MARNIE

Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Refugees Narrating Integration Experiences

Deliverable 4.1: Working Paper

Spaces of inclusion/exclusion: integration experiences of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Greece

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1. Introduction

Social integration of Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers (MRAS) is defined in the National Strategy for social integration, as it was initially designed in 2013 and later amended in 2019 and in 2021. [1] However, Greece has a small experience in the field of MRAS' integration while the majority of the country's efforts focused on the creation of emergency service systems such as camps and temporary housing (Kourachanis, 2018). Therefore, the gaps in social services and the protection of the population are addressed mainly by the activities of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that have implemented, in cooperation with the government, some integration programmes (Sotiropoulos & Bourikos, 2014, Rozakou, 2018). Nevertheless, in the last years, there has been a collective effort to shift the programme management and services offered by the different NGOs to the Greek government (Euractiv, 2021, ECRE, 2021). Moreover, during the last years MRAS' securitisation in the EU through the continuous 'migration crisis' narratives (Nur Osso 2025) had an impact on integration policies in Greece with the most recent example being the limitations on the asylum-seeking process (Article 79 of Law 5218/2025).[2]

The main objective of the MARNIE project was to provide evidence on how MRAS experience policies and social services – not necessarily specifically designed and addressed to them – as part of general and specific social policies. The project did not aim at just identifying and analysing existing policies pertaining to social integration; moreover, it aimed at investigating how MRAS experience and evaluate those policies and services through their everyday encounters with relevant institutions (e.g. hospitals, social security services, unemployment offices). In addition, the project aimed to unravel interactions between MRAS and 'host society' actors who participate in one way or another in the inclusion/exclusion continuum.

[1] https://migration.gov.gr/migration-policy/integration/politiki-entaxis-se-ethniko-epipedo/ethniki-stratigiki/, accessed 1 October 2025.
[2] https://www.unhcr.org/gr/en/news/press-releases/unhcr-deeply-concerned-greece-s-suspension-asylum-applications, accessed 1 October 2025.

This working paper particularly focuses on the findings from the fieldwork, i.e. the conducted semi-structured interviews and the working groups with the participation of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. In the following sections apart from short sections on the methodology and demographics of the participants, the material is analysed following the interview scenario. The main themes, therefore, include experiences with 1) the health system, 2) the educational system, 3) the labour market and banks, 4) accommodation, 5) the financial and security services, and 6) the police and the justice system. The working paper ends with the discussion and conclusion of the findings.

2. Methodology[3]

In order to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of the individual experiences of MARS focusing on everyday encounters with social (inclusion) programmes and services, with the aim to capture data related to the main objectives of the research the method of biographical semi-structured interviews was implemented. The research team strived to recruit participants with a diverse background, meaning people with different ethnicities/nationalities, genders, from different age groups as well as with different socioeconomic characterises (e.g. class, level of education, socio-cultural capital, etc.).

The semi-structured in-depth interview (Mishler, 1996, Mason, 2002, 83-131; Grawitz, 2006, 235-279), offers the researcher the opportunity to discover ideas, values, perceptions, stances and emotions and understand the personal and social experiences, i.e. what people do, why they do it and how the social actors understand their world and their lives (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, 1-5, Kvale, 1996, 1). The semi-structured interview provides the opportunity to the researcher to document the various and complicated experiences of the human beings and contribute to the understanding of the modern world (Back, 2007). The prepared interview guide (see Appendix) was prepared to cover a range of themes, but it was

[3] More details on the implemented methods are discussed in the Technical report on the outcomes of Fieldwork (D3.1).

always adjusted to the interview conditions and each participant's personal characteristics and experiences. That is why there was a range of the interviews' duration from 30 minutes to two hours and a half.

In addition to the interviews two working groups were conducted as part of the participatory action research (PAR) approach implemented. The aim of the groups was to jointly reflect, share of experiences, identify key narratives and co-design potential scenarios for the digital narrative application with game elements. Participatory action research is an approach that encourages an active contribution in the production of knowledge within a collaborative framework, emphasising 'equal partnerships' (Daykin and Stickley 2016, 167). It acts as a 'way of opening up space for dialogue and conversation' (Nicolaidis and Raymaker, 2015, 28), between the role of the participant in the design, implementation, and dissemination of the research' (Vaughn and Jacquez, 2017, 78). So in the field of forced displacement with research showing clearly that 'asylum seekers, refugees and displaced people report high rates of trauma' (Vaughan-Williams, 2015, 275), displaying significant levels of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Aspects that are related with socioeconomic disadvantage, employment, social and emotional isolation, racism, and uncertainty related to the asylum application process PAR becomes not only relevant but essential.

The collaborative character of PAR has its roots in the efforts to 'democratise the research process' (Blumenthal, 2011, 3), so there is an equal consideration to both the participants of the study and academic partners as refugees/ asylum seekers/migrants, as they become part of the knowledge as owners (Clini et al, 2019). Taking into consideration the contribution of PAR in the mental health of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants, it is essential to highlight that Arts-and-health practitioners argue that cultural participation (including music, film making, theatre, dance, museum, and heritage activities) enhances human health and well-being (Clini et al, 2019).

From December 2024 to April 2025 overall, 23 semi-structured interviews with MRAS were conducted. In addition, two working groups were conducted in June 2025 with nine participants in total. After the collection of the material the interviews and the working groups were thematically analysed based on the interview guide.

3. Demographics and trajectories

In terms of demographics 19 women, 12 men and one transgender person participated in the interviews and the working groups. There was a variety of ages from 22 to 62 and ethnic backgrounds as evident from the following list:

- Albania
- Ukraine
- Philippines
- Iraq
- Syria
- Lebanon
- Serbia
- Pakistan
- Congo
- Nigeria
- Libya
- Tunisia
- Haiti
- Georgia
- Indonesia
- Afghanistan
- Ivory Cost

Their education also varied from primary education (not always completed) to university degree as well as their current status which included people obtained the

Greek citizenship, others having a long-term residence permit, ten-year residence permit, five-year residence permit for studies, and some have applied for asylum. Finally, the range of years they live in Greece varied from early 1990s with the first Albanian immigrants (1992) to 2022 with the case of a Ukrainian who came in Greece after Russia's invasion to Ukraine. There were also cases where the participant was born in Greece and later left for the country of origin and then returned again to Greece.

When it comes to the trajectories they followed to come to Greece apart from those born in the country others followed the typical immigration paths either through the Greek-Albanian borders in the 1990s or through Turkey after traveling from other original destinations e.g. Syria, Iraq, Congo, etc. Some of them came with a student visa for studies or because other family members were already in Greece for studies or work. As it was expected and made clear from the collected narrations those who came from conflict zones, like Iraq, Congo or Syria they faced difficulties in their trajectory since they had to pay huge money to people smugglers and risk their life until they arrived to Greece. Similar descriptions were offered by Albanian immigrants who arrived in Greece during the 1990s. There was a constant fear that the police would trace them and deport them since they had no papers. On the contrary and reasonably enough those who came with a student visa for studies, with a tourist visa or because other family members already resided in Greece, as well as in the case of the Ukrainian participant, all narrated a much smoother arrival and initial integration.

4. Health care system

The inequalities in relation to the access of MRAS in the health system services including mental health services is one of the key themes in the literature.[4] Even studies in medical sociology have showcased the role of racial and ethnic background on health and mental health issues (Furr 2023, 225), in relation to other variables such as social class or gender. As it has been argued, stress and racism related to the

[4] More details on the literature can be found in the project's report of the scoping review (D.2.1).

immigrant status can have a significant impact in people's health (Brown, 2018). It is mostly that social experiences, the social environments, and racism can make people sick (Cockerham, 2022, 238). At the same time, as many studies have shown, racism can have an impact on MRAS's mental health (Furr, 2023, 225).

Social inequalities have been documented in other studies of immigration and the health system in Greece during the last years (Galani et al 2020, Fouskas et al 2020). From the narrations we collected such inequalities were verified with the most common barriers being the language and the lack of documentation. The language problem was mainly related to the civil personnel of the hospitals and the nurses and less with the doctors. In one case, one participant (Male, 48) mentioned that because of language, he spoke English but the personnel didn't, he had to go up and down the flours as he illustrated with his hands explicitly in order to have an X-ray for his arm. Another participant recalled that:

> At the hospital, I had difficulty communicating; it was challenging. I have missed appointments because I did not know the address or what documents were required. Language is very important, whether it is English or Greek. In recent years, I have noticed that most people speak English (Male, 40).

This last point was mentioned by other participants, i.e. that some improvements have been noticed, especially for those who are in Greece for more than a decade. Another interviewee argued that:

> The healthcare system has improved considerably, e.g. you can now make appointments online or by phone. Language is still a barrier, no matter how advanced you are, and I don't know how that can be resolved. I realised this when I was constantly with my husband in the hospital when he fell ill with cancer and I had to prepare paperwork and translate. If you go to a hospital without someone who speaks the language, they don't pay attention to you (Female, 50).

As it has been supported through many studies in the past language is a crucial barrier (NSPCC, 2014; NHS 2023). However, apart from language racism in hospitals and health care centres was also underlined. In one such case it was mentioned that:

> Once I went to a health care center with three minor children and a woman wearing a headscarf to get paperwork for school enrollment, and the lady had a stomach ache. As soon as the doctor saw her wearing a headscarf, he started shouting, "You brought her here," he didn't want to help us, and the security guard came and kicked us out, so we went back and made an appointment elsewhere. That was the most intense incident. Also, because we were foreigners, they always left us until last, regardless of our appointment, and the same thing happened in the emergency room. They always told us to 'wait', even when we protested. Comments about religion, about their clothing, 'the dirty ones have come,' but not from everyone, there were also excellent doctors (Female, 40).

This kind of racist attitude against Muslims is a common finding in other European countries in their effort to access the healthcare system (Dogra, 2023).

It is important to note that participants very regularly acknowledged the services they received and the human behaviour by doctors and nurses, although this was described as an exception. Sometimes the language barrier and racism constitute a double exclusion.

> I have been to hospitals, but again it depends on the individual. In Mytilene, I have encountered racist behavior; there was a lot of racism, people shouted at me, at every level, doctors, nurses, employees. You had to find someone who would help you; that was the exception. There was also a big problem with language; they wouldn't speak to you, they insisted on speaking Greek. It's a combination of racism and language (Female, 29).

Racism was not always explicit, though, especially when language was not a huge problem for the participant. In one case, a woman from Albania, who spoke Greek very well, she was confronted as 'inferior' by the medical personnel.

> My husband took me to the emergency room because of very severe headaches. I waited for two hours, and they told me that everyone has them, and it's hot [it was summer], but let's see. Then, they told me that I had something more serious and gave me some eye drops to examine my eyes, and then they told me they had to examine if I was pregnant. I went from floor to floor, and at some point they told me that as a foreigner, there were some things I didn't understand. Then the director called me and asked, "Are you able to understand what we're telling you?" And I said, "Why are you treating me like this?" (Female, 45).

Since MRAS usually arrive already with health and mental issues necessary to deal with due to various reasons (e.g. difficult trajectories, violence and torture in their own country, poor health conditions in the country of origin), the health care system was one of the topics mostly discussed during interviews, and a great number of stories were collected. At the same time a crucial parameter was that all the problems mentioned were better confronted when NGOs or friends were helping them to access the health care system, underlying the importance of social and solidarity networks.

5. Educational system

Access to all levels of education is one of the main topics of public debates when it comes to MRAS and there are a great number of studies showcasing the barriers they face. In relation to secondary education access, Júlia Palik and Gudrun Østby (2023) identify key barriers faced by refugee children in obtaining quality education. While cash transfer programmes can enhance attendance and physical education supports second-language learning, obstacles such as lack of identification, inadequate infrastructure, safety concerns, and socio-cultural factors vary between camp and urban environments and among genders. Urban areas may see host

countries imposing restrictive policies that limit refugee inclusion in national education systems, with linguistic challenges further hindering enrolment, academic placement, and increasing dropout rates. When it comes to University access Platzer (2018) highlights that fewer than 1% of the six million university-age refugees worldwide access higher education, mainly due to a lack of facilities and challenges in validating foreign qualifications. Globally, refugees often lack documentation of their degrees, transcripts, and course descriptions, making credit equivalency difficult. In some fields, additional professional exams are required, but restrictions often stem from a desire to limit competition.

The importance of education for integration was highlighted by the European Parliament in 2016 (European Parliament, 2016). To offer a long-term perspective for migrants through education, the EU followed a twofold approach, providing tools and schemes for their integration in EU countries, and offering support for refugees outside EU borders through specific funds. The former included various policy frameworks, such as increased access to early childhood education and care facilities, the validation of prior learning, and speeding up mechanisms for assessment of capacities and recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning of arriving migrants. An example of the latter was the Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis, aiming to help some 1.5 million refugees in neighbouring countries through the allocation of €140 million to education alone (European Parliament, 2016, 1).

In the Greek context various initiatives have been taken for MRAS's integration to education, e.g. Law 4415/2016 established preparatory classes (DYEP) for vaccinated refugee children, reducing resistance, yet some schools created barriers to enrolment, often linked to vaccination concerns and residential segregation. In addition, rallies against refugee children at schools were organsied by parents' associations and extreme right groups even in front of schools (Sakellariou, 2017, 243-44).

Narratives about education varied. Some of the participants came initially for University studies in Greece meaning that their integration at least in terms of documentation and peer acceptance was smoother. Even those, however, underlined the language barrier during classes and in the everyday life until they managed to learn it at a very good level. “For a year, I had the feeling that they were speaking Chinese or Japanese at university. I remember counting the letters in a word and saying, ‘Wow, 20 letters, how am I going to say that?’ It took me at least 1-1.5 years to be able to understand it well (Male, 40).

An important parameter usually neglected in the relative discussions is what children do actually in schools and how they treated. For example, as it was mentioned in one case, children from a refugee camp attended school, but they were just sitting in the classroom and played. At the same time bullying was also mentioned “there was a little boy who had been beaten up and didn't want to go back to school. They threw water at him and he didn't react. He had lost his mother, and we had to give him psychological support so that he could go back to school” (Female, 40).

Although participants did not mention serious problems at school for their children communication due to language barriers were again mentioned. As one mother said “the same thing happened at school. All the information I received about the children was mainly in Greek, and that was a problem. They spoke to me in Greek, and I didn't understand exactly what they were saying” (Female, 50).

Another problem mentioned was related to their documentation. When they arrived and they wanted to attend school due to lack of documentation and mistakes (e.g. in age) they were assigned to a lower class. In one such case of a female refugee she was assigned to the first class of High School instead of the first class of Lyceum.

> When my friend and I arrived, we went to enrol in night school, and they told me they wouldn't enrol me, even though my name was there, and they told me it would be better not to enrol. They confused me, probably

> because they themselves were confused. I had gone to school and they told me that they had to delete my name so that I could go to Lyceum. They were shouting, they didn't understand, it was a waste of time. Then the Ministry told us that it was possible to have my name removed from High School, but the deadline had passed and it would have to be done next year, but the social worker forgot about me, so I missed the opportunity. On the one hand, they told me that based on my studies, I wasn't for High School [but for Lyceum], but on the other hand, I couldn't leave because I was officially enrolled in High School. […] When I realised that they had put me in the first year of High School, I said that I shouldn't be there and that I wanted to go to Lyceum because I was already working. I think I talked to the vice principal and explained that I didn't want another five years in education and, that I had educational knowledge [High School degree], etc., and she almost started yelling at me, screaming, "Do you think you can make it in Lyceum? If I bring you a book to read, will you be able to summarise it for me? You're not ready for this" (Female, 29).

The intersectionality of integration was illustrated by the case of a transgender participant who was enrolled in the University. In the need to find a place to leave she made an application for a room in the student dormitory. As she described vividly:

> “When the draw [for the rooms] took place, it was a little awkward because the division [of rooms] was between boys and girls, and since I am male on paper, I had to speak openly and say that I am a trans woman and cannot be in a room with another boy, and there was a lot of awkwardness on their part; they didn't know what to do. They suggested that I should be placed in a room alone so that they would not have to deal with my situation any further” (transgender, 22).

Although openly racist behaviour was not mentioned, however, racist incidents were mentioned. In one case a female immigrant recalled when she arrived in Greece and she had to enrol her kids at school.

> I brought my children here when my mother died and I wanted to enroll them in first grade. I took them there and they told me that they belonged to a school next to our home. The principal looked me up and down and said, "Did you say [you are from] Albania?" And she said, 'We don't have any places here,' and gave me a piece of paper to go to another school six or seven bus stops away. I went there and the principal said, 'We have places here, but you don't belong here,' and he called someone at the Ministry and they told me I could send the children to school as normal. The next day when I went again [to the first school], she said, 'Hey, did you go to the Ministry? You didn't need to. We would have taken the children. […] Now I have my granddaughter, who is a very good student, and the teacher said my granddaughter should hold the Greek flag in the parade. Then the Greek parents got up and said, 'Have the Greek children been lost? ' There was a big fuss. And then my granddaughter came home crying, and my daughter decided not to hold the flag so as not to cause any trouble (Female, 58).

In another case a young female described the stance of the school principal and one teacher due to her immigrant background.

> When I arrived, I didn't speak Greek, and that was the problem with me because I didn't look like an immigrant [she is from Georgia]. When I went to the third grade of High School, the principal told me that I had to go back to the first grade instead of the first grade of Lyceum and that I wasn't trying hard enough. So, I left and went to the Intercultural School near the Polytechnic School. At the other school, I was the odd one out, the one who didn't speak. A teacher once said, "Oh, you want to study?" And she tells me that wanting to study is like her wanting to be a princess

> [currently she studies psychology at the University]. Then, when the principal changed at the other school, he asked me to go and finish school there, because my brother went there too. And there, the other principal saw me and said, "Oh, you came to study first year of high school," and I said, "No, I came for second year of Lyceum" (Female, 25).

Access to education is a crucial way to integrate MRAS and relates to children's well-being, however, there is a need for equal opportunities and other initiatives to accomplish this goal. Sometimes, though, school principals are a barrier and contribute to MRAS's social exclusion through education making children avoiding school (Landau and Segatti, 2009). As it has been argued (Gabrielli and Impicciatore, 2022) the lower academic performances of immigrants' descendants can be raised through language-support programmes, mentoring programmes, positive role and disciplinary climate, extra-scholastic activities and parental involvement. Equality opportunities in education should support school-to-work transitions and better allocate the underutilized human capital reserves of migrants' descendants.

6. Labour market and banks

Labour market is one of the key-themes in the literature and the public debates when it comes to MRAS. Not all of them visit health care units and certainly not all of them are enrolled in education, although their children usually are. However, all of them are looking for a job at some point after their arrival. Discrimination and stigmatisation in the labour market based on race, ethnicity, and religion have been at the core of academic studies and analyses (Gunn et al, 2020, Weichselbaumer, 2020). At the same time gender and class should not be neglected when discussing labour market discrimination.

Discrimination in the Greek labour market is not scarce and regularly references on inequalities and violent behaviour of employers have been reported to NGOs and public authorities, e.g. the Greek Ombudsman. Our participants mentioned a number of such discriminatory practices, open or covert, but they also

described positive and inclusionary examples by local families which embraced them and offered jobs upon their arrival. However, even in those cases exploitation, e.g. lack of social security was the norm, which was accepted by immigrants. Narratives vary based on each one's background. For example, it is more difficult for someone which language barriers and disabilities to enter the labour market. As one interviewee from Iraq (Male, 48) mentioned, he speaks English and he speaks to the employers on the phone in English, but when they ask him, "Do you know Greek?" and his says no, they tell refuse to continue. In his view the state must help refugees learn Greek so that they can work and integrate.

There are three types of ways to access the labour market, 1) through non-official networks (e.g. family members already in the country), 2) through civil society organisations (e.g. NGOs), and 3) through public offices (e.g. DYPA, ex-OAED). Only a few of them have visited the offices of such public structures. Some have do not recall negative experiences of OAED ("I went once when I was unemployed", Male, 43) while another one remembered the noise and the chaos when they went but the employer who was with him helped him (Male, 56) and a third that he had to wait for a very long time until they make an appointment for you and he received assistance from an accountant, because although they had uploaded electronically all the necessary documents, they asked for them again and I sent them by email (Male, 33).

Bad behaviour from employees mentioned in some cases, but at the same time another employee came to assist. As one interviewee narrated:

> I went to OAED once to apply for child benefit. We had to fill out some paperwork, so I went there and there was a girl at the counter desk, not even 20 years old, who asked me, "Why are you here?" "For the benefit," I replied. "Why? Are you getting it?" I want this, I want that [document], and then she says, 'Oh, I'm tired of this,' and leaves. So, I took the papers and went to the manager and told her what happened, and she said, 'I'm so sorry, I'll fix it for you (Male, 62).

Another issue somehow related to the labour market is bank accounts which are necessary to be hired. One interviewee went to open an account and they wouldn't let him, even though he had all the necessary paperwork. Then he went to another bank, another branch of the same bank, and there they were very nice and accepted him and opened an account for him (Male, 42). As he mentioned, this is a regular policy by some bank branches based on racism, since there is no legislation to forbid opening a bank account.

Another interviewee mentioned similar problems and that she received assistance by a social worker at the bank in order to open an account.

> Different banks have different policies. Here [job] I had to have an account with the National Bank. They opened an account for me but in the end they told me that I couldn't do anything without e-banking, they didn't explain anything to me about other accounts. I came back to my colleagues and told them about it, and they said that this is not legal, that they make exceptions, that Ukrainians, for example, do not have this problem. If you know Greek very well, you can argue with the bank and tell them that there is no law, etc., but if you go and don't speak Greek, like me, they start playing games with you until you get tired and leave. I went to the appointments alone. They told me to ask for what they were saying in writing, and the manager replied that they don't give that out. I came here [job] and they told me to go to another branch and they would help me, so I went and opened an account without any problems (Female, 29).

A similar problem was with the issuing of debit cards. One interviewee mentioned that “I had the same problem with the banks, so I went to a different bank to get a card. They wouldn't give me one at Piraeus Bank, so I went to National Bank” (Female, 53).

The bottom line was that language is a key-factor to find a job and to open a bank account. As one interviewee put it “Language is very important,

because if I go to an office and I know Greek, they will say, "Oh, you speak Greek very well" (Male, 42).

7. Accommodation

In Greece, access to housing for MRAS has been posing a significant challenge for decades, despite recent initiatives such as the Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection (HELIOS) and the Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation (ESTIA) program. Balampanidis (2020) observed that between the 1990s and 2010, many migrants in Athens overcame significant obstacles to achieve upward housing mobility and even secure homeownership, challenging stereotypes of marginalisation. However, following Greece's economic crisis, conditions for newly arrived migrants deteriorated, making it increasingly challenging for them to find suitable housing. During the so-called 2015-2017 migration crisis, access to housing was influenced by non-state actors acting as intermediaries between the state and migrants (Glyniadaki, 2021). These intermediaries, including civil society organisations, exercised significant discretion in determining which migrants were "deserving' of housing based on their interpretations of vulnerability, often shaped by gender and age. While their actions were framed by policies and structural conditions, individual judgments played a key role in shaping who received housing support.

Participants in our research did not use directly any of the available programmes and addressed to civil society organisations or local authorities to secure accommodation, while in some cases their application for housing was rejected. In addition, some of them upon their arrival stayed in camps in the islands before they came to the mainland and described such places as 'dehumanised' (Female, 29). Housing was also accessed through social networks (e.g. friends and relatives already living in Greece).

Sometimes they have tried to book an apartment on their own but this was not always easy, especially when they didn't speak Greek very well and the own realised that they were foreigners: "I had called a house, but they refused to rent it, saying

that they didn't like, they didn't want to rent it to refugees from Africa" (Male, 42). However, in another case one participant through her narration brought up the parameter of class: "At the beginning I had problems with the house. When I called, they would say, 'No foreigners' or 'We don't speak English'. Now when I call, I say, 'Hello, I'm a pilot, I work for Sky Express', and then we talk normally" (Female, 30). She also recalled that she and her boyfriend left their apartment in Agia Paraskevi because their neighbors heard them speaking Arabic and alerted the owner and complained.

Finally, another participant mentioned that when he arrived had no problem with housing but around 2018-19 things have changed and people ask more details on the phone on who you are, from which country, and sometimes they hung up (Omar, 40). Overall, all our participants mentioned that, one way or another, housing was resolved and personal and social networks as well as through NGOs.

8. Fiscal and social security services

One of the most populated themes of the interview guide was the one related to experiences with public services on social security and taxes. Although, during the last years the digitalisation of the services improved MRAS access, however, this did not come without problems. On the one hand, it was mentioned that one has to know how to use such online services otherwise he/she has to find a lawyer or an accountant for assistance. On the other hand it was stressed that digitalisation without employees who are trained how to use the system or without the necessary employees to proceed with the applications, the time of waiting is still the same.

Some also mentioned that since they didn't know the language they had to go to lawyers but sometimes they also exploited them:

> We have had a lot of trouble with paperwork. Even back in [city], I didn't know how to read, and when they gave me forms to fill out, I didn't know what to write. They took advantage of us, especially the lawyers. "Oh, he doesn't understand..." […] To go to an [public] office, you had to know

> the language, to understand, so we didn't go to public services, but to lawyers (Male, 43).

Social security offices, IKA for example, were described as the worst experience.

> At IKA it was just chaos. They told me to make an appointment in two months, but then my permit would end, and I told them, "Guys, what am I going to do until then? I won't have any insurance". […] At IKA, I had my children insured under their mother because she had stamps, and they told me that wasn't possible, that I had to have them insured under me as their father, and there was a bit of tension there, so I went to the manager and he helped me. […] You make an appointment, the worst is IKA, you go with the papers, I've made so many photocopies and then I've thrown them away. You go there and they tell you they don't need them and then you get angry and say, "You're kidding me." And then they tell you they want this document too, even though they didn't tell you from the beginning, and then you have to make another appointment, but who pays me my daily wage? (Male, 43).

Similarly to social security offices tax offices are described with the same word: chaos. “The tax office in Galatsi is chaotic; it's not somewhere you want to go. I remember the confusion; I don't remember why I went there, but I remember them telling me things other than what I wanted to hear and sending me from one office to another” (Female, 50).

It was more than clear that apart from all other issues (e.g. racist behaviour, bureaucracy, etc.) language was the most important barrier. One interviewee mentioned that:

> Perhaps if I spoke Greek, I might have been able to get help with the services (EFKA, AFM, AMKA), but I had to be very polite and beg. In one case, I had to fill out some forms, I think for my tax identification number, which all were in Greek, but there was no internet in the

> building so I couldn't use Google Translate, and I had to go outside to get a signal, but the pen I needed to fill out the forms was tied up! No one helped me; no one wanted to help me, to translate, because they didn't know English. I have met very few employees in public services who really want to help you (Female, 30).

Racism, openly or not, was also mentioned by many of the participants in their visit to social security and tax services. One of them mentioned that he went to the EFKA office in Galatsi with a friend for an appointment, said he had an appointment, that he had the papers, and a security guard started shouting at him, "No, not here," and sent them away, saying, "Go, back, go back." He mentioned that in this office is someone who does not like refugees and does not even want to listen. Then he made an appointment at another EFKA office (Male, 42). In some cases positive experiences were mentioned like one at IKA from a female employee (Male, 40) but this was the exception. Such behaviour is mentioned in other countries as well e.g. in South Africa where immigrants face problems with public services, bureaucracy, and security guards (Vigneswaran, 2008).

In another case an immigrant narrated an openly racist attitude at a hospital and EFKA as he was trying to submit an application for his wife in order to receive a disability benefit for a psychiatric problem. In the first case an administrative employee at a hospital said 'It's not enough that we have crazy people in Greece, now we have them coming from Albania too'. When they visited EFKA a similar attitude was narrated:

> While the doctor gave us the paperwork for my wife to get the disability benefit [for psychiatric problem], the clerk at the EFKA office told us that she couldn't get them because we're from Albania. I told her, 'I am sorry, but that's what the law says', and she told me she knew that. I said I would submit the papers and let her be, and the clerk asked me what was wrong with my wife, saying she looked fine! (Male, 62).

Another participant who had also serious health problems mentioned racist attitude in EFKA and in a tax office. In the first case he recalled an incident with an employee who he and his wife ironically call 'Our beloved Golden Dawn member'

> I was going to get insurance through my wife's booklet. Because I have experience with public services, I said let's get two numbers... The first guy said 'if I want to insure you, if I don't want to, I won't insure you'. I went to my number and he started yelling at me in English, and I said, if you want, we can speak in Greek... and he said, oh, sorry. If you have a problem, come here, but don't yell. The other one yelled and said it wasn't possible and threw our paper out of his desk; Two employees in the same department, 5 meters apart, one kicking us out and the other serving us secretly. Obviously, I later realised that because lawyers went there, they gave the employee a piece of the pie [money]. Sure, they have many people every day, but that doesn't justify this behaviour (Male, 56).

While in the second narration described an experience in a tax office:

> I also had to go to the [no] Tax Office. The accountant had submitted the application online, but I had to go in person. The lady at the registry didn't want to help me. I was on crutches, I had hypoglycaemia, and she said to me, 'aren't you ashamed, you're taking advantage of the situation to jump the queue', because the security guard helped me jump the queue due to my problem. She sent me away and sent me to the cashier, and strangely enough, the cashier helped me, even though it wasn't his job, but he sent me back to her to get a piece of paper, and she wasn't expecting it, she was shocked that he had helped me (Male, 56).

In his view "access was very difficult [to public services] because they considered us foreigners to be uneducated and [just] gave us a lawyer's card, and once I sat outside and filled out the paperwork for others, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, everyone, because

I was very mad" (Male, 56). However, he acknowledged the assistance of some employees who were very helpful.

9. Residence permit and other services

The application processes for the residence permit and citizenship are two issues often raised during the interviews and the working groups, primarily for the bureaucratic obstacles and delays which usually lead to the expiration of the new permit, even before they received it. Such delays, as it was mentioned, put further obstacles not only for those who want to stay in Greece, but also for those who want to go to other European destinations (Female, 40). Paper issues are more easily overcomed for those who came initially for studies at the University, as in one case through the Patriarch of Antioch, but again there was a long time of waiting (e.g. more than a year) and for applications he had to stand on the line from 3 a.m. (Male, 40). The following is an illustrative example of the barriers faced:

> I kept going to the offices to get my residence permit for Greece. They told me to go there, so I went. They told me, 'Oh, you're not here, go there'. I came back, and they said, 'Oh, yeah, you're here'. I went to an appointment in Pallini and they told me I was missing a document, so I spoke to B. on the phone and he said he would send it. He sent it, and the clerk told me to wait, and I waited, and waited, and three hours passed... Another woman from Egypt was served because her husband had a friend there, and I went to the clerk and asked him what was going on, and he said, 'No English, no English'. I tell him I want to speak to his supervisor, and he tells me it's not possible. In the meantime, the Egyptian man came and told me, 'You need them, they don't need you, that's why they treat you like shit'. I have someone here, I'll talk to him. Then I called B. crying, and he came, and we went together to the supervisor, where the issue was finally resolved. He was very polite and hit on me. When we finished, he gave me his phone number on a piece of paper (Female, 30).

The bureaucratic confusion was also vividly described by an interviewee with health problems when the law changed regarding the residence permit on humanitarian grounds.

> I had been granted a permit on humanitarian grounds and was able to work sporadically. After 2015, I couldn't work because a law had been passed stating that you cannot work when you have a permit for humanitarian reasons, but to obtain it, you must be insured! In other words, you must have social security stamps (Male, 56).

An important comment was made by several participants, mostly those who live in Greece for more than a decade. They underlined the improvement of some procedures in the course of time:

> There have been many changes over the years. It used to be difficult because you didn't know what they wanted; you had an idea, but you had to go there to find out what documents they wanted. Also, if you didn't know Greek, you had a problem. Now it's better, for example, with the immigration office of the Municipality of Athens (Female, 50).

The presence of an interpreter was also mentioned as vital.

> From my experience as an interpreter, we have to write down what they want, and the employee doesn't even look at it or sends you to another department because they see you as a foreigner. We write them, for example, a message on the office cell phone saying that I want a certified signature, which the person cannot say in either Greek or English, but they don't even read it. When I go with them as an interpreter, they pay attention to me (Male, 33).

Driving license was usually the public service with fewer problems, although assistance from friends or an accountant was also reported. On the other hand embassies or services of the foreign ministry were also described as bureaucratic and exclusionary places.

> I went to the Greek embassy in Lebanon to get a work permit, but the consul there didn't seem to like me and kept asking me for additional documents, even though I had already gathered everything. It took four months. I would go and ask, they would tell me to come back in two weeks, I would go and they would tell me they needed more papers. When the consul left and another girl who they knew from the Emirates came, I got it immediately (Female, 30).

10. Police and justice system

The last theme was that of MRAS's experiences with the justice system and police/ security forces. There were only rare cases of MRAS having to go on trial and those for minor reasons (e.g. not having a driving license) and in these occasions the experience was positive, although there is always the issue of language.

With regard to the police and security forces a completely different story was narrated by many participants, especially men, who were stopped to be checked by the police on the street. As one female interviewee argued:

> I have never been checked on the street because I am an Afghan woman and I don't wear a hijab. You can ask men about this; my friends have had many such experiences. One of my friends was taken two hours away from Athens in a patrol car and left there (Female, 29).

Police control on the streets is a very common story, usually traumatic, especially in some cases where the participant is a refugee tortured in his own country and with very negative experience by his country security forces. In many cases he was delayed from going to his appointment with the psychiatrist, even though he had all his papers, and took him to the police station. They have stopped him eight times and stripped him on the street.

> I have very bad experience with the police. They stop you on the street and tell you to take off your clothes [Greek 'everything, everything'] and put their hands on sensitive areas, without you having done anything

> wrong, they treat you this way, even though you have all your papers. Imagine you've just been to the psychologist and you come out and the police treat you like that. […] When the police treat me this way, I feel sad; people have limits. A refugee is under pressure from many sides, from not being able to find work, from not speaking the language. Imagine a refugee who speaks English and Arabic and still can't find work, so this [the police] is a heavy burden (Male, 48).

At the police station, it's the same. They have taken him there for 1-1.5 hours and then tell him there's nothing, 'go away'. He added that:

> This has very bad consequences for someone with psychological problems. It would be useful to have a card from the state saying that I have psychological problems and for police officers to be trained in how to deal with these people. […] You get scared, anxious [at the police station or after police checks on the street], and then the nightmares you have in your sleep increase. After such an experience, I didn't want to go out, I stayed locked up for almost a year, and when I did go out, I was so afraid that I started wetting myself (Male, 48).

Traumatic experiences were mentioned, primarily by Albanian immigrants, on the borders. Racism was mentioned as the key reason for this treatment. One interviewee narrated that:

> And the border is the worst place for us. I don't know where they found these people, excuse me, but I don't know, are they racists? They talk to you in the worst way, as if you were trash. One they asked me 'Why are you passing [the borders] this time of the day?' It was early in the morning, 'to make things difficult for me? If you didn't have children, you wouldn't be able to cross. You can't cross whenever you want, but whenever I want' (Male, 43).

Another participant narrated an incident at the airport and the bad behaviour of the police.

> They stopped me at the airport when I was returning from Serbia and took me to the airport police station, where I waited and waited, and then, without explaining what was going on, they told me to put my things in a locker and then they put me in a room, and they locked me in. Fortunately, I called my friend because I had 5% battery left and I was crying, and a lawyer found out that my name was on the blacklist and had to be removed, but the person in charge was away. Then I started banging on the door and they told me it was illegal to talk to my lawyer, and I told them that what they were doing was illegal. Later, someone who spoke good English came and explained to me that the problem was that I had gone to a third country and my name was on that list, but I explained to them that I was in transit, I didn't travel. Finally, my friend managed to get my name removed through an acquaintance, and after three hours I was released, but it was a very stressful and traumatic experience without any respect. Then they told me, "Next time, come by and say hello." I was terrified (Female, 29).

It is interesting, though, that some of them when comparing the police in Greece and the police in their country of origin argue that the Greek police is much better. However, this doesn’t stop them of expressing their discontent from the police’s attitude, when they consider it racist and discriminatory. In some cases, control was conducted in a more formal and polite way (Male, 40) so it was not perceived negatively.

At the police station the problem is the language and psychological impact related to their status as immigrants or refugees. One female mentioned:

> Once I went to the department because I didn't have my papers and they checked me on the street, so I called my husband to bring them to me. There was no particular communication at the police station; you were

> there and had to solve it yourself. It was scary, although there was no racist behaviour; they are not interested in you (Female, 50).

Another interviewee narrated that:

> Once, because I was waiting for someone I knew outside a police station, they took me inside, because of the way I look, without giving me a choice, and told me to go into a room for identification, even though I didn't want to. There is also this perception among us that if you enter a police station, you don't know if you will come out or how you will come out. They were absolute on their part and I was worried about what they might focus on, that I am Albanian? That I am a queer person? (Transgender, 22).

Violent incidents were also recalled, mostly witnessed by the participants and not experienced personally.

> When the raids were taking place, I saw a police officer in front of me asking for the papers of someone who had collected some food from the market [Athens]. He tore up his papers, threw him to the ground, started kicking him, and then left. Don't we hear about beatings at police stations? What opinion should you have? [About the police] Stay away from them (Male, 62).

Another remembered when he was in Athens as a tourist and was arrested for no clear reason by covert police officers

> Police, I remember in 1998 I was going to Piraeus, and I was turning around on the Piraeus electric railway, when suddenly someone grabbed me from behind by the shoulder, and because I had done judo professionally, I turned around, grabbed his arm, locked it, and threw him down. And as I threw him down, I shouted, 'Police, police, help' and I turned around and he said, 'I am police' and I said, 'Fuck'. They handcuffed me and took me to a side entrance where there were ten

> other people with the same characteristics, and they took me to the Piraeus police station. And there, no one spoke English. The others they caught were all foreigners and didn't speak Greek or English. I went and told them that I have diabetes in English, I want to talk to the embassy, nothing, no response, they put us in, they pushed us. With this kind of behaviour this is not Europe, it is the Middle East and beyond. And they crammed us all into a huge cell with a large mattress, I can't call it a mattress or a bed, it was filthy inside, one on top of the other, and even if they gave me a million dollars, I wouldn't sleep there. Fortunately, an Albanian spoke a little English, and I explained it to him and he went to tell them and one of them opened the door and went to kick him in the face and luckily I pulled him back, otherwise he would have hit him (Male, 56).

And in another incident, he mentioned that "on Petrou Ralli Street [office for immigrants, someone asked the policeman at the gate, "Excuse me, can I ask you something?" I think it was a Pakistani man, and the police officer knocked him down, and I said to myself, thank goodness I didn't go and ask first (Male, 56).

As it came out from the narrated stories your gender and colour plays a crucial role in police control and behaviour. It is usually men who are controlled on the street and arrested, while women don't face such problems.

11. Discussion and conclusions

The above analysis of MRAS's narratives offers very useful insights and reflections on a number of issues related to their life and integration process in Greek society. Since our sample consisted of immigrants of a wide range of ages and ethnic backgrounds the outcome is a fruitful synthesis of experiences and changes observed from the 1990s to nowadays.

The first and common finding was the language barrier from healthcare sector to education, employment, housing to the communication with social security

and tax services or the police, the language barrier was unanimously underlined even for those who came for studies and they had the opportunity to learn the language very soon. The main two ways to learn the language mentioned was either individually through everyday practice and personal search or via language programmes organised by NGOs and Universities. The state seems to be completely absent from this process, because even when young MRAS attend school problems and a lack of a systematic plan were also mentioned.

Another finding related to racist behaviour in their everyday lives and in particular in their contact with the public sector. Although, there were cases where MRAS knew the language very well racist, explicit or implicit, attitudes were also reported. Racism and discrimination were not rare, but at the same time there was a strong, element of public servants which expressed their solidarity helping them to overcome the barriers they are facing. Participants described a collective stigmatisation experience based on their ethnic background, religion, gender, and/or colour, being as Goffman has argued (2001, 66) both discredited and discreditable. However, social class is a variable we should also not neglect in our analyses (Goffman, 2001, 67) building this way a necessity to embrace an intersectionality approach and do not focus only on ethnicity or religion.

A third finding was that social networks and social capital is a key solution to confront the everyday difficulties with public services. A husband, a friend or a network of friends, an NGO, a church, a relative, a companion, were mentioned as key-figures who offered their assistance and solved many issues raised. As a consequence, following Luhmann (1988) we could argue that while trust among MRAS and with parts of the community seems to be strong confidence in public services is very low due to their experiences. As one interviewee mentioned:

> Of course, I encountered problems [at first because of the language], and there was no internet back then. I used to say that I was lucky to have a friend, otherwise I would have said, "My God, what would I have done?"

> I also had a heavy psychological burden because I couldn't communicate, so it was important that we had someone to help us (Male, 40).

A final finding was that during the previous decades many things have changed in terms of access to public services. Less queues in front of desks, digitalisation, and in some cases better attitudes. However, participants still reported long time of waiting especially abut residence permits, lack of employees to check and respond the online applications, and lack of experienced employees to solve any issue raised fast. That said, it seems that NGOs, lawyers, and accountants are necessary intermediaries where MRAS have to address in order to resolve and surpass the still existing barriers.

To sum up its seems that during the last years, as Bauman argued, MRAS outside of the camps are perceived as annoying and an obstacle, while in the camps they are forgotten by everyone (Bauman, 2005, 130). In order to deal with MRAS outside of the camps the welfare state has been transformed into a 'garrison state' (Giroux, 2002) trying to make their life all the more difficult and unbearable. That means that even if their security is not directly threatened, arbitrary policy changes is another kind of threat, since through these changes they face the danger of arrest, of poverty, and of involuntary and early repatriation (Goldin, Cameron, and Balarajan, 2013, 416).

Based on the above, and despite of the limitations each research has, our research tried to focus on people's experiences in order to use of creative and narrative methods to answer the voices of MRAS as research participants and service users and bring those to the fore particularly in shaping interventions (Callan, Nkhoma, and Thompson, 2025, 5). Such interventions are necessary through an overall design of a national integration plan that Greece lacks already from the first day was transformed to a host country for MRAS.

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Appendix

Thematic axes of interviews/ working group discussions

1. Personal/socio-demographic information

- Gender
- Age
- Nationality/ Country of origin
- Place/District of residence
- Family status
- Number and age of children
- Legal status
- Education

2. Trajectory

- When did you leave your country of origin?
- Why did you leave your country of origin? For economic/political/personal reasons?
- When did you arrive in Greece?
- When you arrived in Greece, how did the authorities treat you?

3. Labour, accommodation, housing

- What is your previous work experience? What did you use to do in your country of origin?

- Have you been working in Greece? In what kind of jobs?
- Have you ever made use of any programme providing employment consulting, e.g. HELIOS?
- What is your current employment status?
- How did you find your current and previous jobs?
- Have you used the services of the Public Employment Service (former OAED, now DYPA)?
- [If yes]

o How did you learn about it?

o For what purpose? (e.g. unemployment benefit, job finding, job training) For how long did you receive it?

- Do you remember the first time you visited OAED/ DYPA? Can you briefly describe it?
- What was your first impression?
- How public servants treated you?
- After that did you have further contacts with OAED/DYPA? If yes, how would you describe your overall experience? (in one word and then expand).
- Can you describe any problems/ obstacles you faced during your contacts with them? Can you name the most important ones (those which caused more problems with you?), How did you feel?
- Is there any specific (remarkable) incident/ experience you would like to share? How did you feel?
- If I asked you to give an image (a depiction) of the services based on your experience, which would that be?

- If possible, would you choose to visit or not visit OAED/DYPA again? Why?
- (If you think it is necessary) Do you have any suggestions that would improve the offered services?
- Which are your current living conditions?
- Have you ever made use of any programme providing employment consulting, e.g. ESTIA?
- Can you describe any problems/ obstacles you faced during your contacts with them (e.g. through the Municipality)? Can you name the most important ones (those which caused more problems with you?), How did you feel?
- Is there any specific (remarkable) incident/ experience you would like to share? How did you feel?
- If I asked you to give an image (a depiction) of the services based on your experience, which would that be?

4. Education

- [Children]

o Have your child/children been attending school?

o What kind of school?

o How long after your arrival were your child/children enrolled?

o How do your child/children cope with school? Do they have any difficulties? What kind of difficulties?

o Do you often contact your child's/children's teachers? How is this communication with your children's teachers? Do you have any difficulties communicating with them?

- How would you describe your experience on education activities? (In one word and then expand)
- Can you describe any problems/ obstacles you faced during your contacts with them? Can you name the most important ones (those which caused more problems with you?). How did you feel?
- Could you describe a remarkable incident during your conctact/participation in the above education activities? How did you feel?
- If I asked you to give an image (depiction) of the services based on your experience, which would that be?
- If possible would you choose to avoid or not contacts with the education system again? Why?
- (If you think it is necessary) Do you have any suggestions that would improve the offered services?

5. Health

- During your stay in Greece have you faced any health issues that need to visit a public medical/health centre or public hospital?
- Do you remember the first time you visited such a medical/health centre/ hospital?
- What was your first impression?
- How public servants treated you?
- How doctors treated you?
- Can you describe any problems/ obstacles you faced during your contacts with them? Can you name the most important ones (those which caused more problems with you?). How did you feel?

- Did you have other contacts with medical/health centres/ hospitals? If yes, how would you describe your overall experience? (with a singe word and then expand).

- Is there any specific (remarkable) incident/ experience you would like to share?

- If I asked you to give an image of the services based on your experience, which would that be?

- If possible would you choose to avoid or not further contacts with the health system again? Why?

- (If you think it is necessary) do you have any suggestions that would improve the offered services?

6. Financial services

- During your stay in Greece have you visited/ used public social/security/financial/tax services?

- Do you remember the first time you visited such a service?

- What was your first impression?

- How public servants treated you?

- Can you describe any problems/ obstacles you faced during your contacts with them? Can you name the most important ones (those which caused more problems with you?). How did you feel?

- After that did you have other contacts with such services? If yes, how would you describe your overall experience? (with a singe word and then expand).

- Is there any specific (remarkable) incident/ experience you would like to share? How did you feel?

- If I asked you to give an image of the services based on your experience, which would that be?
- If possible, would you choose to avoid or not avoid contacts with this kind of services again? Why?
- (If you think it is necessary) Do you have any suggestions that would improve the offered services?

7. Justice, security

- Have you ever been to court for any reason?
- [If yes]
  - How judges treated you?
  - How the other personnel treated you?
  - Did you have access to a translator/interpreter? How did you find him/her?
  - Is there any specific (remarkable) incident/ experience you would like to share? How did you feel?
  - If I asked you to give an image of your experience, which would that be?
- Have you ever had contact with a Police officer?
- [If yes]
  - Where did it happen (on the street, at a Police station)?
  - What was the reason?
  - How did the Police officer(s) treat you?
  - Do you remember a characteristic dialogue with him/her/them?
  - Is there any specific (remarkable) incident/ experience you would like to share? How did you feel?

- If I asked you to give an image of your experience, which would that be?

- Have you ever felt threatened?
- [If yes]
  - By whom/By what?
  - Did you address this to someone? Whom?
  - What happened?
- If possible, would you choose to avoid or not avoid contacts with this kind of services again? Why?
- (If you think it is necessary) Do you have any suggestions that would improve the offered services?