it is unsure to what extent it can be used to address the shortcomings in reception and integration of third country nationals.

[16] For an example of money allocated vs money absorbed, see: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/publications/summary-allocation-received-member-state-under-asylum-migration-and-integration-fund_en

- Ensure **meaningful participation** of all stakeholders in the planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes, including ministries, municipalities, regions, managing authorities for funds, NGOs and the various migrant and refugee communities. Emphasis should be given to the participation of civil society in the funds' monitoring committees, something that has been lacking so far.
- Improve **collaboration and synergies between stakeholders** at different governance levels. The government should 'take advantage' of the flexibility and knowhow of NGOs, listen to what TCNs have to say and strengthen the role of municipalities by clarifying their responsibilities and supporting their technical and organisational requirements and access to funding.
- Support **continuous capacity building** for public sector employees and organisations around all aspects of EU funding, including seminars with EC representatives about the new funding procedures for the next period.

While the above recommendations are aimed at improving the management of EU-funded programmes during the next MFF, the following policy recommendations for TCNs and local communities are necessary to facilitate TCNs' integration process:

- Improve and implement the **national integration strategy** and prepare an **action plan**, starting from the reception phase and based on Greece's obligations according to national and European legal frameworks.
- **Support municipalities in creating a long-term strategy** that complements the national strategy and action plan, based on local resources and needs.
- **Continue and expand existing successful programmes**. Existing, successful programmes should be enhanced, improved where needed and linked to other integration programmes to create a holistic integration process. For instance: KEMs should be expanded to more municipalities and further supported with appropriate staff and activities; the ESTIA accommodation programme needs to be linked with integration services (language courses, employability services, etc.); and the eligibility criteria for the HELIOS project, which currently excludes self-accommodated refugees, should be revisited so that it doesn't discriminate against certain groups.
- **Lift obstacles to accessing social services.** Difficulties in getting a Tax Registration Number (AFM), a Social Insurance Number (AMKA and PAAYPA), opening a bank account, receiving benefits, etc., persist and hinder the integration process of TCNs despite significant efforts by many actors to resolve them. Guidelines and info-sessions for public servants and information material for TCNs in line with the adoption of the right policies are examples of the measures that need to be supported.
- **Support communication with local communities**, trainings on human rights and other activities aimed at raising awareness and sensitising the public.

When looking more closely into the three **main aspects of integration**, i.e. education and vocational training, employability and housing, more specific actions and steps are recommended.

Education and vocational training

Access to state education for children has been a priority for the Ministry of Education and positive measures have been adopted to allow this to happen. However, some challenges persist and need to be addressed, while more efforts are necessary to achieve the development of vocational training and Greek language learning for adults. The competent authorities should take the following measures:

- A national scale, certified **Greek language programme for adult TCNs** is long overdue and should be the government's priority. People should be able to join the programme as soon as they arrive in the country and it should run at local level, for example at Lifelong Learning Centres[17] established in various municipalities and funded by EU resources. In addition, fast-track Greek language courses could further support or be combined with the above programme, for people who need to progress quickly.
- Adopt and fund measures to **mainstream refugee and migrant education** so that this population is not excluded from existing educational programmes and structures. Design vocational training programmes for both locals and TCNs as they are necessary for both groups and promote integration through interaction. These measures include:
  - ❖ Placements of **cultural mediators and interpreters** in schools, Counseling Support Centres (KESY), Lifelong Learning Centres and other educational providers as needed;
  - ❖ Provision of **training programmes** on inclusion and cultural awareness for all educators (not just those conducting integration classes), other professionals in the school community (school directors, psychologists, etc.) and local communities;
  - ❖ Specialised **psychosocial support** in schools to help people overcome trauma;
  - ❖ A structured mechanism for **certification of skills, recognition of degrees and provision of scholarships** so that people have an incentive to remain in the country and continue their education.
- Support the **collaboration of non-formal education centres** to cover gaps and needs. Also make them more inclusive; for instance, the Helios Integration Learning Centres for recognised refugees should accept self-accommodated refugees in their programmes.
- Increase the **number and capacity of social coaching schools** ('frontistiria') run by municipalities, so that children on the move, who have been out of school for a long time and need support, can catch up to peers and be placed in the right classes.
- Invest in **digital literacy and new technologies** for both TCNs and local populations, to close existing digital gaps. With the outbreak of Covid-19, this need has become more obvious and urgent as inequalities in accessing digital services have become more visible. Digitalisation, especially in public administration, can also improve asylum and integration in the country and help overcome current bureaucratic obstacles such as delays in service provision, issuance of documents or long queues.
- Resolve **transportation obstacles** so that people can participate in formal and non-formal education and to reduce dropouts. This issue is more dominant in non-urban areas where public transportation is either infrequent or not supported at all.
- Support migrant and refugee **women's participation** in education and vocational training to strengthen female participation in employment; for example, remove additional barriers to women's employment by improving early childcare, including for migrant and refugees.

[17] https://www.inedivim.gr/en/programmes-actions/lifelong-learning-centres-programmes-national-local-level-%CE%B1%CF%807-%CE%B1%CF%808

- Invest in **integration programmes for adolescents aged 16-18,** for whom education is not compulsory and therefore more difficult to access. Involve the General Secretariat for Lifelong Learning in creating and implementing programmes targeting this age group.
- Support, through awareness raising projects and cultural mediators, direct **communication between parents and schools**, which is currently mainly indirect via pupils.

Employability

The Greek government has still not invested enough in the integration of refugees and migrants via the labour market. In a country where unemployment, following a 10-year financial crisis, is the highest in the European Union,[18] and where black-market employment is frequently the only solution for the most vulnerable and marginalised populations, more needs to be done for both locals and newcomers. More specifically, the following measures are recommended:

- As employability is closely linked to education and vocational training, it is worth repeating the urgent need to fund **language courses and courses for learning terminology and the particularities of the Greek system more broadly, as well as employability training programmes**. As with education, employability should be **mainstreamed**, allowing TCNs to access services provided for the broad population but taking into account their particularities.
- Create a **national profiling programme** to connect people to the labour market. Migrants and refugees have skills that need to be acknowledged and matched with market needs.
- Strengthen the **outreach aspects of employment services** to overcome the 'one stop shops' model for those who are not able to reach existing services or do not know about them. Lack of information is still a problem for labour access and can create obstacles and even result in fines (especially for the self-employed).
- Support OAED, the Hellenic **Manpower Employment Organisation, to accommodate the needs of TCNs.** Adapt its services and programmes accordingly and link it with integration programmes (HELIOS for example). Provision of interpretation is necessary.
- Fund programmes that **link trade unions and employers with TCNs** as well as training courses to help employers understand different legal statuses and respective rights, and to help them overcome existing bureaucratic obstacles, especially when hiring people. Also provide cultural training to employers who have not previously worked with TCNs.
- Integrate a **gender dimension** in all programmes, taking into account the particular challenges migrant and refugee women face. Psychosocial support programmes are especially important for survivors of gender-based violence.
- Develop programmes to **tackle labour exploitation** that provide information on labour rights and effective complaints mechanisms for those who have been exploited.
- Support the self-employed with **micro-financing** and **train the trainers** from within communities.

Housing

[18] https://www.statista.com/statistics/268830/unemployment-rate-in-eu-countries/

While Greece is making some efforts to provide accommodation for asylum seekers, mostly through the ESTIA programme, significant challenges persist. For several years, the government has not been able to manage severe overcrowding in the island hotspots,[19] while mainland camps and accommodation schemes have continuously operated at full capacity. This is partly because none of these schemes are linked to integration programmes, perpetuating people's dependency on them and creating concerns for those who are asked to leave their accommodation when they are granted refugee status.[20] At the same time, proactive initiatives to accommodate recognised refugees and migrants are almost non-existent, potentially leading to homelessness. To make matters worse, renting is extremely challenging for TCNs due to racist and xenophobic prejudice as well as exogenous circumstances affecting the Greek society, such as the rise of short-term rental facilities and the increase in rent prices.

In order to remove these barriers and overcome existing obstacles, authorities need to revisit housing policies and undertake the following measures:

- Stop investing in temporary housing solutions such as camps, hotels and safe zones for children. Build **long-term housing programmes** to ensure that people can live in safe environments where their integration is facilitated and promoted through easily accessible support services, vocational training, access to education and the labour market. More specifically:
  - The **ESTIA accommodation scheme** for asylum seekers which hosts more than 25,000 people is a good example and needs to be maintained. Its scope should be expanded by linking it with integration services that are currently lacking. In addition, a follow up mechanism to keep track of people when they have to depart the housing scheme needs to be established in order to monitor how people are progressing and whether they can be independent and self-sufficient;
  - The **HELIOS integration programme** that contributes towards accommodation costs for recognised refugees should expand its eligibility criteria so that more refugees can access it. Also, further hands-on support should be provided to refugee apartment seekers and a bridge should be created between reception accommodation schemes and HELIOS for a smooth transition between programmes;
  - Successful **pilot integration programmes** with a housing component, such as the Curing the Limbo[21] and the Housing and Reintegration[22] programmes that provide affordable housing solutions for refugees and the homeless respectively, need to continue and expand;
  - Appropriate **accommodation places for unaccompanied children** should be increased, including supported independent living for the housing and protection of unaccompanied adolescents aged 16-18;
  - Likewise, more **specialised accommodation places** for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and trafficking survivors, and other vulnerable groups, are needed.

[19] https://infocrisis.gov.gr/category/latest-info/national-situational-picture-regarding-the-islands-at-eastern-aegean-sea/?lang=en

[20] https://www.solidaritynow.org/en/exits/

[21] https://curingthelimbo.gr/

[22] https://www.feantsa.org/download/feantsa-ejh-11-1_a3-v03404505347244129508 4.pdf

- Invest in **social housing** and **affordable housing** for all. Existing housing options in Greece are either temporary or do not address the needs of all vulnerable populations. Unlike most European countries, Greece does not have a social housing policy - a huge gap that needs to be bridged urgently. A collaborative effort among ministries, municipalities and other stakeholders is required and should involve **mapping of empty state-owned houses** and an evaluation of **flexible schemes and innovative programmes** that can be adapted and implemented in the Greek context. Social Rental Agencies,[23] where NGOs or social enterprises can act as mediating agents between private owners and people in need of housing, could be a good starting option.
- **Facilitate access to benefits, loans and other means** that will assist TCNs to overcome financial obstacles when seeking accommodation outside existing programmes. Create services that will offer advice and assistance with finding accommodation, accessing housing benefits and applying for loans to help with rent deposits.

Conclusion

The fast-approaching next MFF is an opportunity for Greece to improve its policies and programmes for the integration of asylum seekers, migrants and refugees. The current framework, despite allocating financial resources for the management of migration, could not have foreseen the large-scale arrivals of asylum seekers at Europe's eastern border and therefore was not adequately prepared to accommodate their needs or the needs of the host communities, as funding alone is not enough. Leaving delays in reaching agreements aside, this time Europe is better prepared. Integration of people who have escaped conflict and extremely harsh living conditions is no longer optional - it is the only way to effectively manage migration and combat extremism. Greece, being a major entry point for migrants coming to Europe, knows this very well.

For this reason, competent Greek authorities that are currently in the process of submitting their proposals to the EC for the next funding period, should take into account the above listed recommendations and use available EU funds in the best possible way to ensure social cohesion and create a more inclusive society for all. This can only be achieved with the real participation of all stakeholders, including civil society, during the planning and implementation process of the MFF(s) from now on.

[23] https://www.feantsa.org/download/2012_06_22_sra_final_en-2-2292903742234225547.pdf