



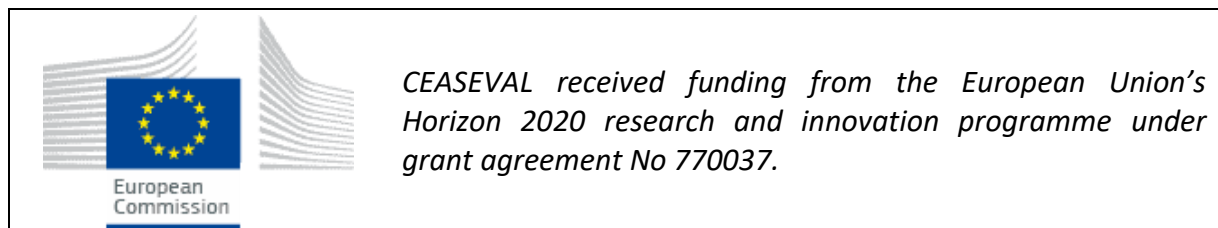
# **The refugee 'crisis' in Greece: politicisation and polarisation amidst multiple crises**

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## The refugee ‘crisis’ in Greece: politicisation and polarisation amidst multiple crises

### Abstract

*The European refugee “crisis” of 2015 first and foremost unfolded in Greece at a critical period for the country and its place in the EU. Amidst the threat of Grexit and domestic political turmoil, the arrival of the refugees raised to the forefront questions of responsibility and burden sharing between Greece and its EU partners. Drawing from de Wilde’s analytical framework, this paper tried to explore whether the question of responsibility became an issue of politicisation in Greece as well as polarisation and whether it resulted in policy change on migration. The analysis draws from three types of sources: online media, parliamentary debates & party announcements, and public opinion polls. Two periods are investigated: the discussion on relocation from May 2015 to November 2015 and the discussions on the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016. Politicisation of migration pre-existed the crisis and acquired further salience during 2015-2016. Polarisation, in contrast, featured less in 2015, due to the focus on Grexit, but acquires salience in 2016 following the EU-Turkey Statement. Nonetheless two common themes underscore both periods. There is convergence (with varying degrees of intensity) in blaming the member states for failing to adhere to their responsibility and for showing little solidarity. Similarly, there is a broad convergence that migration policy is designed by the European Union and its institutions, with Greece only responsible for the implementation. Thus, the polarisation of 2016 over migration focuses more on the government’s poor implementation and less on the policies initiated at the EU level.*

**Keywords:** crises, Grexit, relocation, solidarity, Turkey

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## 1. Introduction:

The refugee 'crisis' of 2015 was a unique moment for Greece as well as Europe. In 2015, 860,000 persons entered the European Union (EU) through Greece and 153,000 through Italy,<sup>1</sup> in what has been termed as "the summer of migration".

The summer of 2015 and for almost a year, the arrival of more than a million refugees brought to the surface the question of responsibility sharing, solidarity and the function of the Common European Asylum System. At its core, the arrival of thousands of refugees on Europe's external borders served as a powerful reminder of the EU's collective obligations, as reaffirmed in the EU legal order, in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the EU Treaties.

The refugee 'crisis' of 2015 was, initially, a Greek 'crisis'. The islands of northern Aegean functioned as an entry point for the overwhelming number of arrivals.<sup>2</sup> Four islands bore the brunt of arrivals: Kos, Chios, Samos and Lesbos. Situated across from the Turkish coasts, they have functioned for more than a decade as landing ground for irregular maritime migrants. In 2015, the island of Lesbos alone received 406,206 arrivals (January-November 2015) with November being the most critical month, recording 63,400 arrivals. Of the total population to have arrived in 2015, it is estimated that 507,745 crossed the border from Idomeni onwards to the Western Balkans. Since these are the figures recorded, the actual estimate of people is deemed to be much higher.

For Greece, the refugee 'crisis' played against a critical backdrop; Grexit. Numbers increased throughout the summer and autumn of 2015, during and after the referendum on the bailout with the Troika.<sup>3</sup> An unprecedented political and economic crisis peaked with the decision of the government to seek public support for rejection of the bailout proposal. Banks shut down, capital controls were imposed, people took to the streets to protest and the political discourse became deeply divisive. The financial crisis that had slowly crippled Greek economy since 2012 rippled to a political crisis and a growth in Euroscepticism, neither of which have seized to this day.

The backdrop is important in understanding that unlike other EU Member States, the arrival of the refugees in Greece was a crucial but not overly discussed issue. The focus was on the domestic management of arrivals, contrasted with Europe's failure to adhere to its values of solidarity and right of asylum. For the government, the dominant discourse was that not only the economic woes of Greece did not alter its 'hospitality' to those in need but brought to the forefront the limited (and often incoherent) response by European partners in the early days of the 'crisis'. For the opposition parties, the refugee 'crisis' was an opportunity to showcase the limitations of the coalition government. As will be discussed further on, despite the deep divisions between parties and media outlets, a common element emerges. Irrespective of the failure domestically to address the needs of arrivals, Europe comes up short in addressing the arrival of the refugees. Irrespective of how the

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR (2018) 'Operational Portal: The Mediterranean Situation'. Available at <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean> (accessed 20 August 2018).

<sup>2</sup> 885,386 migrants utilised the Eastern Mediterranean Route, of which 496,340 were Syrians, 2013,635 Afghanis and almost 93000 Iraqis Frontex Risk Analysis for 2016 (2016) Annual Risk Analysis. Available at [https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk\\_Analysis/Annula\\_Risk\\_Analysis\\_2016.pdf](https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annula_Risk_Analysis_2016.pdf) (accessed 21 August 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Troika refers to the three institutions involved in the bailout negotiations: International Monetary Fund, European Commission and the European Central Bank.

domestic situation is approached, all sources reviewed acknowledged and lay part of the responsibility (if not all in some cases) at the door of the European Union, its institutions and Member States.

### 1.1. Methodology

The present report seeks to examine whether responsibility became an issue of politicisation. In other words, whether the “who is responsible” at the EU level or within the Greek context acquired “salience and diversity of opinions resulting in “public demands on public policy”.<sup>4</sup>

This describes a two-dimensional research process that enables to empirically observe and assess the context and settings of politicisation. Furthermore, with the inclusion of salience and opinion diversity, this analytical framework enables us to turn the attention to the rhetoric and debates of the public sphere.<sup>5</sup> Based on that, the politicisation of the migration and refugee issue in parliamentary debates and, in general, in the political arena, is analysed with respect to the salience and the diversity of opinions. Accordingly, to answer the main research question, namely “to what extent and how responsibility vis-à-vis refugees in Europe has become an issue of politicisation in Greece?”, the research also addresses the following questions:

“Who is considered to be responsible within the EU and Greece?; “What triggered these debates?” and “To what extent has the politicisation of the migration and refugee situation led to policy change?”

The analysis draws from three types of sources: online media, as well as parliamentary debates and party announcements, and public opinion polls. Two periods, or episodes of contention are investigated in terms of politicisation: the discussions around the relocation quota from May 2015 to November 2015,<sup>6</sup> and, the discussions for the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016.

The different periods are significant. Whereas the discussion on relocation took place amidst a referendum of the bailout and the threat of Grexit looming near, the Statement unfolded in a relatively stable<sup>7</sup> financial landscape for Greece. Questions on solidarity and burden sharing were weaved into Greece’s financial woes with the relocation of refugees seen as a critical test of Member State’s intentions for fair redistribution. Similarly, the quick support of the Greek government to the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016, was quickly linked with exchanges for debt relief and German support in the negotiations with the Troika. The narrative, irrespective of political parties and approaches to refugees, tended to link the financial crisis with the refugee crisis in a *quid pro quo* manner. In early 2016, the fear of Grexit rescinds in the background to be replaced by the threat of expulsion from the Schengen area.

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<sup>4</sup> de Wilde, Pieter (2011) ‘No Polity for Old Politics? A Framework for Analyzing the Politicization of European Integration’. *Journal of European Integration*, 33, 5, p. 561.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 560.

<sup>6</sup> Though initially the data collected were until September, a quick review showed that relocation had actually increased in salience between October-November. To make up for the gap during the summer in the media reporting, the months of October and November were included.

<sup>7</sup> Stability here refers mostly to the eventual acceptance of the Memorandum with Troika and the agreement of reforms and financial assistance in exchange for remaining in the Eurozone. The ‘Grexit’ factor has been removed by March 2016.

In January 2016, media reported that EU Ministers requested Greece to undertake the registering of arrivals.<sup>8</sup> The Austrian Minister of Interior clearly echoed the sentiment stating that “If we cannot protect the external EU border, the Greek-Turkish border, then the Schengen external border will move toward central Europe”.<sup>9</sup> The threat of exit from Schengen is largely attributed for driving the Greek government’s support to the EU Turkey Statement, once more hinting at a *quid pro quo*.

A quantitative analysis took place of the media coverage of the discussion on relocation (March-November 2015) and the Statement (March 2016) as well as of the parliamentary debates and party announcements. Online media were chosen on the basis of the ranking at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, which identified two online media sources as the most commonly used; “newsbomb.gr” and “in.gr”.

“In.gr” is a website that was shut down for a period of roughly 5 months, due to license issues. As a result, the coverage on the refugee ‘crisis’ is limited, however it is indicative of its popularity the fact that it remained number 1 throughout 2015.

“Newsbomb.gr” had a more extensive coverage of the issues however similarly to most online media sources in Greece, it does not provide on-the ground source-based coverage particularly when it comes to decision making process in Brussels. Rather both news sites translated mostly articles either by Reuters, Associated Press (AP), foreign newspapers or reprint the news provided by the Athens News Agency. Both media sources but broadly also almost all media sources (tv, print and online), contributed to the politicisation of migration by raising the issue to their audience. Migration was also mediated as a result and particularly following the death of Aylan Kurdi on Turkey’s coast.<sup>10</sup> For the relocation quota, keyword search included “relocation”, “refugee crisis”, “burden sharing”, “responsibility (sharing)”, “solidarity”. For the EU-Turkey Statement, keyword search included “deal”; “EU-Turkey (Joint Action Plan/Statement)”, “burden sharing”, “solidarity”, and “refugee crisis”.

The second source material was parliamentary debates and party announcements. The data for parliamentary debates concerns plenary session discussions and parliamentary questions. These data have been extracted from the minutes of the plenary sessions of the Hellenic Parliament that are accessible to the public.<sup>11</sup> Taking into account that the plenary sessions particularly between March to November 2015 reveal a polarised and divided country where the primary concern is Grexit and financial bankruptcy, another relevant source has been included; the party communication of the political parties that seat in the Hellenic Parliament. This enables to minimise any methodological challenges that may arise from the restricted access to parliamentary documents as well as to include all the relevant debates that may, or may not be conducted, in the Parliament’s setting and structure. After all, although the Parliament is the major ‘institutional arena for public deliberation’,<sup>12</sup> political

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<sup>8</sup> It was common knowledge throughout 2015 that Greece registered only partially arrivals. Limited registration was partly due to lack of sufficient number of EURODAC machines but partly due to the silent nod towards refugees to leave the country via the Western Balkan route.

<sup>9</sup> Baczyńska, Gabriela & Körkemeier, Tom (2016) ‘Greece Threatened with Expulsion from Schengen over Migration Crisis’. Reuters. (January 25, 2016) Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-ministers-idUSKCN0V315L> (accessed 03 September 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Krzyżanowski, Michał, Triandafyllidou, Anna & Wodak, Ruth (2018) ‘The Mediatization and the Politicization of the “Refugee Crisis” in Europe’. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16, 1-2, pp. 1-14.

<sup>11</sup> See Hellenic Parliament (2018) ‘Plenary Sessions: Browse for Plenary Minutes’. Available in Greek at <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/en/Praktika/Synedriaseis-Olomeleias> (accessed 27 August 2018).

<sup>12</sup> de Wilde, Pieter (2009) ‘Designing Politicization: How Control Mechanisms in National Parliaments Affect Parliamentary Debates in EU Policy-Formulation. ARENA Working Paper No. 13/2009, p. 2.

narratives and political rhetoric can also be traced in and extracted from other relevant settings of the public sphere.

Following that, the party communication is also investigated, as it constitutes a central and strategic means for the promotion of party positions and the information of the public in the party attempt to gain visibility and legitimation.<sup>13</sup> The party communication clearly reflects the party line in the topic under scrutiny and is directly addressed to the public. As such, there are no restrictions in the access to the documents. The data for party communication has been extracted from archived documents in the official sites of all the political parties that seat in the Parliament. These documents refer to party statements and announcements, as well as speeches and interviews of party spokespersons and parties' parliamentary representatives in the two selected chronological periods.

All the documents of the parliamentary debates and the party communication have been researched based on the keywords 'migration', 'refugee crisis', 'migration crisis', 'relocation', 'EU solidarity', 'responsibility/burden sharing', 'Turkey', and 'EU-Turkey Statement'. The chronological scope for this research included the periods from May 2015 to October 2015<sup>14</sup> that covers the discussions around the relocation quota and March 2016<sup>15</sup> that includes the discussions of the EU-Turkey Statement. The focus is also largely domestic rather than European. The Minister at the time came under attack for various statements regarding irregular entry and stay in Greece and the main opposition party of New Democracy framed the absence of government response on migration as part of a continuum in policy from the financial crisis to the migration crisis.

The final source were public opinion polls in Greece. In partnership with the Municipality of Athens, one of the main polling/research firms- Public Issue- undertook throughout 2016 seven public opinion that included migration or focused only on migration. In 2016, *Dianeosis*, a Greek think tank, also undertook in partnership with Public Issue a quantitative assessment titled 'The refugee problem and Greeks'. The usage of the term "problem" is already indicative on how migration is approached by 2016 in Greece. Though the opinion polls were not necessarily linked to an event or to the episodes of contention, they are useful in understanding how the public perceives migration, especially post 2015.

## **2. Overview of the main debates**

Migration has always been politicised in Greece, with the issue acquiring salience usually when irregular arrivals increase. The period of 2012-2014 was also one of heavy politicisation of migration due to the policies of deterrence (border fence, increase in detention) undertaken by the previous

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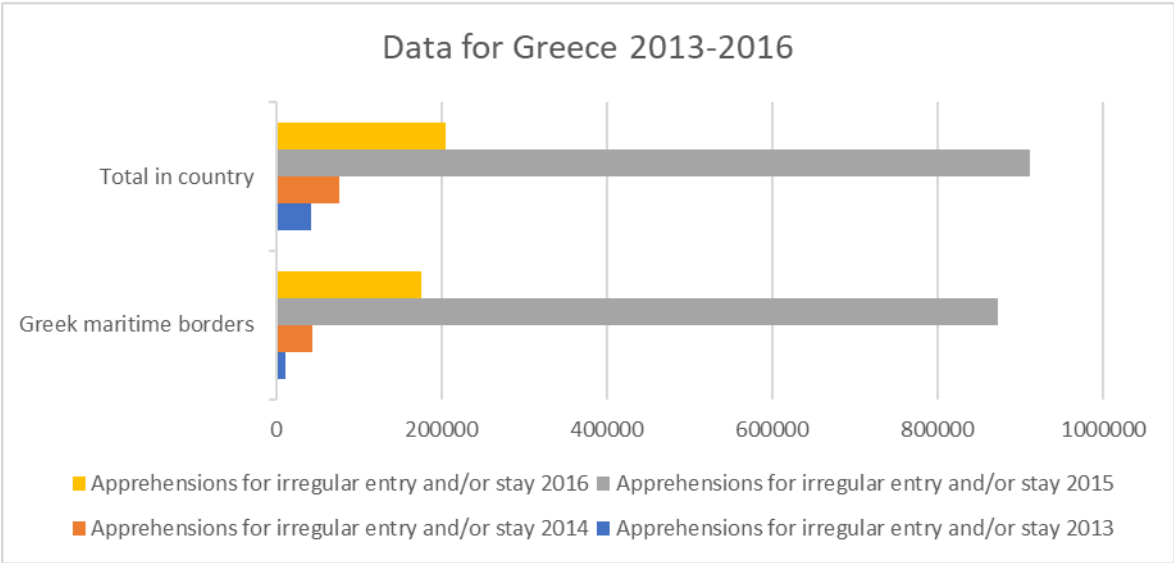
<sup>13</sup> Garland, Ruth (2017) 'Between Mediatisation and Politicization: The Changing Role and Position of Whitehall Press Officers in the Age of Political Spin'. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 6, 2, pp. 171-189.

<sup>14</sup> The end date of this chronological scrutiny is not September 30 but October 31. This enables to include any late references in the parliamentary discussions.

<sup>15</sup> The end date of this chronological scrutiny is not March 31 but April 17. This enables to include any late references in the parliamentary discussions.



government of the conservative New Democracy.<sup>16</sup> By 2014 a noticeable increase takes place in apprehensions across the country and particularly in the maritime borders. As early as December 2014, the General Secretariat for Migration circulated a non-paper to the Minister of Citizens Protection (responsible for border security) and the Prime Minister, forewarning of a rapid increase in arrivals and recommending a series of measures for Syrian refugees. Named operation 'Io',<sup>17</sup> the rough idea existed since 2012 as a backup plan in case of increase of arrivals at the maritime border. It had never been utilized, largely because between 2012-2014 numbers remained low in comparison to previous years. When in 2014 the idea is put forth once more, the Syrians had small percentages in the apprehension data and thus the operation was deemed unnecessary. By 2015 it was too costly and impractical considering the number of arrivals in the country.



The official government narrative is best laid out in an interview of Prime Minister Tsipras in October 2016 at France 24. In it, he stated that: “Greece has done everything it can, and people continue to do their best to have *stability* in Europe. We saw this in the crisis, we saw the sacrifices of the Greek people, we saw that the eurozone did not dissipate, that the eurozone countries did not leave one after the other. *Greece has highlighted the values of solidarity* and, at this moment, is a country that restricts uncontrolled inflows and the movement of traffickers within Europe. But, Europe must also accept *its obligations*, must speed up the process of relocation of refugees, and the cessation of

<sup>16</sup> Angeli Danai, Dimitriadi Angeliki & Triandafyllidou, Anna (2014) ‘Assessing the Cost Effectiveness of Irregular Migration Control Policies in Greece’. Policy Paper, Athens: ELIAMEP.

<sup>17</sup> Io was the daughter of Zeus. The naming is significant: the round up of migrants in police operations across various urban centres in Greece throughout 2012 and 2013 was named ‘Xenios Zeus’-the ancient god of hospitality to foreigners. Io, lover to Zeus, faced Hera’s jealousy and in her effort to escape punishment fled and crossed the Ionia Sea, then the Bosphorus, ending up in Egypt. The operation sought to utilise ships to temporarily house and transfer Syrian refugees. The naming of operations is significant in creating a continuum in policy. From the framing of arrests and deportations as part of conditional hospitality (Xenios Zeus) to the narrative towards the Syrians, in contrast to other nationalities; the ‘genuine’ refugees, in search of protection.

illegal entries must be replaced with *distribution* of refugees in central Europe”<sup>18</sup> [translation and italics authors own].

The narrative that Greece rose to the challenge and functioned as an example for Europe but also a reminder of its obligations, is one that underscores the period 2015-2016 in government discourse but also across parties. It bears acknowledging that it was a useful strategy. Amidst the financial crisis and discussions on Grexit, migration served as a negotiating tool in relation to the debt relief discussions but also a way to remind Europeans of their obligations but also of the imbalanced asylum system (with a particular reference to Dublin). It is worth noting that though migration per se is present in the Greek media and parliamentary discourse, the issues of contention are not necessarily at the core of the discussions.

To better assess the politicisation of the migrant and refugee situation in the political context an analysis of the articles is employed, in the media as well as documents of the parliamentary debates and the party communication. For this document analysis and drawing on de Wilde’s analytical framework, a document coding has been used so as to answer the research questions investigating and identifying ‘who’ (triggered the debate), ‘when’, ‘how’, ‘addressing what’ and ‘why’.<sup>19</sup> However, all these need to be identified taking into account the general political context<sup>20</sup> that prevails in the investigated periods.

### **3. May 2015-November 2015: relocation scheme**

On May 13<sup>th</sup> 2015, President Juncker unveiled the much-awaited European Agenda on Migration. The Agenda had largely been shaped by the repeated tragedies in the Central Mediterranean route<sup>21</sup> and the acknowledged failure of the EU to stand in solidarity with Italy in a period of heightened arrivals. A proposal for the relocation of 40,000 Syrians and Eritreans followed on May 27<sup>th</sup> 2015. President Juncker stated that “We cannot leave it solely to the Member States directly concerned to manage

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<sup>18</sup> Hellenic Republic Press Office (21.10.2016), Interview by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras at the tv channel France 24 and the reporter Caroline de Camaret. Reproduced at “To Vima”. Available at <http://www.tovima.gr/files/1/2016/10/21/tsipras.pdf> (accessed 10 August 2018).

<sup>19</sup> de Wilde, Pieter (2009).

<sup>20</sup> In January 2015, the Coalition of the Radical Left, Syriza, became the largest party in Parliament forming a coalition government with the right-wing Party of Independent Greeks (Anel). Despite their differences, they found a common ground against the bailout programmes and austerity measures marking the development of a new political system in an unstable period. A few months later, in July 2015, and in the midst of capital controls, a referendum was held on the bailout terms that revitalised the discussions about Grexit. Despite the result of the referendum and the ‘no’ vote, the government accepted the proposed bailout package resulting in a loss of confidence vote in Parliament. Early parliamentary election took place in 20 September 2015. The coalition government of Syriza-ANEL remained in power, with the centre-right party of New Democracy (ND) becoming the main opposition party, while the far-right Golden Dawn (GD) continued to be the third political force in the country. Other parties that won parliamentary seats were the centre-left coalition of PASOK and Democratic Left (DIMAR), the centrist Potami party and the centrist Enosi Kentroon party (EK) that entered the Parliament for the first time. Ministry of Interior (2018) ‘Elections Results’. Available in Greek at <http://www.ypes.gr/el/Elections/NationalElections/Results/> (accessed 28 August 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Dallal Stevens and Angeliki Dimitriadi (2018), ‘Crossing the Eastern Mediterranean Sea in Search of “Protection”’, *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, doi/10.1080/15562948.2018.1444831

the relocation of refugees. What we need is shared solidarity.”<sup>22</sup> The language of solidarity was the bedrock of the relocation proposal. Solidarity is also a critical element of the Lisbon Treaty, with explicit provision included for assistance to a Member State facing disproportionate number of arrivals.

In Greece, Syriza having a radical left political stance embraced a pro-migrant rhetoric, which tried to implement in its term of office, firstly with Tasia Christodouloupoulou as alternate Minister for Migration Policy and later with Ioannis Mouzalas, despite any possible objections from its right-wing coalition partner. Measures towards this pro-migrant setting were the closure in February 2015 of migrant detention centres to be replaced by open accommodation structures as well as the abolishment of the operation Xenios Zeus.<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that this change in Greek policy coincided with the beginning of the refugee crisis, as hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees arrived in Greece at the same period. In parallel, the Greek government tried to frame migration as a European issue, bringing it in the agendas of the EU fora, such as in the October 2016 Euro-Mediterranean Summit,<sup>24</sup> and with interventions in the Council of Europe.<sup>25</sup> In the same spirit of migration prioritisation, due to the vast migratory inflow, the Greek government decided to create in November 2016 the Ministry for Migration Policy separating the sector of migration from the Ministry of the Interior and Administrative Reconstruction as well as from the Ministry of Citizen Protection.

Prime Minister Tsipras, had suggested in April that it was imperative to support Mediterranean member states and to do so through burden sharing financial but also in terms of hospitality. He was alluding to a form of redistribution that would essentially reduce the number of refugees on Greek and Italian soil.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> European Commission - Speech - [Check Against Delivery] (29 April 2015). Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the debate in the European Parliament on the conclusions of the Special European Council on 23 April: ‘Tackling the migration crisis’. Available at [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-15-4896\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-15-4896_en.htm) (accessed 03 September 2018).

<sup>23</sup> With operation Xenios Zeus police officers conducted document checks at migrants so as to limit irregular immigration. However, this operation received harsh criticism from NGOs and human rights organisations. See: Greek Council for Refugees (2012) ‘Επιχείρηση “Ξένιος Ζευς”: Το ΕΣΠ Ζητά τον Σεβασμό των Ανθρωπίνων Δικαιωμάτων και την Έμπρακτη Προστασία Όσων Δικαιούνται Διεθνή Προστασία’ [“Xenios Zeus” Mission: GCR Requests the Respect for Human Rights and the Actual Protection of the Beneficiaries of International Protection]. Available in Greek at <https://www.gcr.gr/el/news/press-releases-announcements> (accessed 27 August 2018) and Human Rights Watch (2013) ‘Unwelcome Guests: Greek Police Abuses of Migrants in Athens’. June 2013. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/06/12/unwelcome-guests/greek-police-abuses-migrants-athens> (accessed 27 August 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Euromed (2016) ‘2016 Euro-Mediterranean Summit of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions: Short Description’. Available at [http://www.oke.gr/notice/Short\\_Description\\_Euromed\\_Summit\\_2016.pdf](http://www.oke.gr/notice/Short_Description_Euromed_Summit_2016.pdf) (accessed 19 August 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016a) ‘Αννέτα Καββαδία για Προσφυγικό: «Έχουμε Κάνει το Νομικό, Ηθικό και Ανθρωπιστικό μας Καθήκον. Καιρός να Κάνει και η Ευρώπη το Δικό της»’ [Anneta Kavnadia for refugee situation: “We have done our legal, moral and humanitarian duty. It is time for the Europe to do the same”]. Press Office. Available in Greek at <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/Enimerosi/Grafeio-Typou/Deltia-Typou/?press=a7b7ecd7-6601-475e-84ab-a5c200f92302> (accessed 19 August 2018).

<sup>26</sup> in.gr, 22 April 2015

### 3.1. Relocation in the media

Media coverage in the period in question (May to November 2015) focus on opposition faced by President Juncker in the relocation scheme, the support by Germany and Sweden, and the opposition by Visegrad states as well as the UK. Interestingly, when the relocation scheme is examined words such as “forced upon”, “imposed” and “compulsory” appear in the coverage of both “in.gr” but particularly “newsbomb.gr” with the implication that most Member States would not necessarily partake in relocation had it not been put forth by the European Commission and supported by Germany. The role of Germany is highlighted in its willingness to accept a significant number of refugees under the relocation scheme.

A gap exists in the media coverage between June to August 2015 and it matches real time events. Grexit is firmly on the agenda and a bailout referendum takes place amidst a two week ‘campaign’ that sharply divided the country. While refugees continued to arrive on the Greek islands and media do cover the domestic context (numbers, Statements by the Ministers etc) the focus has clearly shifted on the financial crisis and away from the EU responsibility sharing discussions.

The last minute averted Grexit and the negotiations on the bailout, gave way in late August to migration that acquired increased salience as a topic. Between the two media sources alone 19 articles were identified discussing burden sharing and responsibility at an EU level, relocation and solidarity. Part of the focus was prompted by the death of Aylan Kurdi on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2015. The diffusion of the picture through social and traditional media served not only to highlight the plight of the refugees<sup>27</sup> but also the eventual mediatisation of migration that would be dominated by personal stories and images documenting journeys.

In late August 2015, the Greek Prime Minister, returning to the links between the financial and migration ‘crises’ noted as regards an upcoming EU Council meeting that “Greece is the frontier of Europe and on the receiving end of mass refugee flows. It remains to be seen whether there are prospects for European solidarity or if everyone will look at its own borders”,<sup>28</sup> referring to the Greek position that the external borders of Greece are those of the EU and should be protected by everyone.

The calls for solidarity persisted throughout September, by both the Minister of Migration (Mr Mouzalas) and the Prime Minister and were documented in the press. According to the press coverage by “newsbomb.gr” the Minister called for EU Member States to show responsibility and solidarity towards Greece and stressed that “we will not allow our country to turn into a massive refugee camp”. The statement echoed a long-standing concern of Greece since the early days of the Dublin Regulation, and a sentiment shared across political parties.

Responsibility in other words, should be shared by all. This is a theme that has persisted throughout the period in question but also in 2016. Shared responsibility by all Member States in support of front-line states has been a long standing position of Greece, irrespective of the political party in

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<sup>27</sup> Triandafyllidou, Anna (2018) ‘A “Refugee Crisis” Unfolding: “Real” Events and Their Interpretation in Media and Political Debates’. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16, 1-2, pp. 198-216.

<sup>28</sup> newsbomb.gr, 7 August 2015.

power. The ‘a la carte’ participation of Member States to the relocation mechanism has been heavily criticised, by all parties in the democratic spectrum as well as by the media.

The two media sources selected, do not directly adopt neither a populist nor a pro-EU discourse. Their coverage, precisely due to limited (or no) direct access to Brussels, tends to reproduce foreign media sources. Thus, when looking into relocation in 2015, mainly a topic discussed and decided in Brussels, reporting focuses more on facts rather than assignation of responsibility (and blame). However, particularly “newsbomb.gr” tends to produce articles that highlight the internal conflict in the EU Council, the disagreements of Member States and thus indirectly reproduce the narrative of a divided Europe. All the articles pertaining to relocation in September 2015 discussed the disagreements and refusal of sharing responsibility.

In contrast however to the early narrative of “Greece” vs “Europe”, in the fall of 2015, the portrayal changed into a coalition of countries willing to assist Greece (Germany, Austria, Sweden and Italy) vs those opposing relocation.

It is important to note that the focus to media that tend to represent specific political ideologies is different. For example print media (not part of the research sample here) such as Avgi (the official newspaper of Syriza), Kathimerini (conservative newspaper), Proto Thema (towards the right end of the political spectrum), provide a much more biased coverage. Kathimerini’s editorials and articles expressing personal views by analysts tend to give a clearer picture of how the newspaper looks at the refugee “crisis”. An example is an opinion piece written by a regular author on October 31<sup>st</sup> 2015. In it he highlights segments from a press briefing by the Prime Minister

[...] he said the West is responsible for causing the problem [refugee crisis], he said the dead scattered European civilization on the shores, he said he was ashamed of being a member of the European leadership. ]

The opinion piece continues with a personal comment from the author

‘His work [Alexis Tsipras] with *ideas and short stories* did not give him time to say when the centres would be created, without which, as agreed, relocation could not begin. But these are all details, since it is the West’s fault’.

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras’ representation of a morally weak Europe was recurrent in 2015. The author’s own reference (see above) to “ideas and short stories” alludes to a specific way of framing the refugee “crisis” in Greece. The government throughout 2015 framed both the bailout referendum and the refugee crisis a story of David and Goliath. In the debt crisis, Goliath is the Troika and Greece’s debtors. In the refugee “crisis” Goliath is the Member States and the threat of expulsion from Schengen. In both cases, Greece is David.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “For me this effort is a world heritage, it is obvious that this is a fight between David and Goliath and it is obvious that we are right” (translation authors own). Prime Minister Tsipras interview, July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015. Available in Greek at <https://www.news247.gr/politiki/tsipras-ekana-polla-vimata-piso-apo-tis-proeklogikes-mas-desmeyseis.6361515.html> accessed 21 August 2018)

Boukala and Dimitrakopoulou<sup>30</sup> in their discourse analysis of various print media on the refugee “crisis” found that variation of the discourse in populist newspapers, where Europe “threatens” Greece with exit from Schengen (early 2016) which is portrayed as a way to punish the country once more: “‘Since the ‘boogie man’ called Grexit ... has passed away, they needed to invent a new one. And it was found/ invented through the excuse of the refugee crisis: Greece’s expulsion from the Schengen zone’.”<sup>31</sup>

Once relocation is proposed, and a coalition of the willing emerges at the EU level, Syriza, mainly through the Prime Minister but also the Minister of Migration, move between a xenophobic Fortress Europe and a Europe of solidarity. The former is exemplified by Hungary’s refusal to vote on relocation, as well as the unilateral measures undertaken to fence off its borders. Solidarity is exemplified by Germany and the coalition of Member States willing to offer tangible assistance to Greece and Italy. The media adopt this dichotomy but also acknowledge that the European solidarity is not unconditional; rather it requires Greece to beef up the external borders, implement the hotspot approach and clearly distinguish between refugees and migrants. For example, on September 14<sup>th</sup>, “newsbomb.gr” published a detailed article on the relocation scheme. Complimentary to it, was the letter sent to DG Migration and Home Commissioner Avramopoulos. The letter outlined the list of requirements Greece successfully completed within twenty days, all prerequisites for accessing EU Funding for assistance in the ‘crisis’<sup>32</sup>.

### 3.2. The political discourse on relocation

Europe’s need to live up to its humanitarian values and the role of Greece as a promotor of humanity and legality, whilst being confronted with a humanitarian crisis, dominate also parliamentary discussions and party discourse.

The government pointed out repeatedly that the arrivals of migrants were not a new phenomenon. Instead, an increase had been witnessed since 2014 and the government criticised the main Opposition party (previously in government) for failing to take the necessary measures to equip the civil services with staff, new reception places for asylum seekers and formulate initiatives at the EU level.<sup>33</sup> The government sought to differentiate itself from past practices, by bringing in Parliament a series of legislative initiatives for the staffing of civil services to cope with this emergency, given that, as the alternate Minister for Migration Policy, Ms. Tasia Christodouloupoulou mentioned, ‘the Asylum as a service had collapsed’<sup>34</sup> (translation authors own). Furthermore, the government sought to establish Greece as an active participant in the search for solutions.<sup>35</sup> For this reason, the Greek PM

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<sup>30</sup> Salomi Boukala & Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou (2018) Absurdity and the “Blame Game” Within the Schengen Area: Analyzing Greek (Social) Media Discourses on the Refugee Crisis, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16:1-2, 179-197.

<sup>31</sup> quotes from Proto Thema, January 30, 2016, in Boukala & Dimitrakopoulou (2018)

<sup>32</sup> Newsbomb.gr, 14 September 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015a) ‘Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΣΤ’ Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΛΔ’ [Parliament Minutes: ΙΣΤ’ Term, Session ΛΔ’]. Tuesday 05 May 2015 (afternoon). Available in Greek.

<sup>34</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015b) ‘Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΣΤ’ Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΛΘ’ [Parliament Minutes: ΙΣΤ’ Term, Session ΛΘ’]. Monday 11 May 2015. Available in Greek, p. 2527.

<sup>35</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015c) ‘Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΖ’ Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΙΔ’ [Parliament Minutes: ΙΖ’ Term, Session ΙΔ’]. Friday 30 October 2015. Available in Greek.

asked for a 'national consensus' from the other political parties on migration,<sup>36</sup> underlining that it was not only a Greek preoccupation, but also a European and universal challenge.<sup>37</sup> The aim for this political consensus was to strengthen the national position so as the EU countries to finally fulfill their obligations. As the alternate Minister for Migration Policy, Ms. Tasia Christodouloupoulou said, national consensus would enable Greece to 'gain confidence to demand from Europe' to implement a 'proportional distribution of refugees and migrants'<sup>38</sup> (translation authors own).

Thus, in the parliamentary discussions the impression emerges of a government that seeks to place Greece at the forefront of a European solution, partly born out of the belief that Greece functioned only as a transit country for those arriving. According to the alternate Minister for Migration Policy, Ms. Tasia Christodouloupoulou 'from those that enter [Greece], no one wants to remain in Greece'<sup>39</sup> (translation authors own). Also, the government stressed West's responsibility for the current 'humanitarian tragedy that is taking place'<sup>40</sup> (translation authors own). Furthermore, it condemned EU's 'solidarity à la carte'<sup>41</sup> underlining Europe's inability to manage the situation with ill-designed tools, like Dublin and Schengen, which only function as a means to render Greece the borderguard of Europe.<sup>42</sup>

From the other side, the Opposition, and mainly the liberal progressive / centrist Potami and the communist KKE parties, criticised the government for an underdeveloped migration policy with contradictory elements,<sup>43</sup> such as the closure and then re-opening of detention centres. On the emergency rhetoric and the continuous legislative acts, all the opposition parties accused the government for undemocratic practices and corruption.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the Golden Dawn party blamed the government for agreeing to the relocation programme in exchange of money.<sup>45</sup>

The Opposition attributed on Syriza's policy changes the augmentation of migration flows. It was also highly critical of the emergency procedures in the parliamentary discussions and adoption of legislative acts, which as a consequence, undermined the oversight function of the Parliament. Apart from these issues, the role of Turkey as an enabler of migrants has also been investigated as well as Hungary's decision to unilaterally suspend Dublin agreement.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 1124.

<sup>37</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015a); Hellenic Parliament (2015c); Hellenic Parliament (2015g) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΣΤ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΠΒ' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΣΤ' Term, Session ΠΒ']. Friday 31 July 2015. Available in Greek.

<sup>38</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015b), p. 2525.

<sup>39</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015d) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΣΤ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΞΒ' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΣΤ' Term, Session ΞΒ']. Wednesday 24 June 2015. Available in Greek, p. 3692.

<sup>40</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015c), p. 1120.

<sup>41</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015g).

<sup>42</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015a).

<sup>43</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015d); Hellenic Parliament (2015e) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΣΤ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΠΕ' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΣΤ' Term, Session ΠΕ']. Friday 14 August 2015. Available in Greek.

<sup>44</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015f) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΣΤ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΛΓ' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΣΤ' Term, Session ΛΓ']. Tuesday 05 May 2015 (morning). Available in Greek.

<sup>45</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015e).

<sup>46</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015d).

For the first episode of contention, namely the discussions around the relocation quota, there have been 11 parliamentary discussions and 2 party communications from 01 May 2015 to 31 October 2015 that referred to the refugee situation and/or the relocation quota. The highest number of parliamentary debates took place in May 2015 and July 2015 with four findings in each month, while there was one parliamentary debate conducted in June, one in August and one October 2015. It should be noted that for the same chronological period a general search in the plenary discussions reveals 76 findings. Hence, these numbers cannot reflect an increase in salience.

These parliamentary debates were triggered mainly by the introduction of legislative acts for the staffing of the civil service<sup>47</sup> and an amendment to the Greek citizenship Law<sup>48</sup>. Also, there were a few parliamentary questions that referred to the general migration policy,<sup>49</sup> the situation in the city centre of Athens due to migrants and refugees,<sup>50</sup> and corruption investigations in the supply of services for refugees.<sup>51</sup> Apart from these parliamentary discussions, there were also references to the migration situation following deadly shipwrecks and the EU Summit in October 2015.<sup>52</sup>

The refugee and migration situation became a political battleground between the government and the opposition parties. Absence of consensus also amongst non-government parties, increased the diversity of opinions, lack of homogenisation and intensified the polarisation in the already highly divided political setting due to the economic crisis and the antagonism of Greece with the EU technocratic system and 'paper pusher' staff.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the differences, all political parties underlined the EU's role and power in addressing this situation.<sup>54</sup> This has also been noted by the PM who stressed that 'we do not design the West's strategy. We [...] face the consequences of these strategies and policy choices'<sup>55</sup> (translation authors own). Emphasis was also placed on the EU Commissioner for Migration, Mr. D. Avramopoulos, and the results of the EU Summits.<sup>56</sup>

Though the refugee 'crisis' resulted in a politicised and polarised discussion in the media and Parliament as well as between parties, it was not the foremost issue of concern in the Greek public.

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<sup>47</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015a); Hellenic Parliament (2015f).

<sup>48</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015d); Hellenic Parliament (2015h) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΣΤ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση Ο' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΣΤ' Term, Session Ο']. Wednesday 08 July 2015. Available in Greek; Hellenic Parliament (2015i) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΣΤ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΞΘ' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΣΤ' Term, Session ΞΘ']. Tuesday 07 July 2015. Available in Greek.

<sup>49</sup> Hellenic Parliament, 2015b; Hellenic Parliament 2015c; Hellenic Parliament (2015ia) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΣΤ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΟΖ' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΣΤ' Term, Session ΟΖ']. Monday 20 July 2015. Available in Greek.

<sup>50</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015g).

<sup>51</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015ib) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΣΤ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΜΖ' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΣΤ' Term, Session ΜΖ']. Monday 25 May 2015. Available in Greek.

<sup>52</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015c); KKE (2015) 'Ανακοίνωση Γραφείου Τύπου' [Press Office Statement]. Available in Greek at

[http://www.kke.gr/anakoynoseis\\_grafeiow\\_typou/anakoynosh\\_toy\\_grafeiow\\_typou\\_gia\\_to\\_ektakto\\_symboylio\\_ypourgon\\_metanasteysis\\_kai\\_esoterikon\\_ypotheseon\\_ths\\_ee?morf=0](http://www.kke.gr/anakoynoseis_grafeiow_typou/anakoynosh_toy_grafeiow_typou_gia_to_ektakto_symboylio_ypourgon_metanasteysis_kai_esoterikon_ypotheseon_ths_ee?morf=0) (accessed 03 September 2018).

<sup>53</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015g).

<sup>54</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015ib).

<sup>55</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015g), p. 4649.

<sup>56</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2015d); Hellenic Parliament (2015g).



Rather, and for obvious reasons, Grexit, debt relief and the referendum on the negotiations were forefront issues of concern. Migration is considered a critical issue for Greeks as regards EU cohesion and continuity but is not the primary issue at national or individual level. The recognition that the refugee 'crisis' has the potential to make or break the Union, derives to an extent from the extensive coverage of the disagreements and limited decisions coming out of Brussels as well as the domestic discourse of Greece. In relation to the first issue of contention, relocation, though relocation proved to be a major crash test for the EU and migration overall came to dominate public discussion (and election results) across Europe, in Greece opinion polls show that migration was not the foremost issue of concern. This does not mean it was not considered critical but rather an EU-wide issue rather than a domestic one. Birgit Glorius's analysis of opinion polls reveals that "immigration" appears on the top of the agenda in most countries under observation starting from year 2015'.<sup>57</sup> Her analysis further shows that even for the countries that did not consider immigration an issue of concern, will eventually do so by 2017. This is also the case for Greece.

Overall however, domestic public opinion polls show that the division "Greece" vs "Europe" initially adopted by the government in the early days of 2015 (through the focus on lack of solidarity and need for stronger European response) seeped through the public perception. This is evident in the Political Barometer Polling undertaken by Public Issue in October 2015.<sup>58</sup> The timing is important. By October 2015 the relocation scheme had been approved amidst a fierce battle in the Council.

When asked whether Greece should receive refugees, a 65% of respondents rejected the idea with only 34% in favour. Solidarity thus, is understood as needed for Greece but not necessarily something Greece should also impart with other Member States.

In contrast, 50% of respondents argued that EU migration policy is too restrictive. The responses are not contradictory but rather complimentary. Greece was sympathetic to the plight of refugees but deemed the EU response insufficient, especially in terms of responsibility-sharing. When asked if refugees pose a threat to national security the answers divided equally to 46%. By December, in the second polling undertaken, 53% answered positively and only 38% found they do pose a threat. The tipping balance is once more linked to real time events. The Paris attack of November 2015 and the incident in Cologne, dominated the media for weeks and shifted the discourse from saving lives at sea and asylum to border security and terrorism.

#### **4. The EU-Turkey Statement of March 18<sup>th</sup> 2016.**

If in 2015 Greece perceives itself as the victim of EU intransigence, in 2016 the discourse changes drastically. Partly due to the threat of expulsion from the Schengen but primarily due to the closure of the Western Balkan route- the main exit corridor from Greece- the government adopted a rather pragmatic approach. Facilitated by the agreement on relocation and the financial assistance to

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<sup>57</sup> Glorius, Birgit (2018) 'Public Opinion on Immigration and Refugees and Patterns of Politicisation Evidence from the Eurobarometer. Working Paper CEASEVAL project.

<sup>58</sup> Public Issue (25 October 2015). Political Barometer 149. Special issue: perceptions towards the problem of refugees. Monthly political research of Public Issue. Available in Greek at: <https://www.publicissue.gr/12176/varometro-oct-2015-ref/> accessed 20 August 2018).

Greece, the media and government discourse changed. It still castigates the EU for losing its moral compass, but the issue is presented much more as a challenge to the very “Union” within the EU, and a political crisis rather than a crisis in solidarity.

On March 18<sup>th</sup> 2016, the EU-Turkey Statement (henceforth Statement) was announced. A lot of criticism has been levelled at the deal as well as Greece’s implementation of it over the past few years.<sup>59</sup> The Statement is part of the broader discussion on migration, European values and responsibility to this day. For the purpose of this research, media, party press releases and parliamentary discussions focused only on the month of March 2016, when the Statement was announced. This does not mean that it had not already acquires salience as an issue.

#### 4.1. Media discourse on the Statement

As early as February of 2016, ‘in.gr’ reports that a Greek MEP in the European Parliament submitted a question towards the European Commission regarding ‘secret discussions with Turkey on the refugee issue’.<sup>60</sup> The article further notes that there are documents showing that a refugee deal is part and parcel with the visa liberalization and Turkey’s membership to the EU.

Both media sources cover extensively the negotiating progress of the Statement, with particular emphasis on the Visegrad countries. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of March both ‘in.gr’ and ‘newsbomb.gr’ report that the Visegrad countries oppose returns of refugees to Turkey on the basis that Turkey is not a safe country. In a shift from the discourse of “Greece vs the EU”, in 2016 increasingly Greece is presented as part of the EU with the Visegrad against a European solution:

‘Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras stated there must be an agreement, otherwise what was in effect on the Balkan Corridor has to apply oncemore, i.e. to remain open. “It is hypocritical to refuse to accept certain ethnicities of refugees and at the same time to reject their return to Turkey. “They will find a way to come to Europe,” he said [Alexis Tsipras]’<sup>61</sup> (translation authors own).

Newsbomb.gr takes the analysis a step further and tries to explain why Hungary opposes the deal with Turkey

‘it is worth noting that Orbán's harsh attitude to the refugee crisis has helped to increase his popularity in his country. Last month, he said he plans to hold a referendum in which

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<sup>59</sup> Refugees Deeply (March 20, 2018). Expert Views: The E.U.-Turkey Deal After Two Years. Available at <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/community/2018/03/20/expert-views-the-e-u-turkey-deal-after-two-years> (accessed 20 August 2018); Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe (19 April 2016). ‘The Situation of Refugees and Migrants under the EU-Turkey Agreement of 18 March 2016’. Available at: <http://semantic-pace.net/tools/pdf.aspx?doc=aHR0cDovL2Fzc2VtYmx5LmNvZS5pbncveG1sL1hSZWYvWDJlLURXLWV4dHluYXNwP2ZpbGVpZD0yMjYxMiZsYW5nPUVO&xsl=aHR0cDovL3NlbWFudGljcGFjZS5uZXQvWHNsdC9QZGYvWFJlZi1XRClBVC1YTUwyUERGLnhzbA==&xsltparams=ZmlsZWlkPTIyNjEy> (accessed 01 September 2018).

<sup>60</sup> in.gr, 9 February 2016.

<sup>61</sup> in.gr 7 March 2016.

Hungarian citizens will be called upon to decide whether they accept the EU's resettlement plan on the basis of a quota system in which its government is showing strong resistance'.<sup>62</sup>

The negotiations to the Statement were covered regularly with the drafts translated into Greek and laid out in detail in the media. This is also an indication of the significance attached to the discussions with Turkey but also the salience of the issue.

Concern is also regularly expressed that the European Council will not reach a decision. The media followed closely the release of a draft of the negotiating agreement between the EU, with 'in.gr' focused more on the negotiations in Brussels; eg. 'Thriller [negotiations] in the early afternoon',<sup>63</sup> 'Against mass returns of refugees: UNHCRH notes that the EU-Turkey agreement is against international law'.<sup>64</sup>

'Newsbomb.gr' in contrast adopted a more biased tone, raising the alarm over the situation at the border, and the lack of solidarity.<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, a day before the Statement is announced, 'newsbomb.gr' also includes the statement by the Archbishop of Greece criticising the EU of lack of solidarity.<sup>66</sup>

Almost all print, online and tv media released the full document of the Statement translated in Greek as well as the official reaction of the government and the opposition parties. This is indicative of the weight attributed to the Statement at the time. The legality of the agreement was also covered. This was of particular interest in Greece since it would be the one to enforce the Statement. Although a pragmatic approach was adopted by the government regarding the Statement, it was not particularly favoured amongst media nor the public. Rather, it was a controversial decision and this is noted on March 19<sup>th</sup> by 'newsbomb.gr'

'The EU and Turkey have concluded an *unprecedented and controversial agreement* with a view to putting an end to immigration flows towards Europe, but its implementation is expected to be very complicated. [...] As a humanitarian crisis unfolds in Greece, where 46,000 immigrants are trapped in poor conditions en route to the so-called "Balkans Road" which has now been closed, the pressure on Europeans to find a solution at long last was very high'.<sup>67</sup> [italics and translation authors own].

The article is representative of the reception in Greece of the Statement. Idomeni had evolved at that point into a vast refugee camp with people trapped on the Greek side of the border in squalid conditions.

Parties reacted to the Statement with scepticism. Potami issued a statement noting that

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<sup>62</sup> March 7, 2016, newsbomb.gr

<sup>63</sup> in.gr March 8 2016.

<sup>64</sup> in.gr March 8 2016.

<sup>65</sup> newsbomb.gr 9 March 2016.

<sup>66</sup> newsbomb.gr 9 March 2016.

<sup>67</sup> newsbomb.gr 21 March 2016.

‘With new complex tasks and tens of thousands of refugees and immigrants remaining trapped in Greece, we honestly do not understand the solemn declarations of the Prime Minister who sees victories after each European Council Meeting’<sup>68</sup> (translation authors own)

The concern over the thousands trapped in Greece, was expressed widely by almost everyone in the media, and political parties. It was born less out of the actual numbers and more out of the impression that Greece appeared unable to sufficiently manage the incoming arrivals.

To a very large extent, the concerns voiced proved justified. The implementation of the Statement began on March 20<sup>th</sup>, amidst chaotic conditions. Lack of human and material resources, lack of clarity over returns and a sudden increase in asylum applications meant that several thousand did become trapped on the islands of northern Aegean, some still there almost three years later.

In an effort to decongest the islands and prepare the hotspots to receive the new arrivals post March 20<sup>th</sup>, migrants were transferred to Athens. Lack of reception spaces and camps meant that several thousand ended up on the port of Piraeus. The leader of the Communist Party (KKE) visited Piraeus and noted that

‘all the concern and the opposition we have expressed about the unacceptable decisions of the EU-Turkey Summit on the refugee issue, which leads to the massive entrapment of thousands of refugees in our country, is confirmed,’ said Mr. Koutsoumpas after his tour at the port of E2 of the port and stressed that ‘the solidarity shown by the Greek people is remarkable’<sup>69</sup> [translation authors own]

The Communist Party’s discourse, traditionally anti-EU, in this case reflects the perception of media and public. On the one hand the government is deemed incompetent, but the EU is also found lacking and blamed for the fact that thousands remained in Greece. In contrast, the Greek people are praised for continuing to exhibit solidarity, even amidst the financial crisis. It is a discourse designed to appeal to the domestic audience and with variations encountered since 2014.

On March 20<sup>th</sup>, ‘in.gr’ also published a lengthy article on the Statement and its implementation but also on Austria’s role. Titled ‘the Statement is in the air- Austria “strikes again”’ it goes into the difficulties of implementing the deal particularly in terms of asylum procedures and reception facilities. It also focuses on Austria that is implicitly identified as a “problematic” partner in the endeavour:

‘After "leading" the closure of the Western Balkans road, the Austrian Interior Minister, Johanna Mikl-Leitner asks for the closure of the Eastern Balkans route, saying there is a "potential" of 1.1 million people who could now move to Bulgaria to reach it through Central Europe. Regarding the situation at the Greek-FYROM border in Idomeni, Mikl-Lajner accused non-governmental organizations of "irresponsible" behaviour by claiming that they are trying

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<sup>68</sup> Press release To Potami (19 March 2018). Available at: <http://www.newsbomb.gr/politikh/story/680198/potami-asafi-simeia-stin-symfonia-ee-toyrkias#ixzz5E9qc72hW> (accessed 02 September 2018).

<sup>69</sup> newsbomb.gr, 21 March 2016.

to persuade refugees to remain in the "mudslides" because they may then reopen the border.' [translation authors own].

The attack in Brussels on March 2016, raised concerns over the implementation of the Statement and particularly the resettlement of Syrians from Turkey to the EU. The concerns were justified. After the Paris attacks on November 2015, the borders closed for all nationalities except Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans. Eventually the Afghans would also be excluded. The attack in Belgium raised concern they would affect the management of the refugees either to be relocated or resettled and this was voiced in print media like Kathimerini, conservative newspaper, and To VIMA, a left-leaning newspaper. It was also noted by the government spokesperson, Ms Olga Gerovassili, in an interview on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016, who noted the need to respond to the attack with more solidarity.<sup>70</sup>

On that same day, the-at the time- Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr Mardas echoed similar concerns and pressed the need to maintain the Statement. He further noted

"On the issue of terrorism I assure you that there will be full consultation. However this does not exist on other issues [i.e. consultation]. But I will tell you this, following the history of Europe, this is how Europe is being built. That is, through the disagreements, we get some result at some point. Europe has gone through many crises. We are experiencing this crisis very strongly, because it concerns us" (referring to the arrival of the refugees)<sup>71</sup> [translation authors own].

His statement alludes to the difficulty in reaching a decision on relocation, and then the Statement amongst EU member states.

The salience of the Statement is evident in the almost daily coverage and the focus on implementation difficulties. The pull out of UNHCR, Norwegian Refugee Council and Doctors without Borders from the hotspots following the announcement EU-Turkey Statement received extensive coverage, noting the disagreement of the organisations to the Statement and particularly the transformation of the hotspots from screening to detention centres.

The media do partake in the blame game throughout March 2016 however different players are blamed for different things. The EU is still blamed for its tendency to close borders, adopt unilateral policies and push the burden of responsibility on Greece. In fact, the Statement is discussed as a solution on the one hand but also as a challenge for Greece and an indication of the shifting norms and values of the EU. The Visegrad group and Austria are criticised, for their initial opposition to a deal with Turkey, evidence of lack of solidarity. However, increasingly the government is also under attack, portrayed as disorganised and unable to create acceptable conditions for those in Greece. The latter will prevail in the public and media discourse by the end of 2016 and remain central to this day in the domestic narrative of migration policy.

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<sup>70</sup> newsbomb.gr 23 March 2016

<sup>71</sup> newsbomb.gr (23 Μαρτίου 2016). Available in Greek at:

<http://www.newsbomb.gr/politikh/story/681429/prosfygiko-mardas-den-prepei-na-allaxei-tipota-sti-symfonia-ee-toyrkias#ixzz5E9r0GSTS> (accessed 02 September 2018).

## 4.2. The Statement in the Greek parliamentary debate

As in the media, the rise in the number of parliamentary debates and parliamentary communications for March 2016 that referred to migration indicate an intensified political interest. From 01 March 2016 to 17 April 2016 there have been 7 parliamentary discussions in the Hellenic Parliament and 15 party communications from a total of 26 findings for all the plenary discussions. This intensification was directly linked to considerations about possible repercussions of Turkey's involvement in EU affairs after the refugee deal with the EU as well as to the situation in Idomeni due to the closure of the Balkan route that converted Greece from a transit zone into a country of prolonged destination for refugees and migrants. In this context, although the aforementioned issues were not new political topics, the change in geopolitical circumstances after the EU-Turkey refugee deal and the border closure, led to their more profound re-emergence in the political narratives.

More specifically, during the parliamentary discussions for the EU-Turkey refugee deal, the government underlined that with this agreement for the first time Turkey is recognised as a problematic partner on the issue of irregular migration.<sup>72</sup> On the contrary, ND, as the main opposition party, characterised this agreement as 'exceptional complex and intricate with many points that are worryingly unclear' (translation authors own) and for this reason its implementation remains rather dubious.<sup>73</sup> However, any failure to implement this agreement risked rendering Greece a camp for hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees.<sup>74</sup> Concerns were also raised by Potami and Enosi Kentroon regarding any negative effects to the national interests that stem from the characterisation of Turkey as a safe third country.<sup>75</sup>

Apart from the issue of Turkey, there was also a political juxtaposition regarding the situation in Idomeni, as it was referred as 'Dahau' camp by the Opposition drawing a parallelism with Nazi concentration camps,<sup>76</sup> while the leader of ND after his visit in Idomeni, chaired an emergency meeting with his party officials.<sup>77</sup> It should be noted that the perception that Greece has stopped being a transit country but instead became a country of prolonged destination<sup>78</sup> has also inserted in the political rhetoric preoccupations regarding the burden that migration poses to tourism,<sup>79</sup> the additional workload in administrative courts and the dangers that Idomeni poses to public health<sup>80</sup> as

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<sup>72</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016b) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΖ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση Δ' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΖ' Term, Session Δ']. Monday 21 March 2016. Available in Greek.

<sup>73</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016b), p. 6949.

<sup>74</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016b).

<sup>75</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016c) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΖ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΠΗ' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΖ' Term, Session ΠΗ']. Wednesday 09 March 2016. Available in Greek; Hellenic Parliament (2016d) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΖ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΠΑ' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΖ' Term, Session ΠΑ']. Friday 01 April 2016. Available in Greek.

<sup>76</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016d); Hellenic Parliament (2016e) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΖ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση Η' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΖ' Term, Session Η']. Tuesday 29 March 2016. Available in Greek.

<sup>77</sup> New Democracy (2016) 'Επίσκεψη του Προέδρου της Ν.Δ. Κ. Μητσοτάκη στην Ειδομένη' [Visit of N.D.s President K. Mitsotakis in Idomeni]. Available in Greek at <https://nd.gr/nea/episkepsi-toy-proedroy-tis-nd-k-kyriakoy-mitsotaki-stin-aidomeni> (accessed 03 September 2018).

<sup>78</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016f) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΖ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΠΒ' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΖ' Term, Session ΠΒ']. Monday 04 April 2016. Available in Greek.

<sup>79</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016e); Hellenic Parliament (2016g) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΖ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση ΠΔ' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΖ' Term, Session ΠΔ']. Thursday 03 March 2016. Available in Greek.

<sup>80</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016f).

well as the 'dark' role of certain NGOs.<sup>81</sup> Also, in GD's narratives there was a direct link of migration to terrorism and the dangers to the Greek demography.<sup>82</sup>

These parliamentary debates were partly triggered by certain legislative acts on migration as well as by parliamentary questions on the health situation in Idomeni,<sup>83</sup> the role of NGOs on the islands,<sup>84</sup> the dangers from delays in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement<sup>85</sup> as well as by an initiative of the PM to discuss the developments in the judicial field. The latter took place at the level of party leaders (rather than plenary session) and resulted in a broad political quarrel on migration management.<sup>86</sup>

Thus, in this period there is an increasing salience of the migrant and refugee situation, given that there was a rise in parliamentary discussions and a significant number of party communications after the signing of the EU-Turkey Statement. However, the quantity of parliamentary discussions shows that the topic of the migrant and refugee situation has not completely monopolised the political debate. Similar to the first episode of contention, there was no homogeneity in the political narrative neither in the coalition government neither in the opposition parties. Although in this period, migration issues were brought to the fore of the political debates and party communications, the focus was the role of Turkey that could undermine the national interests of Greece as well as the situation in Idomeni with the migrants and refugees that were trapped there causing not only chaos but also posing a public health danger for the region. Thus, apart from an increasing salience there was also a diversity of opinions and the link of variant topics with the migration management, like tourism, corruption, health, terrorism, austerity and bailout evaluation. All these had as a result the emergence of a polarised political environment, which can be attested by the high number of party communication for the respective period.

In terms of responsibility, the government was once again criticised by the Opposition for its unpreparedness and contradictory migration policy. Accordingly, the role of Europe continued to prevail in the political narratives mainly of KKE and Potami especially due to the EU-Turkey refugee deal and the coordination responsibilities of Maarten Verwey, the Director-General and Head of the Structural Reform Support Service in the European Commission, vis-à-vis Greece with Turkey and NATO.<sup>87</sup> In this context, the EU was perceived as an actor that by adopting the refugee deal with Turkey could endanger the national interests of Greece, as this deal allows the settlement in the islands not only of EU staff but also Turkish police officers.<sup>88</sup> In parallel, the Greek government was perceived as an enabler of the EU's intervention in the national issues. In this spirit, an MP of Potami accused the government that 'attempted to make a policy using the refugees as a tool'<sup>89</sup> (translation authors own).

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<sup>81</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016d); Hellenic Parliament (2016e).

<sup>82</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016h) 'Πρακτικά Βουλής: ΙΖ' Περίοδος, Συνεδρίαση Ε' [Parliament Minutes: ΙΖ' Term, Session Ε']. Tuesday 22 March 2016. Available in Greek.

<sup>83</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016d); Hellenic Parliament (2016f).

<sup>84</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016f).

<sup>85</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016d); Hellenic Parliament (2016f).

<sup>86</sup> Hellenic Parliament (2016e).

<sup>87</sup> Hellenic Parliament, 2016d; Hellenic Parliament (2016h).

<sup>88</sup> Hellenic Parliament, 2016b.

<sup>89</sup> Hellenic Parliament, 2016d, p. 7537.

The increased dissatisfaction with the failure of collective policy responses at EU level as well as the Greek government is reflected in public polling. In fact, polls show a similar polarisation and politicisation of the issue. In February 2016 polling undertaken by Public Issue on behalf of Dianeosis,<sup>90</sup> 54% of those polled blamed the refugee “crisis” in ‘the countries of the West and the competition between the Great Powers.

A smaller section of those polled (28%) blames Greek politics and either the current government [i.e. Syriza] and Prime Minister or current and previous governments and parties as regards the management of refugees and migrants. The reference to the “West and Great Powers” is part of a broader historical discourse that portrays traditionally Greece as a pawn (mainly due to its geography) to States with invested interests in the Mediterranean. In this case the terms refer to the countries of Western and northern Europe however the logic of assigning blame to external forces remains dominant in the public’s perception of the refugee “crisis”. Crucially, the assignation of blame varies depending on one’s political views. The overwhelming number of those identifying themselves as Left-wing voters, blames the countries of the “West” (75%) while a much small portion of them on Greek policies (13%). In contrast, voters of centre and right-wing parties, blame the Greek policy (46%) and secondarily the countries of the “West” (31%). When asked to randomly name those ‘responsible’ for the refugee crisis in Greece, 21% of all polled named the EU first and foremost. The overwhelming responsibility thus rests with the EU.

Public Issue also undertook its monthly survey on how Greeks perceive migration. Looking at the months of April 2016, respondents were asked to reflect on the EU Turkey Statement. On The question of whether Turkey will implement its side of the deal, 85% responded negatively, opting for ‘likely not implement the Statement’. The most pessimistic were Syriza voters, followed by Golden Dawn voters. On the question of whether refugees pose a security threat to Greece, 50% respond positively, with 41% against. 65% believed migrants would be unable to integrate, a response generated by over 50% of voters polled across all parties. This implies a consensus in Greek public opinion that may remain divided on whether refugees pose a security “threat” but tend to share the belief that arrivals will not integrate in the country. This belief largely feeds the shared perception among the public that refugees should be welcomed but not necessarily remain in the country.

## 5. Conclusion

Drawing from de Wilde’s analytical framework, this paper tried to explore whether responsibility vis-à-vis refugees in Europe has become an issue of politicisation in Greece as well as polarisation. The sources of media coverage, public opinion polls as well as political debates and party communication highlight increased salience particularly after the summer of 2015.

2015 is characterised by both politicisation and mediatisation of the refugee “crisis”, with Greece portrayed as from the rest of the EU in terms of values and as a result, of priorities. It is a portrait that as polls have shown has been adopted by most Greeks that remain in favour of a humanitarian

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<sup>90</sup> Dianeosis (2016) ‘Το προσφυγικό πρόβλημα και οι Έλληνες’ [The Refugee Problem and the Greeks]. Available in Greek at <https://www.dianeosis.org/research/oi-ellines-kai-to-prosfygiko-provlima/> (accessed 07 September 2018).



response to the refugees but not in their presence in the country. The debate is focused more on the hospitality of the Greeks amidst the financial crisis, the lack of assistance of the EU and absence of solidarity and much less on relocation measures themselves.

Though the political debate is polarised regarding the actions of the government, there is little disagreement about the EU. The language used to discuss the EU's responsibility policy response differs, as to be expected, between political parties, as well as media outlets. Nonetheless, a general consensus exists throughout that period, from party politics to media and public opinion, that the largest share of responsibility rests with the EU. Relocation does not actually begin in Greece before the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2015. Absence of hotspots, registration and the lack of human and material resources delayed an already difficult to implement scheme. Thus, the focus of media, government, parties and Parliament is on the domestic front. The refugee "crisis", like the debt crisis, became part of a blame game, of Greece vs the rest of the EU. Thus, when looking at the media, public opinion and parliamentary debates, national events dominate the narrative but also shape much more the way migration is approached domestically but also in relation to the EU. This is especially true for 2015, with the second part of the year shaped by the Grexit discussion. The EU is responsible for the "crisis" and for failing to assist Greece. The 'EU' in that context does not include Greece, but rather the destination countries. Greece, is portrayed as hospitable, having adopted a humanitarian approach to the refugees and yet at the same time an unsuitable (and unwilling) destination for them. The EU's responsibility narrows down to redistribution of refugees, with the prevailing opinion at the time being that all arrivals should be allowed to either reach their intended destination or be redistributed across the EU.

In 2016, a shift on who is responsible and what that responsibility entails, takes place. Politicisation remains a constant, however polarisation gradually emerges as regards the management of the aftermath of the "crisis". Media, political parties and public note the divisions within the EU and the unwillingness of certain Member States to show solidarity and share responsibility. The "blame game" continues, however in March 2016, Greece is part of the coalition of countries willing to work together vs the Visegrad group. The fear of Grexit has receded and the threat of removal from the Schengen area looms in the horizon. In this framework, the initial reaction to the Statement is overly cautious by the media and sceptical (at best) by the public. Discussions referred to the role of Turkey in this crisis, the EU's moral responsibility to act with solidarity and the divisions between the EU countries of the North and the South. In this context, the Greek government was rather active in bringing the issue of migration in the EU fora and Summits. It also sought to form coalitions with other EU Member States to reinforce its position. However, all these attempts were directly or indirectly linked to the rivalry between Greece and its creditors and the new political regime that the radical left government of Syriza attempted to impose in the EU arena. For this reason, the governmental rhetoric also incorporated narratives of division from the old political system and the long-established EU interests that were promoted by the countries of the northern Europe. This, unavoidably, increased the polarisation inside and outside the country, with the government's policy on migration criticised primarily by parties but gradually also the media. As the operation of NGOs comes into question, as well as the financial cost and management of the camps and hotspots, most political parties maintain their criticism of the EU but incorporate also criticism towards the

government. The polarisation however does not peak in March 2016, but almost a year later, on the anniversary of the first year of the EU-Turkey Statement and the reports coming out of the hotspots.

Migration was and remains a highly politicised issue but surprisingly less polarising as one would expect, especially in 2015 but also in 2016. Factoring in the growing dissatisfaction with the European Union due to the economic crisis and bailout negotiations, the refugee crisis functioned as one more issue for the Greek media, public and politicians where the Union failed in its normative, legal obligations but more importantly (and linked with the Greek crisis) failed to show solidarity to a Member State in “crisis”. Though this dissatisfaction is no longer at the height it was in 2015, neither relocation, nor the Statement are considered to this day measures of solidarity or of a successful response but rather as rough patches in a Union politically divided.

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