

# **Asylum, Transit Migration and the Politics of Reception: the Case of Kurds in Greece**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to explore the relation between irregular and asylum migration and the institutional and socio-economic structures of the host society. Based on empirical findings from a case study of Kurdish migrants in Greece, the paper follows the asylum cycle and focuses on the organisation of the journey, the period of temporary and permanent settlement in Greece. At the same time, the analysis addresses certain aspects of the migration process, such the question of whether Greece is a transit country in South-North movements, the role of relations between migrants and locals and the dynamic of intra-group divisions (particularly political) among Kurds affecting migration patterns and migrant relations.

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## **i. Introduction**

Irregular migration has been one of the most pressing challenges for Greek external and social policy in recent years, because of the size of population flows, the geography of porous borders and, mainly, the entanglement of irregular migration with asylum. Boats loaded with Kurdish, Iraqi, Afghani or Pakistani migrants reach the Greek shores on an almost routine basis. Few of them apply for asylum and most choose to remain undocumented, hoping to continue their journey and apply elsewhere in Western Europe. The dominant impression is that most forced migrants from the Middle East stay in Greece only temporarily. The present paper comes to challenge this impression and argue that transit migration is not a status, but a stage in the asylum cycle; depending on the circumstances, some migrants also settle permanently in Greece. The paper analyses the organisation of asylum migration in transit and permanent settlement and in political mobilisation, and highlights the importance of the context of the receiving country in shaping migration patterns.

The paper is divided in three parts: the first part provides the context of asylum migration and policy in Greece. The second describes the operation of smuggling and the role of networks in decision-making, in the journey and temporary stay in Greece. The third part describes the process of settlement and integration of Kurds in Greece, and the political mobilisation of the Kurdish migrant community.

## **ii. Asylum migration in Greece**

### **a. Migration management and the asylum policy framework**

Like most South European countries, Greece has experienced in the last decade a transformation from a country of emigration to one of immigration. The 1990s saw the arrival of large numbers of labour migrants mainly from the Balkans and Eastern Europe, but also labour migrants and asylum seekers from the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. The features of the 'Southern European' model of migration, as described by King (2000), all apply here: a heterogeneity of nationalities; a gender asymmetry between males from the Middle East and the Balkan countries, and females from Eastern Europe and the

Philippines; an increasing participation of urban educated migrants working as low-cost labour; and a high degree of illegality. Research on migration in Greece has mainly focused on labour migrants from the Balkans and the former Soviet Union who comprise the majority of foreigners in the country. The relatively small annual number of refugees and asylum seekers gives the impression that this issue in Greece is minor; in 2002 the country had a refugee population of 18,852, out of which two thirds were new applicants and people whose application was still pending.<sup>1</sup> These numbers do not, however, reflect the actual size of the refugee population, a large part of which remains undocumented, often reluctant to apply; and they also do not include the rejected asylum seekers, the majority of whom end up staying in the country. To state the obvious, no reliable data exists on illegal entries. Estimations are usually based on apprehensions at the moment of illegal border crossing. The number of migrants arrested for illegal entry in 2001 was 6,800 people.<sup>2</sup> This does not however include the cases of 'successful' entries; instead, the numbers of migrants arrested inside the country for the same year was 210,000.<sup>3</sup> Another 114,181 were arrested by mid-2002.<sup>4</sup> In total, the number of foreigners in Greece, including regular labour migrants, irregular migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and 'returnees' from the former Soviet Union is estimated to be close to one million (Cavounidis; 2000). Given the short history of migration flows, the transformation of Greece from a country of zero-immigration to one with a migrant population that comprises 10% of the country's total is an extraordinary phenomenon in Europe.

Having ratified the main international conventions regarding refugee protection, Greece is considered an asylum country.<sup>5</sup> In addition, with Law 1996/1991 Greece also ratified the 1990 Dublin Convention regarding the state responsible for the examination of an asylum application lodged in one of the EU countries. Refugee matters are regulated primarily by articles 24-25 of Law 1975/1991 on the Status of Aliens, as amended by Law 2452/1996. Presidential Decrees PD 189/1998 and PD 61/1999 regulate the rights of refugees, asylum seekers and people under humanitarian status, and the procedures and criteria for granting asylum in Greece.<sup>6</sup> Unlike many other EU countries, asylum seekers in Greece are refused a subsidy, but they have the right to temporary employment during the time their application is being examined. The asylum examination process is usually rather long, between 1,5 and 2 years including appeals, and the recognition rate very low: while in 2000/2001 it was ranging between 7 and 10%, in 2002 it dropped to 0.3%.<sup>7</sup> These factors discourage people's decision to apply in Greece. In general, in a country with no previous

experience of immigration, institutional provisions are still in the process of development and migrants mainly rely on NGO support and their individual efforts to find employment in the informal economy.

The issue of irregular migration has become one of internal and external security concerns for the country and for the European Union, because of its extent (Baldwin-Edwards; 2001), and because of the geopolitical role of Greece as a gatekeeper at Europe's southeastern border. Thus, migration management has focused on the one hand on the regularization of resident labour migrants, and on the other on the reinforcement of border protection, through the recruitment of additional border guards and the intensification of sea patrols.<sup>8</sup> With regards to smuggling, the amendment of article 55 of the law 2910/2001 on the illegal transportation of migrants into Greece aims to help fight smuggling through stricter punishment of smugglers (imprisonment, high penalties and vessel confiscation), and to protect migrants through granting temporary residence permits and protection from deportation. One of the most important aspects for Greece in the area of migration management is cooperation with Turkey, given Turkey's geographical position in the map of South-North migration movements. The two countries signed in November 2001 a Protocol for the readmission of illegal migrants.<sup>9</sup> Its implementation, however, has not been considered successful up to now – at least from the Greek side. In practice, only very few migrants have been readmitted to Turkey; out of 5,600 applications to Turkey in 2002, only 100 were accepted at first instance, and 34 after further negotiation.<sup>10</sup> The readmission protocol has been also criticized for not guaranteeing the protection of refugees and access to the asylum procedure.<sup>11</sup> As Sitaropoulos (2003) argues, this kind of inter-state cooperation is doomed to fail because it is based on a purely police control mentality and not on exchange of information and study of the needs of the migrants and the states. Outside the scope of readmission, Greece has informally undertaken deportations of migrants back to the transit or sending countries. Cases of deporting torture victims and other forced migrants have been repeatedly reported by international organisations.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, several recent cases of mass arrivals have displayed the difficulty to control migration flows, and the ambivalent attitude of the state with regards to the nature of these flows: for example, the case of the ship 'Brenler' that arrived in Zakynthos in January 2002, loaded with almost 1,000 Kurds, or the case of 3,000 migrants who, having crossed the Greek-Turkish border of Evros, gathered in the border region of Thrace in the summer

of 2002. In both cases, the state reaction was an oxymoron of providing temporary reception facilities, but with the aim to deport the migrants soon as irregulars. State officials and the public generally share the impression that in many instances labour migrants are abusing the asylum system. The entanglement of irregular migration with asylum is indeed a very problematic issue in Greek and EU migration policy. The restrictive framework of asylum in Greece and the EU in general has not managed to control migration flows, but only divert the problem elsewhere – to illegality. In addition, in pragmatic terms it is a fact that, today, migration and asylum flows in one member state are common European issues *sui generis*: without a common EU policy framework, migrants will move between European member states according to the types of rights, the protection and the opportunities available. It is therefore that the Greek Presidency of the EU in 2002 has adopted the priority of comprehensive migration management to promote the integration of existing migrants, an enhanced protection of regional borders, and an effective and fair system of burden sharing.<sup>13</sup>

#### **b. Kurdish Migrants in Athens**

The number of asylum applications in Greece has been fluctuating during the last decade, with peak times the early 1990s, the years 1996-7, and from 2000 onwards (TABLE 1). Regarding nationality, roughly 50% of asylum seekers and refugees in Greece during the last decade have originated from Iraq, Turkey and Iran.<sup>14</sup> (TABLE 2). Among them, the majority are said to be Kurds, who came to Greece in three main waves: in 1991-1992, after the use of chemical weapons in Halabja, Iraq and the Gulf war, in 1994-5 after the escalation of violence in Southeastern Turkey, and in 1996-8 due to the ongoing conflict between Kurdish parties in Northern Iraq (TABLES 3,4,5). A small number of Kurdish refugees from Turkey had already arrived in Greece in the late 1970–early 1980s. Kurdish migration from Iraq has continued unabated up to the present, which reflects the social and political instability and economic deprivation in Northern Iraq. The total Kurdish population in Greece is difficult to estimate, because of the constant border crossings in and out of the country but also because of the absence of statistics for this particular group: applicants are recorded according to citizenship (Iraq, Iran, Turkey), while ethnicity ('Kurds') is mentioned in the hearing process only<sup>15</sup> (TABLE 6). In 1997-8 estimations ranged between 6-7,000 and 24,000, while in 2001 an estimation gave 10,000:<sup>16</sup> out of those roughly 1,600 are said to live in the refugee camps, 2,000 in Athens, in flats, sheds or

empty lots in downgraded inner city areas, some in other cities;<sup>17</sup> and about 2,000 in Patras.<sup>18</sup>

The present paper is based on field research conducted with Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers in Athens in 2001-2. Field research was based on qualitative research methods and involved in-depth interviews with 35 men and 15 women living in the refugee camps of Penteli and Lavrion, the reception hall of Medecins du Monde and houses in the Greater Athens Area. The research also involved interviews with policy makers, NGO officials, activists, and discourse analysis of secondary data, media information and parliamentary proceedings.

### **iii. The journey and temporary settlement in Greece**

The analysis of the internal mechanism of asylum migration is inspired by Koser's (1997) idea of applying a social networks approach to the asylum cycle. Koser argues that the interaction between social networks and migration varies between individuals through the asylum cycle, and very much depends on the structures of the reception country. The present paper also argues that the organisation of asylum and irregular migration needs to be seen in relation to macro/micro factors, such as the structures of Greece as a receiving country (socio-economic, political, reception structures), ethnic group structures and individual dynamics. In other words, the decision to stay in Greece or leave for another country, and the type of integration witnessed is a result of the interplay of those factors.

#### **a. Crossing the border**

It is almost an established practice for migrants from the Middle East to use smugglers for the exit, passage through third countries and entry into Greece. The main points of entry are the Evros river at the Greek-Turkish border<sup>19</sup> and the islands of the Eastern Aegean (Samos, Kos, Rodos etc). According to interviews, Istanbul and the Turkish coast cities are meeting points for migrants and smugglers arranging the crossing into 'Europe'.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, trying to cross the border without the help of a smuggler is not easy; a young Kurdish man I interviewed had to try seven times. About forty migrants are reported to have died in the border minefield in the last five years.<sup>21</sup> Migrants leaving Greece for Western Europe also use the smuggling service by plane, buying fake passports, by car (also hiding in trucks) through Albania, or by boat, crossing from Patras to Italy.

The smuggling business is organized by the *kaçakçı*, drivers in both sending and receiving countries. They are based in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and do the crossing of the Iran/Iraq, Iraq/Turkey and Turkey/Greece borders, similar to the *coyotes* at the Mexican/US border (Spencer; 2001). The smugglers used in these borders are not always in contact with smugglers in other countries; they may be casually engaged in the business, or be part of a small network of co-ethnics. According to the Ministry of Public Order (MPO), 190 such networks involving Greece have been identified in the last two years.<sup>22</sup> The case could be described more as small smuggling groups rather than mafia-type organisations that are active in the region (Icduygu and Toktas; 2002). In fact, using the smuggling service is mostly a short-term transaction between the individual offering the service and the migrant paying for it. According to interviews, contacting a *kaçakçı* in Iraq, Iran or Turkey is very easy, since they are numerous and well known in the local community. In Greece, *kaçakçı* are also known in the refugee camps, and are easily contacted through mobile phone. Among the Kurds interviewed, those who had paid a *kaçakçı* agreed with the practice, for being the only professional way to leave the country. ‘*They are doing their job. We would not be here otherwise*’, a young Kurd told me once.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, smugglers serve as one, and sometimes the only source of information about the policy framework and living conditions in the destination countries, and can affect migrant decisions for the choice of destination.

In a summary, the smuggling business has become a key part of the migrant journey, assisting with its organisation, as well as choice of destination. In the context of increasing restriction, crossing the border illegally has become not one, but almost the only option for forced migrants who want to immigrate to Europe; and paying a smuggler is unfortunately the standard means to achieve that.

#### **a. Social networks in the migration process**

The smuggling business would not operate but for the migrant networks that mobilize in the asylum cycle to finance the trip. Family, relatives and friends at home and other destination countries mobilize and send money for the travel fees. In turn, those in Greece take up part-time jobs to pay off their relatives/friends; the capital, instead of being invested in one country, is circulating between homeland, transit and destination country.

With regards to information about the countries of asylum, Kurdish migrants usually have to rely on smugglers, the media, and rumours. Some Kurds with friends/relatives in Greece had been well informed about reception facilities, the asylum application process, welfare provisions for refugees, or meeting points and social life. By the time they reached the shore, they knew where to go and whether to apply for asylum in Greece or elsewhere. Their relatives or friends followed the same route before them. Most Kurds, however, are completely unaware of the situation and have had no information from friends or relatives in Greece prior to emigration. Thus, transnational ties in Greece or other destination countries may affect migration selectivity (who leaves) and may give an orientation for the choice of destination; those with relatives/friends in countries other than Greece will most likely want to join them. Whether they do in the end of the day is another question related to structural and individual factors – the opportunities for asylum, survival and integration offered in Greece and the other countries.

### **c. Being ‘in transit’**

The impression, therefore, that all Kurds do not aim to stay in Greece but are ‘in transit’ on their way to Western Europe – an impression dominant in the public and media discourse, but also shared among the public and NGO officials I interviewed<sup>24</sup> - needs to be further examined. Indeed, some interviewees in the reception camps stated their intention to leave soon. ‘Soon’, in fact, can be somewhere between three months and five years; all this time, migrants stay in refugee camps, empty lots, or shared flats, work in the informal economy – in jobs like constructions, services, or agriculture – and save money for the second journey. Contrary to those permanently settled, Kurds who are temporarily staying in Athens are much more oriented towards their homeland and other destination countries, than towards the place they are staying. Many among those interviewed in the camps were not interested in socializing with other camp residents, and even less with locals and migrants outside the camp, and knew very little about the city and Greek society. They also had no interest in learning the language, even though they worked in the local market. Instead, they kept regular contacts with their friends in Germany, Sweden and England. Being ‘in transit’ proves to be a *process* rather than a *status*, a process of engaging/or not engaging socially and economically in the host country.

The existence of a large number of irregular migrants and asylum seekers living in a status of temporariness and semi-protection in Greece has consequences for the people, the state and the region. For the migrants, being 'in transit' is a period of vulnerability, insecurity and socio-economic marginalisation;<sup>25</sup> an invisible population, living on the margins, with no obligations and no rights. This prolonged irregular situation can be counterproductive in the process of smooth social and economic integration and poses a human security threat for migrants (Graham T. and Poku N.; 2001). For the state, the toleration of this phenomenon not only raises moral and ethical issues with regards to the regulation of migration flows, but it also poses a security threat, because the existence of an irregular migrant population may reinforce intolerance and xenophobic trends towards migrant populations in the country in general. For the region – the EU – the presence of irregular migrants living 'in transit' in one member state has the potential of further irregular or asylum migration flows to other countries. The existence of 'transit' migration in Greece is the result of the absence of an effective burden-sharing mechanism among member states that can prevent 'asylum shopping' and promote migrant integration in Europe.

#### **iv. Settlement and Integration**

Still, some of the undocumented migrants and asylum seekers are settling down in Greece. The decision to stay in Greece is not necessarily linked to the length of residence, but depends more on the stage of individual integration during this period, mainly in terms of proper accommodation, employment and development of relations with Greeks. From an institutional aspect, Greek reception structures, as described in the first part, do not seem to encourage permanent settlement at the moment, for they do not provide an infrastructure for integration from its initial phase. Migrant participation is left to depend on the knowledge of the language, social relations with Greeks, and invisible recruitment in a well-established informal economy (King et al.; 2000). The latter has to do with the fact that, from the host society's point of view, migrant participation in Greece is understood as participation in the labour market.<sup>26</sup> In relation to Soysal's (1994) models of migrant membership in a state (corporatist, statist, liberal, fragmented), Greece offers opportunities for 'liberal' membership in the informal economy for all types of migrants, regular and irregular labour migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Thus, all Kurds interviewed were working in construction or in the service sector. Only few of the Kurdish women in the sample worked, usually in manufacturing or in the service sector.

### **a. Social Relations with Greeks**

Relations with the host society can sometimes become a promising source of social capital for Kurds. As argued by Korac (2001), these spontaneous relations can be a significant resource for accommodation, employment, socialisation and adaptability, in the light of the absence of well-established state policies for integration. Among the Kurds interviewed, it was those who had ties with Greeks who had more stable jobs and were feeling more integrated in Greece – even if migrant participation still fits into class boundaries between a Greek/dominant versus a migrant/marginal social stratum. In addition, judging from three interviewees' cases, Kurdish men married to Greek women managed to overcome even nationality-based class boundaries. Almost all Kurds interviewed, who had spent more than a year in Greece, stated that they feel a sense of affinity with the culture, the mentality, the strength of family ties and the character of socio-economic structures in Greece. A comparison with North European receiving countries reveals a striking contrast; in Finland, Middle Eastern migrants found social interaction with locals hard to attain (Valtonen; 1998); in England, Kurds found themselves withdrawing into a cultural enclave (Griffiths; 2002). The affinity that Kurds, and Middle Eastern migrants in general, feel with Greek society supports not only the socialization with locals, but also access to the labour market. This factor was also mentioned as a motivation to stay in Greece, despite bureaucratic difficulties and welfare deficiencies. Needless to stress, the ease migrants have with social and economic structures may be a truly positive asset for the success of integration programs, but cannot replace the need for institutional developments.

Another factor contributing to the good relations between Greeks and Kurds is the Greek experience of 'refugeeness' (Hirschon; 1998) in the 1920s, with the arrival of ethnic Greek refugees from Asia Minor, and their 'successful' integration in what resulted to be a remarkably ethnically homogeneous state (Kitromilides; 1989). In a country with a refugee past, collective memory has nurtured feelings of sympathy and solidarity towards displaced persons (Voutira; 2003). And what is more, like many of today's Kurdish refugees, it was Turkey that the Greek populations of Asia minor were forced to flee from some eighty years ago. It is remarkable how the people of Nea Smyrni, now second and third generation of the 1920s' refugees, have been very welcoming and supportive towards the undocumented, homeless Kurds in the area (N.Smyrni Municipality; 2002). Using the conception of 'migration systems' of Kritiz, Lim and Zlotnik (1992), one could possibly

describe the two neighbouring countries, Greece and Turkey, as parts of a migration system of various linkages/exchanges, social, cultural, religious, economic – imprinted by the historical ties and cultural syncretism during the Ottoman Empire – part of which is the migration from Asia Minor after 1923 and the current migration flows.

### **b. Migrant ties and migrant communities**

Beyond the role of institutional, socioeconomic and ideological structures of the host society, another factor shaping the migration process is the internal dynamic of the ethnic group, its character, the levels of relationships and identification. It will be shown, that the existing Kurdish population in Greece has not been able to support newcomers with social capital as a migrant community would. This is an additional explanation of why settling down in Greece has become for Kurds a question of individual efforts.

In his research on Kurds, Iraqis, Iranians, and Assyrian Christians in Greece in 1991, Black highlighted the role of family, locality and social networks as particularly important, in ‘securing access to employment, housing, and resettlement overseas [...], loans or mutual support in the event of unemployment, bereavement, or other unexpected event’.<sup>27</sup> He also identified a spatial concentration of Kurds in particular Athenian neighborhoods that followed the thread of family networks. That was at a time prior to the large migration flows that would follow throughout the 1990s. The geographical situation was not exactly the same at the time of my fieldwork. Most newcomers had found temporary – and often prolonged – shelter in refugee camps and NGO hostels, or they had randomly squatted abandoned houses in the city centre. There are only few cases of ethnic conglomeration, like the Kurds in the area of Nea Smyrni, Athens. This community consists almost exclusively of 250-300 undocumented young men, who live under very bad conditions in squatted houses and work in part-time construction jobs in the area. Most of them (79%) came to N. Smyrni because of their social ties with other migrants in the area (N.Smyrni Municipality Report; 2002). Another ethnic concentration is known to exist in the municipality of Aegaleo, this time of Iraqis, Assyrians and Chaldeans, but only few Kurds.

Apart from these two examples, where settlement is centred around social ties, in general, relations between Kurds are randomly formed, following the groups made during the journey and at the place of arrival (i.e. reception camps), and short-term, based on

solidarity to meet survival needs, on locality ties (town/area of origin), or political affiliations. In addition, migrant relations may offer psychological and material support, but they cannot generate employment, which is usually assisted more by NGOs or relations with Greeks. Kurdish newcomers may have a couple of friends or relatives in Greece, but no reference point to a settled migrant community. The reasons for the absence of a community are on the one hand, the short history of Kurdish migration in Greece and the high mobility of this population in and out of the country, and on the other, the maintenance of ethnic/political divisions among Kurds in the host society. Divisions are evident between Kurds from Turkey and the rest (from Iraq or Iran), and between Kurds from the same country affiliated with rival parties. Thus, Kurdish migrants form various sub-groups based on contingent ethnic/social/political ties: the refugee camp populations, the homeless, the Kurdish party affiliates, the integrated but non-politicised refugees/asylum seekers.

#### **v. The political mobilization of Kurds in Greece**

The distinction between politicized and non-politicised Kurds is not only one of ideology and socialization, but also one of different migration patterns: the ‘organised’ refugees on the one hand, the ‘migrants’ on the other – to use the terms that Kurds use for their self-ascription. The number of ‘organised’ i.e. party members, is rather small (according to interview information, a few hundred in total), compared to the masses of undocumented/asylum migrants.

The ‘organised’ are members of Kurdish parties from Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, that opened offices in Athens and other Greek cities during the last decade<sup>28</sup> in order to raise awareness and internationalize the parties’ political projects. For ‘organized’ refugees, migration means that they may share accommodation and everyday life with comrades, and contribute to the party - financially, or by working in the party offices, distributing information material or by joining demonstrations, hunger strikes, etc. According to interviews, the party provides its members with protection in the host country, and often with the guarantee of a safe journey, by employing other party members to cross the border, or using good contacts with smugglers – this is where smuggling networks and political networks meet. Above all, ‘organised’ migrants distinguish themselves from the rest on the basis of their identity as political exiles - a *Diaspora* identity rather than a

*migrant* one. For them political action has been the reason and the pattern of migration, as participation in a transnational, but exclusive political community.

The Kurdish parties' agenda in Greece has been homeland-oriented and confrontational, aiming to attract the influence of foreign relations for a political change in their homelands. The parties mobilized more as *political* than as migrant movements, because this is the context of the 'political opportunity structure' (Ireland; 1994) they found; until the arrest of the leader of PKK Abdullah Ocalan in 1999, Kurds were tolerated in Greece as a *political* exile community, whose resistance movements were seen with solidarity in the context of Greek-Turkish relations (Papadopoulou; 2003). A reflection of this is that in the late 1990s the public rhetoric about Kurds in Greece was that they were 'refugees'. The parties rarely mobilized for migrant issues in the host society, and as a result, became dissociated from the rest of the Kurdish migrants - contrary to the case of Kurds/Turks in Germany, where, according to Ostergaard-Nielsen (2001), homeland/Diaspora politics and migrant politics are inseparable categories.

Nonetheless, not all Kurdish asylum seekers in Greece are fleeing persecution - many are migrants fleeing political instability and economic deprivation. For them, migration means rebuilding their lives and not mobilizing for a political cause, even if they have been politicised in their homelands in the past. On the other hand, ex-party members (who had been active in Greece for some years) stated that engagement in homeland politics made them feel insecure, dependent and excluded from the host society, because of the social control and the inter-party conflicts that spilled over to the new environment. Politically inactive migrants faced pressure from both sides, from the Kurdish parties who adopted a patronizing role towards Kurdish migrants, and from the host society, who perceived Kurds collectively as politicised. After the arrest of Ocalan, where the risk of associating political exiles with foreign relations became visible, engagement in homeland politics has come to be translated by asylum seekers as a stigma, rather than as a claim to refugee identity. Integration is understood as stepping out from the Kurdish political community. At the same time, the media rhetoric about Kurds arriving in Greece after 1999 shifted from being 'refugees' to being 'illegal migrants'.

In a nutshell, the type of political networks and the role of Diaspora politics for certain politicised Kurds have drawn lines of division with the others and weakened the potential

of ethnic community formation to support integration. As Wahlbeck (1998) also argues for Kurds in England, interpersonal relations are the continuation of the types of social and political relations the Kurds had in their countries of origin.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the type and dynamic of political mobilization of Kurdish refugees has very much depended on the political opportunity structures and the foreign relations environment at a particular time.

## **vi. Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to analyse the organisation of refugee flows to Greece in relation to the country's reception structures. Irregular and asylum migration, temporary and permanent settlement need to be seen as different phases in the process of forced migration, where migrants negotiate their status according to the conditions for settlement. The fact that Greece is currently both a transit and a destination country has more to do with the absence of a common EU migration and asylum policy and with the poverty of domestic reception and integration mechanisms to help migrants rebuild their lives, rather than with the migrants' intentions and the operation of their networks. A particular point made here is the positive asset of informal, social relations between Kurdish migrants and Greeks, which is a good indicator for the integration prospects of this group and their offspring. With regards to the ethnic group's particularity, the mobilisation of Kurdish refugees in homeland politics that managed to create a set of distinct and self-sustained exile communities, quite dissociated from the rest of Kurdish forced migrants. In their case, the strength of ethnic/political affiliations overrides the experience of displacement. This division has also been sharpened by the host society's perception and collective ascription of Kurds as politicised. At the same time, the categorization of people as 'refugees' or 'labour migrants' is also a construction reflecting the political and foreign relations environment of the host society at any particular time.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> 7,000 Convention Refugees, 6,188 registered asylum seekers and 5,664 new applicants in 2002, UNHCR BO Athens, based on Ministry of Public Order (MPO) data, [www.unhcr.gr/basics/o4.htm](http://www.unhcr.gr/basics/o4.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Migration News Sheet, February 2002, vol. 9, 2.

<sup>3</sup> 'Ta Nea' Newspaper, 25/10/2001.

<sup>4</sup> Between 01/06/2001 and 31/03/2002, 'Eleytheroyia' Newspaper 31/05/2002.

<sup>5</sup> In 1959 Greece ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention and in 1968 the 1967 New York Protocol.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, Handbook on Criteria and Procedures for Determining Refugee Status (2000).

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR data estimations and GCR Interview, 11/01/2002. ECRE Country Report Greece 2001 gives a rate of 9,5%. According to MPO data, the recognition rate in 2001 was 11.2%, in UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.gr/basics/04.htm> The estimation of recognition rates in relation to asylum applications is rather problematic, because recognitions/rejections usually refer to past applications and not those of the same year (backlog).

<sup>8</sup> 1,000 border guards were recruited in 1998, and 2,500 more in permanent posts in 2002, 'Ta Nea' 05/01/1998 and 'Eleytherotypia' 30/05/2002, Land border control corps were created with PD 310/1998, amended by PD 112/1999.

<sup>9</sup> Protocol for the Implementation of Article 8 of the Agreement between the Government of the Hellenic Republic and the Government of the Republic of Turkey on Combating Crime, Especially Terrorism, Organized Crime, Trafficking and Illegal Migration' signed on the 07/11/2001, and voted on 20/06/2002 (Law 3030/2002).

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey Office, 08/04/2003.

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR Comments on the Protocol, UNHCR BO Athens, November 2001, Amnesty International Press Conference, 26/11/2001, AI Greek Delegation, Athens and National Committee for Human Rights (NCHR) Annual Report 2002, pp. 91-92.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) accused Greece of deportation of 34 asylum seekers, including torture victims [press release, OMCT Geneva 07/12/2001]; the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR) accused the authorities of granting deportation papers to migrants instead of asylum application forms [cited in 'Eleytherotypia' 06/01/2001]; the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) accused Greece for the threat of deportation of a 70 year old Kurd who was torture victim [GHM press release, 09/12/2001].

<sup>13</sup> Our Europe: We share the Future in a Community of Values; The Priorities of the Greek Presidency,' Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 2002.

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR, BO Athens (2000), 'Statistics, Greece 1990-2000', and UNHCR BO Athens (2002), 'Annual Statistical Report for 2001: Refugees and Others of concern to the UNHCR'.

<sup>15</sup> The first UNHCR data on Kurds are now released for January-June 2002, (UNHCR; 2002a).

<sup>16</sup> The first number mentioned in interviews and in 'Ta Nea' Newspaper 05/01/1998, the second in the Greek Parliament by the then Minister of Public Order, G.Romeos, Parliamentary Proceedings, Session 109 (04/04/1997), pp.5413-14. The third number in Triantafyllidou; 2001

<sup>17</sup> 'Ta Nea' Newspaper, 08/11/2000.

<sup>18</sup> Newspapers 'Ta Nea', 19/07/2001, 'Eleytherotypia' 16/01/2002.

<sup>19</sup> More than 5,000 are estimated to have crossed the border in the last three months (i.e. May – July 2002), 'Avgi' Newspaper, 10/08/2002.

<sup>20</sup> Also mentioned in 'Ta Nea' Newspaper, 07/09/2000.

<sup>21</sup> 'Ta Nea' Newspaper, 21/03/2002.

<sup>22</sup> 'Eleytherotypia' Newspaper, 05/01/2003.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, 17/10/2001.

<sup>24</sup> This impression was also shared among most public and NGO officials I interviewed.

<sup>25</sup> According to a survey on vocational training for refugees/ asylum seekers, 48% of the sample have had higher or technical education, but these skills are not used in Greece (Papadopoulou; 2001).

<sup>26</sup> The liberal perspective is also made clear in the latest regularization processes, (1998, 2001), that attached the migrants' right to stay (residence permit) to their work permit.

<sup>27</sup> Black; 1992, p.16.

<sup>28</sup> According to Turkish Daily News [TDN], the office of ERNK (the political wing of PKK) is said to have opened in Athens in 1994, together with two Kurdistan Committees, and a Kurdistan Cultural Centre. A second ERNK office opened in Thessaloniki in the same year, (TDN,23/02/1999). According to interviews, the KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party), the PUK (Patriotic Union Kurdistan) from Iraq and the KDP-Iran have also maintained offices in Athens, and Rizgari Party of Kurdistan (RPK) in Athens and other cities.

<sup>29</sup> Wahlbeck (1998), p.140-141.

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