

'NGOs are sort of a dirty word here': Refugee service provision in Greece

RALUCA BEJAN | 4 JUNE 2022 | [OXFORD MIGRATION CONFERENCE 2022](#)



Victoria Square, Athens. *Picture by the author.*

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The sun was scorching hot in Athens last August, in 2021, as temperatures reached 45 degrees. As I moved around Victoria Square and in and around Acharnon, close to the Hellenic Motor Museum, these areas of the city hosting refugees were for the most part segregated. There were no Greeks.

It was not just the refugee presence. These neighbourhoods were also migrant neighbourhoods. They had Eastern European, Polish shops. Romanian was also spoken on the streets.

Stores were selling small, one-burner stoves. You would never see these types of stoves catered to status residents or Greek citizens – an entire industry tailored to the needs of refugees.

I started to interview service providers and community stakeholders in Athens for [Refugees' Integration in South-East Europe](#), a project I am leading for Dalhousie University and with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Canada. In doing so, an entire activist network of professionals, academics, and journalists, mainly originating from the Western European countries, the UK and North America, surfaced – networks that seemed somewhat detached from Greek society.

These were professionals connecting amongst themselves and creating service links whose mode of delivery could be transported anywhere on the globe in case of any migrant crisis. In short, they seemed to have little to do with Greece. Greece was just one of the sites hosting the most current 'refugee crisis'. As put by one interviewee from our project:

'Unquestionably, there are issues with the foreigners coming in – people coming in from other countries not speaking Greek, you know... In some of these NGOs, there are [international and local staff, and the local staff, some of them get paid less than the expats. You have some incredibly talented Greeks, working on the ground, doing the same work as the expats, who are getting paid less and who are not treated as well. So, there are definitely issues. People are right to criticize. I don't know what the solution is, but I fully agree with the criticisms and it's definitely created [...] hostility.'

This international/local divide seemed to persist across structures, beyond employment divisions. This is oftentimes a direct consequence of the migration governance structure guided from Brussels. As one study participant stated:

'There is a real kind of divide between the [local] community and the [international] NGOs. I also think that more could have been done to work with the local communities. And this definitely was an issue that [...] is a product of European migration policies made in Brussels. My perspective is that a lot of Europeans who come and work here understand this as a European issue.'



Victoria Square, Athens. Picture by the author.

Some participants seemed to have little interest in understanding the local population's perceptions and the local concerns regarding refugee-related issues. Other community stakeholders we interviewed, however, referred to the competitive nature of their work in terms of who can do the bolder activist work or who can extract the ripest information from the refugee camps. As one participant in our study stated, in reference to a refugee settlement in north-western Greece:

'Ioanina became like a hub for organizations competing for funds. So they were all claiming that they were all doing the same thing. And I really did not, didn't like that, you know, because they're all lying. And I didn't want to be in this competition.'

These criticisms are not intended to take away from the integration work provided by NGOs in Greece, given that the state has failed to deliver support. From education programmes and Greek and English language classes, to providing shelter and accompanying people to medical appointments, hospitals or COVID-19 vaccination clinics, to providing guidance with asylum claims and assistance with entering the labour market, it is often civil society actors that navigate these aspects of the refugees' lives:

'We have our [English] literacy classes. There are way too many students who are 17, 18 years old

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we have our [English] literacy classes. There are way too many students who are 17, 18 years old that cannot read or write[...] and English becomes their first language [in which they can] read and write. Obviously, that changes their whole world, to be able to read and write for themselves [...]. We have Cambridge exams classes. So we prepare them for the exams, we pay for the exams [...]. For these kids, it opens up [study] possibilities for them, not just in university, but also for schools. For example, some of the students want to study in the American Community School, [...] a private American school here. It's very prestigious, and some of the shelters have a connection with this so they will choose a certain number of kids to be part of their programme [...]. It is very rigorous and if they do graduate from there, their lives change.'

Yet the Greek state, governed by the right-wing New Democracy party since July 2019, has launched a full-on anti-immigrant attack targeting the work of refugee service provision without stepping in to cover the services needed by the refugee population. As identified by our study participants, it includes the requirement that all international NGOs must register in Greece or the criminalisation of service provision and solidarity work:

'There are cases which are sort of paraded around national media like, you know, we've cracked down the smuggling network, the NGOs, it was an NGO smuggling network. NGOs are sort of a dirty word here. And [their work] seems to be steadily squeezed; the space for solidarity, humanitarianism, whatever you want to call it, it is less and less.'



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