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***“How the humanitarian crisis of the huge migration flows was handled  
by the Greek state”***

**Introduction**

The civil war in Syria and the current conflict in the Middle East has forced thousands of people to migrate towards safer grounds. Millions of them have moved to neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and Turkey, but also a large amount of them is trying to immigrate to Europe (UNHCR 2015). Migration can be considered a result of our continuous changing world, where we have constant economic, social and policy transitions. Globalization affects the people who are experiencing it. Thus, we observe increased migration, which is the movement of people or groups of people from one area moving to another. States play a significant role in managing migrations, and again those alternations of population in the society can create social and economic changes as we have learned in class during the “Demographics” lecture. Even though it is extremely hard for an immigrant to leave his home/family and migrate, the reasons for doing it are upsetting and worth looking into. The majority of them feel unsafe, threatened or they might be experiencing social challenges. Regimes, Wars, and their leader’s political ideologies make them become political refugees.

Greece is one of the first members of the European Union which means that if Greece is domestically affected by it, eventually most of Europe is going to deal with it. Finally, after being an intern at the European Parliament last summer and participating in many meetings with NGOs such as FRONTEX and LIBE (the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs), I thought it would be beneficial to do some more research into it. This inflow of migrants is occurring in a difficult domestic context, however, Greece has experienced severe financial shocks since 2009 (Filidi 2014). Its current economic system has fallen to an extreme point and it has created huge social problems for its people. With that taken into consideration, the government must also face thousands of migrants entering the country from the Aegean sea and the borders with Turkey. Just in 2015, it has been estimated that more than 150,000 Syrian refugees passed the Greek-Turkish borders. All these people are in need of help (asylum mostly) and the state is required to respond. However, the government does not have the necessary means to assist such a huge number of people and it results into violations of human rights. This paper examines how the Greek state responded to such a humanitarian crisis, especially during the summer 2015.

## **The Hellenic environment**

### **Geographic Location**

The main reason why immigrants are coming to Greece is its geopolitical position. As it can be concluded from historical data Greece used to be a country of exporting migrants, since 1990 when it turned into a hosting country for other Mediterranean people. Greece is the main intersection between Asia, Africa and Europe (Tozakidou 2012). Syrian refugees have to pass through Greece in order to make a successful trip to the western European countries and eventually find a better life for them and their families. Its geographical point has created a perfect pass routine. Once Syrians pass the Greek borders they are being treated under the European law. Greece has been characterized as the “gateway” of Europe for illegal immigration. Especially, while the Italian and Spanish passages are barred and are quite tough to be reached, Greece is the main source for Middle Eastern refugees to come into Europe. In 2010, according to FRONTEX, 9 out of 10 illegal immigrants who entered illegally into Europe entered through Greece.

### **Political and Social Changes**

Moreover, all these new immigrant population has brought a lot of different levels of political and social changes. We have seen the public to react either positive or negative to the new refugees that come into the society and a big political alternation to the public’s opinion. Greek society tends to be much divided on their opinions for the immigrants while some support them and feel their struggle while others are blaming them for the current social crisis, these are usually the ones that live in the islands and have to associate with them daily.

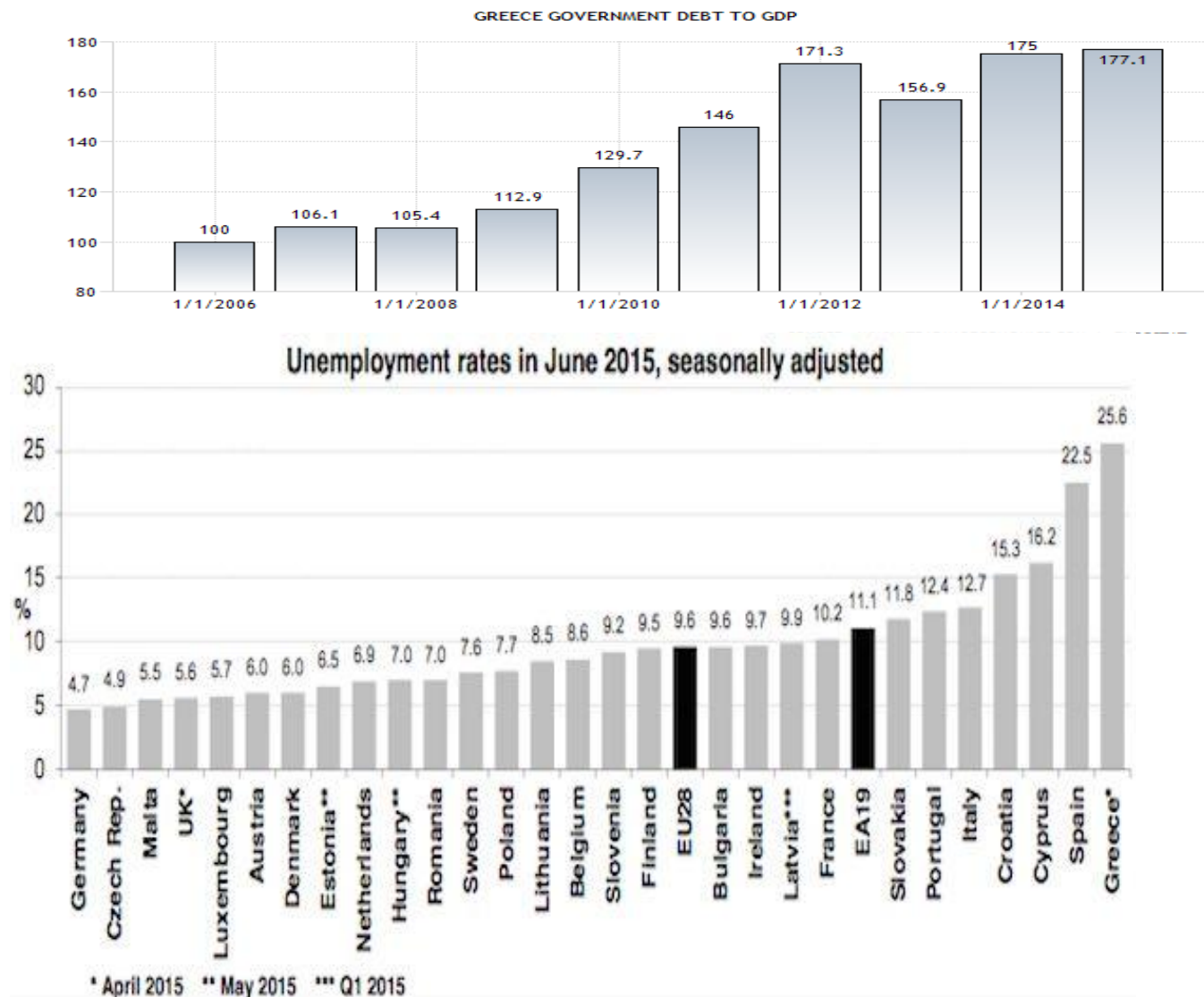
Political parties have taken this opportunity to use the immigration policy as a main fundamental for the campaigns. In assistance with the financial issues, the popular vote has become way more in favor to the extreme political parties the past 6 years (Golden Dawn). Greek citizens have switched their political views to be more familiar with either the extreme left or the extreme right (Tozakidou 2012).

### **National Security Threat**

Another issue, which was emerged with all these new refugees, is the national security of the country and Europe as well. Having thousands of immigrants passing the borders every day is a risk since we cannot be certain of who is actually a real political refugee and who is just an immigrant and or even a terrorist. The Hellenic Ministry of National Defense, the Hellenic Police but also the rest of the European countries are very aware of the danger that this uncertainty brings with the passing of ISIS members among those refugees. Having such a large number of people is barely impossible to make an accurate registration of who is entering the European borders. This can lead to serious threat not only to Greece but to the rest of the western societies as well (Filidi 2014). The roles of the institutions in such an event are extremely important.

## Financial Situation

Examining the financial situation of Greece, the country is in a difficult position. According to the current data, we are looking at a deep economic recession. Migrants can easily face the struggle while there are usually the ones who are being the first victims of it. Prime Minister Tsipras was in the edge of bankruptcy the July of 2015 and government's debt to GDP was raised to 177%, which is the highest in the European Union (Davidson 2015). Furthermore, the unemployment rate is being stabilized to around 25-27% while youth unemployment is passing the 50%. The labor market is unable to stimulate any improvement for the near future, while most of the businesses are based on the micro-enterprises and the past measurements were even harder on them.



Source: Eurostat

As the data clearly show, Greece's unemployment rate is way higher than most of the other European Union states, except Spain (whose unemployment rate is even more stable while it has been that high for a longer time). Since there is a substantial increase in unemployment in Greece right now, there are no work opportunities for the immigrants. As a consequence, most of them are loitering in Greece trying to find ways to pass to Western Europe. While they look for successful

ways to continue their journey, they try to integrate temporally the Greek community, which increases the burden on Greek social services and infrastructures, which are already failing to cope with the existing social issues even without the presence of the immigrants (Megaloudi 2015).

## Aftermath

Finally, what really matters is that all these new refugees and immigrants that came into the country have made the humanitarian situation even more horrific. The government is already been dealing with such a devastating financial situation and now it is obligated to find ways to address the new refugee crisis. The entire society is not able to have practical solutions towards the problem, neither to give settles to such a huge amount of people. Certainly, drastic reforms need to be made by both Greece and other European states who often seem to rely on the Greek government. (Adampa 2014).

## The migration flows

### The Immigrants' path

Greece is located at the junction between Europe, Asia and Africa. Its geopolitical position has made the country the main passage for many migrants to cross from the Middle East to Europe and move towards Western European countries, including Germany, France and the U.K. The migration flows are very important and the Greek government is required to respond properly. More specifically, during the year of 2015-2016, the situation became more serious while thousands of Syrian refugees pass the Aegean borders every day (De Boda 2015).

### *Immigration flow route*



Sources: iMap; Frontex: news reports

In parallel, the Greek society was already facing dramatic socio-economic issues. The current humanitarian crisis in Syria is spilling over its borders is making

the situation worse. In 2009, there was a huge collapse of the financial Greek system, which led the government to take huge loans in order to face the economic recession. The IMF gave the Greek government bailout plans that demanded important austerity measures. With that being said, the Greek government started cutting budgets, including salaries and pensions, and raised taxes. This resulted extremely high unemployment rates and increasing debt (The Telegraph, 2011).

Furthermore, the situation became worst and the political instability led the European Central Bank to issue capital controls to the Greek banks. The government could not legislate or take decisions while there wasn't a majority in parliament, and generally there was a complete chaos at the political scene. Prime Minister Tsipras organized a referendum over the signature of the new memorandum that had even more drastic austerity measures (BBC News, 2015). At the same time, the Greek authorities had to deal and rescue the Syrian refugees who were passing the Greek-Turkish borders by thousands.

### **Syrian Refugees**

According to the United Nation Human Rights Council (UNHRC 2015), there were 762,203 immigrants that arrived to Europe by sea. From that number, 619,101 of them passed through the Aegean Sea, which is more than the 80% of the total refugee numbers. Italy is the other major pathway with 140,200 so far. Those numbers tend to be three times bigger than the ones from 2014 and most experts estimate that they will remain high even during the upcoming winter (UNHRC 2015). Looking back at the hypothesis question, it is clear that the Hellenic government will have to deal with an enormous amount of people when its resources would not be efficient enough to cover their needs.

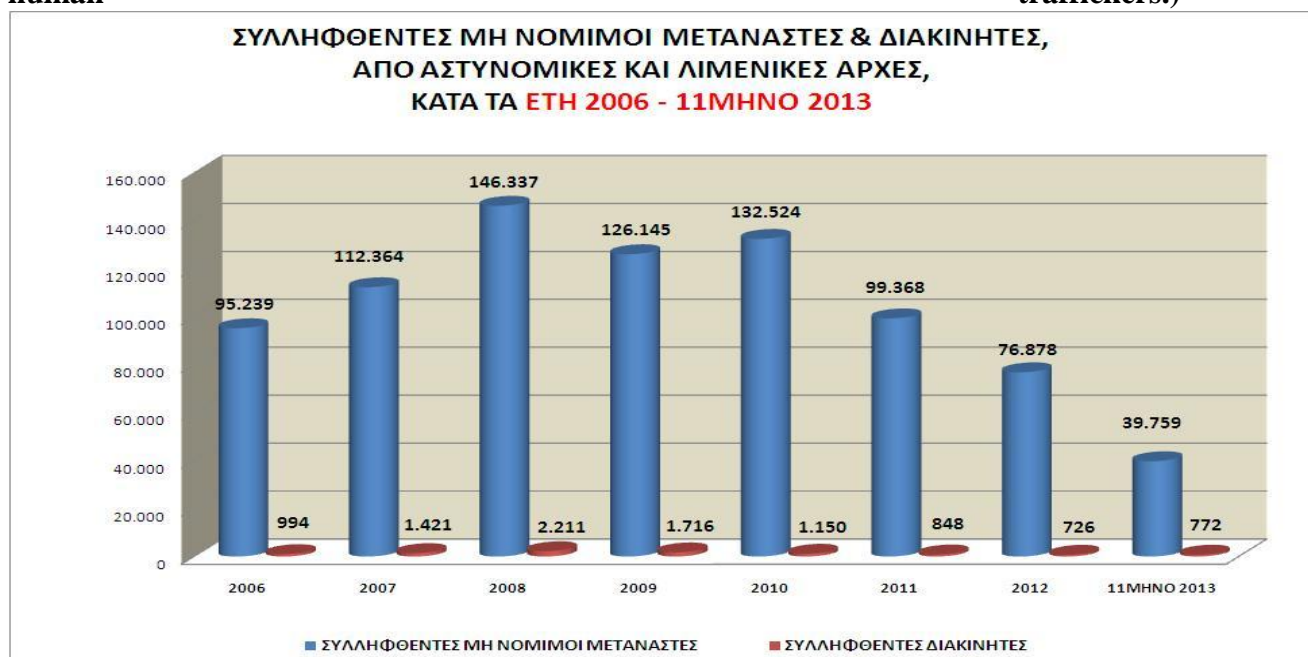
### **Greek-Turkish borders incidents in July, August, and September 2015**

	<b>July 2015</b>	<b>August 2015</b>	<b>September 2015</b>
<b>Number of incidents of illegal entry</b>	791	915	836
<b>Arrests of illegal immigrants</b>	54964	107889	142010
<b>Arrests of human traffickers</b>	56	66	97
<b>Confiscated boats</b>	158	271	189
<b>Confiscated vehicles</b>	3	7	11
<b>Forged travel documents</b>	39	32	70

*Source: Hellenic National Coast Guard*

Greek-Turkish borders incidents in 2006-2013.

(Blue columns are arrests of illegal immigrants and red columns are the arrests of human traffickers.)



Source: Hellenic Police – Ministry of Interior

The numbers presented above show a significant increase of illegal immigrants passing through the Greek borders at the Aegean Sea. During the period of crisis, Hellenic Coast Guard officials commented to the major Greek newspaper “To Vima” (2015) that the data from September were recorded as the highest number of arrests of illegal immigrants passing the Greek-Turkish borders in one month. Each incident is a group of migrants apprehended. The data suggest that the traffickers tend to have a greater amount of people on the boats, something that makes the risk of sinking even higher and puts the lives of the immigrants in a tremendous danger. Besides, the arrests on the human traffickers have been increased; still the number of migrants is still getting higher which shows that more and more individuals are looking at the refugees as a profiting business and not as a human rights issue. The Hellenic Police in cooperation with the Coast Guard are trying to capture the human traffickers and preserve the human rights of the refugees but as it has been seen the amount of personnel or the means that they have are inadequate.

## Greek response to the humanitarian crisis

### Providing assistance at the islands

First and most importantly the Hellenic administration provide the resources which go towards the refugees and the migrants. The Hellenic administrations need to have proper centers of hospitality for the immigrants at the islands. Moreover, the number of personnel is insufficient and the registration centers are unable to do the proper documentation on time, making the whole process overwhelming for the migrants (Ranstiou 2015).

In order for those services to be operating successfully, the European Union needs to send the financial aid and the personnel that are pledged with. Specifically, the European Commission has decided to provide a total of 2.4 billion euros in

European Union member countries for the period of 2014-2020, which face increased refugee and migration flows. The majority of the assistance will be directed to Italy with 560 million euros. The European Commission provides for the Hellenic Fund of Asylum, Immigration and Integration, the amount of 259.4 million euros. With that amount Greece can set as a goal to host over 2,500 administrative positions by the end of 2015, and to improve the quality and speed of decision-making on asylum. It also undertakes to settle the accumulated pending applications and to strengthen the monitoring system of housing areas.

### **Controlling the flows**

Controlling the immigration flows will result in a more mild and effective integration of the migrants inside the European Union. As a member state of the European Union, the Hellenic government needs assistance in order to manage the flows and to send them towards the rest of the European nations without letting them trespassing the Balkan borders illegally. The European states cannot disregard the migrants and they need to propose plans to accept them. So far, northern countries such as Germany and Sweden have been a very good example of states, which have proposed such plans. Still though, there are not enough appropriate and accepting plans from all the European member states. Again, this problem needs a collective action in order to be solved and if not all the member states contribute towards the receiving of the refugees then the future of the migrants will be uncertain and it will continue to create more issues (Charakopi, 2013).

### **Improving Greek-Turkish relations**

By improving the relations with Turkey, it can be key factor for a fundamental for the management of the flows and for the capturing of the human traffickers. On November 18, Tsipras had a meeting with the current Prime Minister of Turkey in which they discussed the issue of immigration in the Aegean. The goal of the meeting was finding a solution for both nations to stop the human trafficking and create a safer route for the people so that they can go safely to the hot spots reception centers at the islands, where they can be provided with hospitality.

### **Conclusion**

The most important challenge that the Hellenic government has to solve right now is to be able to manage and assist the migration flows. So far, the Greek government that it is in power has shown that it has the will to help the Syrian refugees with all means. However, no matter what Greece believes if the rest of the European states do not respond with progressive new proposals then Greece will continue to be inadequate to provide the necessary needs to the migrants.

The Hellenic state needs to strengthen its diplomatic capability and press for more reforms inside the E.U. Otherwise, Greece will remain being the “entrance country” and the Hellenic society will suffer even more with the continuous number of refugees coming through the borders.

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