
Implementing Refugee Integration Policies in a Transit Country: The HELIOS Project in Greece

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➤ **Abstract** *This paper examines the social impact of the HELIOS programme which aims at the social integration of refugees in Greece. The Greek state has, for decades, been a transit country that refugees cross to settle in wealthier European countries. Following the EU-Turkey statement, Greece became a country of forced settlement of refugees. The findings of the field research show that the predominance of the neoliberal philosophy of responsible citizenship, the reluctance of refugees to stay in Greece, as well as the shortages in the housing, education, and employment services offered by HELIOS result in an insufficient impact on the social integration of the HELIOS beneficiaries.*

➤ **Keywords** *EU Migration Policy; Responsible Citizenship; Housing; Education; Employability*

Introduction

This article attempts an examination of the HELIOS project (Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection), which has been implemented in Greece since 2019 for the social integration of recognised refugees. Immigrants, Asylum Seekers, and Refugees are considered as a category of homelessness. According to the ETHOS Typology, these populations are classed as ‘houseless’ (immigrants in reception or short-term accommodation due to their immigrant status) (FEANTSA, 2005).

In 2015, the European Union experienced a huge influx of asylum seekers. Accommodation systems for asylum seekers and refugees vary considerably across EU countries: in some countries there are well-developed, whereas other

countries are less developed and may also be inadequate. Some initiatives, like those in Greece, Hungary, and Italy, were struggling to cope with the numbers of people they were being asked to process, though this could reflect both their resource levels – described as inadequate – and the relative scale of demand (European Observatory of Homelessness, 2016).

This paper examines the social impact of the HELIOS programme which aims at the social integration of refugees in Greece. HELIOS is the first organised intervention for the integration of refugees in Greek society, which is especially important given how the increase of refugees in the summer of 2015 created a new imperative for their management by the Greek State (Parsanoglou, 2020). Greece is a country in Southern Europe which for the last three decades has been receiving massive migratory and refugee inflows (Christopoulos, 2020). The Greek State has always dealt with the immigration phenomenon through a philosophy of repression, forcing the immigrant populations to the social margins. The lack of any integration policy for immigrants or refugees resulted in them being housed in poor conditions with severe overcrowding (Kourachanis, 2018a, Papatzani et al., 2021), their inability to access fundamental elements of social integrations, such as Greek learning language or cultural familiarity (Daskalaki et al., 2017), and their being channeled into undeclared work with low wages, high risk, and serious job insecurity (Kapsalis, 2018).

The increase in refugees in 2015 opened a new chapter for the reception policies of immigrant and refugee populations in Greece. This chapter is strongly permeated by the EU's influence on refugee management (Scipioni, 2018). Since the 1990s, EU immigration policy has been marked by the repression of migrants and refugees. The security of the external borders is the main concern of these policies, which are shaped by and implemented under repressive, militarised, and controlling conditions (Kaunert, 2018).

The 2016 EU-Turkey Statement sharpened biopolitical and death policy practices against refugees, establishing hotspots as a central tool of reception and identification services and making it clear that their focus is not on developing social integration but on repression (Dhesi et al., 2018). In the context of the Europeanisation of migration policy, residual social interventions have been strongly intertwined with the control and strengthening of external borders (Balzacq and Carrera, 2006).

The EU's anti-social refugee management policy has intersected with wider cuts in European welfare states, especially after the Great Recession of 2008 (McBride et al., 2016). The prevalence of a neoliberal perception places more emphasis on the responsibilities of the individual to meet their social needs (Clarke, 2005; Lister, 2011). The predominance of the concept of individual responsibility legitimises the resignation of the neoliberal welfare state from the development of social actions to ensure a dignified human life (Kourachanis, 2020). In the context of state social

policy residualisation, significant social actions are organised and funded by supra-national organisations and implemented by local or non-governmental organisations (Williams and Mooney, 2008; Arapoglou and Gounis, 2017).

At the same time, a series of social policy interventions have been shaped according to this individual-centred approach, with the aim of making the beneficiary responsible and of having obligations (Lister, 2011). But this is extremely difficult to achieve for vulnerable groups who have been excluded from the possibility of social participation (Turner, 2016). Fundamental initiatives for social integration are developed according to this spirit. Thus, housing actions often take the form of housing subsidies, entrusting the beneficiaries directly with finding housing and managing housing costs on their own, something that in countries with a residual housing policy does not seem to work (Colburn, 2019). Actions for education take the form of investing in the beneficiary's human capital (Sorgen, 2015) and employability practices are considered to provide the appropriate skills for the beneficiary to be able to look for a job on their own (Lakes, 2011).

In the Greek reality, the tangible policy response for the refugees from 2015 onwards was the formation of a framework for the reception and identification of asylum seekers which had strong elements of repression and anti-social treatment (Christopoulos, 2020). The majority of asylum seekers are accommodated in camps (either in hotspots on the Aegean islands upon arrival, or in the mainland) (Kourachanis, 2018a). The most vulnerable asylum seekers joined the ESTIA programme, which offered housing in social apartments, although without any social integration actions (Kourachanis, 2018b, Papatzani et al., 2021).

Due to the lack of adequate support measures from the Greek State, the refugees rely on informal forms of solidarity, such as migrant networks, for their survival. The role of migrant networks is crucial in adapting and promoting the processes of social integration. This phenomenon is strongly observed during their settlement in urban centres (Kobia and Cranfiel, 2009). Among other things, through the networks, migrants and refugees learn about how to meet their social needs, such as finding housing, access to goods and services, and finding employment in the host society (Beirens et al., 2007).

HELIOS proclaims that it is a programme that aims at developing actions for the social integration of refugees (IOM, 2021a). This programme is being implemented in a country which, until recently, was a transit zone for asylum seekers (Christopoulos, 2020). Several scholars have emphasised that social integration is a two-way process between immigrants and the host society (Berry, 1997). The majority of asylum seekers and refugees consider Greece as a transit country, through which they pass in order to settle permanently in other European countries. HELIOS therefore aims at the social integration of refugees in Greece, at a time

when the majority of them want to settle permanently in more wealthy European countries (Kourachanis, 2018b). Based on these considerations, the following sections describe the characteristics of HELIOS, the field research methodology, the findings, and conclusions, with the aim of providing an initial assessment of the social impact of the project during the first two years of its implementation.

The Characteristics of the HELIOS Project

The HELIOS project started in June 2019 and is implemented throughout Greece under the supervision of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in collaboration with local and non-governmental partners.¹ It is funded by the Directorate-General of the European Commission for Migration and Home Affairs. This is a pilot intervention that aims to support recognised refugees after 01/01/2018 to integrate into Greek society. The programme offers social integration measures such as rental subsidies, integration courses, employability support, and integration monitoring (IOM, 2021a).

More specifically, as mentioned on the official website² of the programme, HELIOS includes the following interventions: first, actions to support the housing of beneficiaries in apartments with a lease in their name with a minimum duration of six months and a maximum of twelve. Second, Integration Courses at Integration Learning Centres (ILCs) lasting six months, including modules related to learning the Greek language, cultural orientation, the degree of readiness for work, and other skills. Third, enhancing employability through the provision of consulting services, access to job-related certifications, and networking with potential employers. In parallel with these actions, procedures are provided to monitor the progress of the integration of the beneficiaries and to raise the awareness of the host communities.

¹ The implementation partners of the HELIOS project were: Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Danish Refugee Council Greece (DRC Greece), Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), Solidarity Now, INTERSOS, Municipality Development Agency Thessaloniki S.A (MDAT), Metadrasi, PLOIGOS, and Social Enterprise of the Municipality of Livadia (KEDIL).

² <https://greece.iom.int/el/hellenic-integration-support-beneficiaries-international-protection-helios>

Table 1: HELIOS Housing Benefits

Household Size	First instalment of the initial disbursement (consists of partial amount of contribution to start-up of independent living)	Second instalment of the initial disbursement (consists of remaining amount of contribution to start-up of independent living plus first month of contribution to rental costs)	Contribution to rental costs provided after the initial disbursement (month two and onwards)
	Released upon submission of lease agreement and other documents	Released upon confirmation of exit from Reception System and proof of payment of the first rent	Released monthly upon proof of payment of rental costs
1	€301	€301	€162
2	€569.50	€569.50	€309
3	€688	€688	€396
4 to 5	€838	€838	€504
6+	€1 060	€1 060	€630

Source: IOM (2021a)

According to the available statistics from the HELIOS Factsheet, by December 10, 2021, 33 889 beneficiaries had participated in the programme, coming mainly from camps (36.61% from sites and 17.05% from reception and identification centres) and from the ESTIA programme (32.23%). The countries of origin of the beneficiaries are mainly the Syrian Arab Republic (34.5%), Afghanistan (33.6%), and Iraq (12.2%); 54% of the beneficiaries are men and 46% are women. The geographical distribution of the beneficiaries with lease agreements per region is mainly in Attica (51.2%), Central Macedonia (18.73%), and Crete (6.45%). There have been 6 459 enrolments in Integration Courses and 6 945 job counselling sessions (IOM, 2021b) in the field of employability.

Field Research Methodology

The focus of the field research was the analysis of the social impact of HELIOS through the perceptions and experiences of the staff involved in the implementation of the programme. For this purpose, the development of quality research methods was chosen and, more specifically, the preparation of semi-structured interviews with representatives of the partners at a local and non-governmental level. The main criterion used in the selection of the respondents was to ensure the greatest possible representation of the agencies involved in the implementation of the HELIOS project. This method was adopted so that the respondents could be directed by the researcher in key areas related to the discussion, thus enabling them to develop their views (Robson, 2002).

The main axes of the interview guide were related to the philosophy and characteristics of the HELIOS program, as well as the description of the main strengths and weaknesses of the rent subsidy, integration courses, and employability actions. Based on these findings, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of partners involved in the implementation phase and working in the Integration Learning Centres (ILCs) who are responsible for the implementation of HELIOS throughout Greece. Specifically, four interviews were conducted with ILCs' coordinators, three with accommodation support officers, two with integration courses officers, two with employability support officers, and three with integration monitoring officers. The results of the field research are presented below.

Field Research Findings

HELIOS innovative elements

A first point that emerges from the comments of the interviewees is the elements of innovation that characterise HELIOS. Although Greece has been a host country for migrant populations for three decades, until recently it did not have a structured social integration programme (Kourachanis, 2018b). The fact that the implementation of the programme is carried out by an international organisation and by municipalities and NGOs highlights the consequences of devolution (Williams and Mooney, 2008), as well as the significant deficits of state social policy in Greece (Dimoulas and Kouzis, 2018).

Clearly the existence of these programmes run by the international organisations is a result of the non-existence of social policy in Greece. I can imagine such a programme from an international organisation in Turkey or Jordan, but I cannot imagine it in Sweden or Germany. (ILC Coordinator)

The planning and implementation of the HELIOS programme is an original action that indirectly emphasises the significant delays in the social integration policies of the Greek State. In particular, the originality of the programme is that it combines actions that cover important social needs of refugees (rent subsidy, learning the Greek language, preparation for entry into the Greek labour market). Similar projects have only recently been implemented for other groups suffering from extreme poverty in Greece, such as the homeless (Kourachanis, 2017), yet there have still only been a few such projects.

At the planning level, there is no corresponding programme in Greece that is responsible for the integration of recognised refugees. They have the opportunity to rent their own house for a while and to learn Greek and get acquainted with Greek culture and the Greek labour market. (ILC Integration Monitor Officer)

Emphasis on individual responsibility coexists with deficiencies in social benefits

HELIOS places great emphasis on the individual responsibility of refugees. Previous housing programmes, such as ESTIA, were criticised for the passivation of beneficiaries, as they did not include social integration policies (Kourachanis, 2018b). According to the interviewees, HELIOS leaves the beneficiaries completely free to fulfil all the requirements. They are responsible for looking for and finding the apartment to rent, while the lease agreement will be in their own name, as will all the household bills. At the same time, they must attend Greek language courses, as well as job counselling seminars to enhance their skills so that they can seek work on their own. The plan of the programme is very reminiscent of the logic of responsible citizenship (Lister, 2011), the fulfilment of which, however, is extremely demanding for people with increased vulnerability (Turner, 2016).

First, the beneficiary has to find a home. When he finds it, he has compulsory Greek lessons and must attend job counselling courses. They fall into a pattern of having to deal with their residence permit and official documents themselves, pay their bills, go to the services on their own. (ILC Coordinator)

The prospects of the successful fulfilment of the obligations borne by the beneficiaries upon their entry into HELIOS are made even more difficult by two important factors. The first is the lack of preparatory procedures for their entry into HELIOS and the second is the very low levels of social benefits offered by the programme itself.

According to the informants, the refugees have not learned how to look for a home on their own and they are not familiar with interacting with the Greek public administration and social services on their own. Such skills had not been developed during their stay in the camps or in ESTIA as asylum seekers (Kourachanis, 2018a; 2018b).

This population is not ready from the previous programmes they were on to know how to act on their own. How easy it is to find a home in Athens now, especially if you are a refugee? And how easily can you combine learning the Greek language and finding a job in Greece in six months? (ILC Integration Monitor Officer)

The informants see the financial and temporal aspects of HELIOS as insufficient. The total number of beneficiaries of the programme is considered extremely limited compared to the total number of recognised refugees in Greece. By December 10, 2021, a total of 33 889 beneficiaries had registered on the programme (IOM, 2021b), while a total of 85 371 (65 589 as refugees and 19 782 as beneficiaries of subsidiary protection) were recognised as refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection in the same period (January 2018 to November 2021) and a total of 98 544 since 2016 (77 424 as refugees and 21 120 as beneficiaries of subsidiary protection)

(Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 2021). It is therefore estimated that only about 30% of all recognised refugees have been HELIOS beneficiaries. Equally negative for them are the level of the rent subsidy, as well as the timing of the programme. These two points usually lead, as will be discussed below, to the refugees being settled in poor housing conditions with severe overcrowding.

HELIOS was meant to be a vehicle to exit ESTIA. In order for people to leave ESTIA they were told that HELIOS would take place. It also did not have the capacity to receive the population housed in ESTIA (once their numbers had reached 27 000). In proportion to the number of recognised refugees, only a small section become beneficiaries on HELIOS. (ILC Integration Monitor Officer)

The allowances are very low. They are not enough for someone to live alone. For this reason, many people are forced to live together or even many families together. (Accommodation Support Officer)

Refugees are not interested in joining HELIOS: The “German Dream”

The inadequate social benefits of HELIOS do not seem to be the main reason for the lack of interest on the part of the refugees in benefitting from it. From the answers given by the interviewees, it appears that the refugees are not interested in participating in a Greek social integration programme as their desire is to settle in other, more economically developed, European countries (Christopoulos, 2020).

The majority of refugees see Greece as a transit country from which they will leave as soon as the right opportunity is found (Kourachanis, 2018b). The discouragement of their participation in HELIOS stems from reasons related to their intention to relocate to another European country. One reason is the rumour that if they register on the HELIOS programme, then they lose any chance of moving to another European country. In other cases, refugees who have reached the end of their maximum stay in the camps and the ESTIA program, end up joining HELIOS for a short period of time, so that they have somewhere to stay until they leave for abroad. Finally, some refugees register with HELIOS so that they will receive the first instalments of the rent subsidy, after which they then leave for abroad without notice.

Leaving Greece directly to go to Germany is the main goal of refugees as soon as they become refugees, so they are not interested in joining a programme to integrate into Greek society. Even those who enter HELIOS tell us clearly: we entered the programme to get the rent subsidy until we leave for another country. (ILC Coordinator)

There was fake news that the registration of recognised refugees in HELIOS would prevent them from going abroad. Second, many beneficiaries agreed to a fictitious rent contract to get a down payment of the rent allowance and then they went abroad. (ILC Integration Monitor Officer)

The above findings are strongly reminiscent of the two-way process of social integration (Berry, 1997). The will of the subjects themselves and their intention or not to remain in the host society are very important aspects for the successful achievement of social integration policies.

***Assessing the HELIOS Pillars:
Rent subsidy – integration courses – employability***

The findings regarding the three pillars of HELIOS show that in its current form it does not contribute adequately to the beneficiaries' prospects of social integration. More specifically, the low level of rent subsidy forces refugees to be housed in poor housing conditions and, often, forces them to live in overcrowded conditions with other compatriots. Greek language courses, although an important activity, do not interest the beneficiaries as most want to settle in wealthier countries. The pillar of employability does not substantially contribute to the labour market integration of refugees, leading them to be channeled into undeclared, unskilled, and dangerous jobs in sectors where the Greek economy needs a cheap labour force. This set of dimensions is analysed below.

Rent subsidy

The housing subsidy is the starting point for activating the programme for each beneficiary, as it is followed by the other actions. In order to receive the allowance, the beneficiaries are required to look for and find an apartment that they can manage at their own risk. The most important aspects of this dimension are the geographical location, the methods used to find a home, and, finally, the conditions of the housing which they will eventually occupy.

The interviews show that the beneficiaries look for housing exclusively in urban centres. This phenomenon is observed both for the metropolitan areas and for the provincial cities. This dimension is very apparent in the area of Athens, which is the main focus of the search for housing by HELIOS beneficiaries. The refugees usually look for apartments in areas that already dangerous jobs previously settled migrant and refugee populations, such as Omonia Square, Victoria Square, Kypseli, and Patisia. These are areas where cheaper apartments are located and many ethnic businesses operate, such as grocery stores, restaurants, and other shops offering

basic necessities. This enables refugees to find products of their choice, such as food at cheap prices and, at the same time, to enjoy the informal solidarity of migrant networks.

At the same time, due to the high level of social marginalisation that is concentrated within them, many NGOs are active in these areas, offering support to vulnerable groups, such as medical care and psychosocial support services. The refugees can therefore turn to these organisations to meet any of their fundamental social needs. Also, since they are located in city centre areas, it is easier for them to travel by public transport as well as to look for work from here. Finally, an equally important criterion for searching for an apartment in the city centre is their immediate access to Athens International Airport in order to travel abroad, as discussed in the previous section.

Usually, the refugees choose to stay in the centre of Athens and mainly in areas where other migrants already live, so that there are ethnic shops, migrant networks, as well as social services. They also find work through migrant networks, to earn an income. They are also able to move easily with public transport. Finally, it is very important that they want to be in Athens in order to have direct access to the airport to escape abroad. (ILC Accommodation Support Officer)

The above testimony recalls the crucial role of migrant networks for the provision of support and solidarity within their community (Beirens et al., 2007). This parameter seems to be very important for finding housing under the HELIOS programme, as information on available and affordable housing is obtained through them. Also, the important role played by the settlement of refugees in urban centres in terms of their labour and social integration is strongly emphasised (Kobia and Cranfield, 2009).

Of particular interest are the findings on the methods and strategies developed by HELIOS beneficiaries to find housing. Within the programme, a special online platform has been created called “HELIOS Home”, where various apartment owners can register and advertise their property for rent to the refugees. This platform is intended as a support for refugees seeking housing, as this is their individual responsibility. The interviews showed, however, that the “HELIOS Home” platform contributes little to the housing of refugees, as few advertisements are registered and the rents are considered very high for the quality of the apartments on offer. Thus, the main way in which the beneficiaries of the programme find housing is through informal channels. In this case, too, migrant networks perform the most important functions of disseminating information about available affordable apartments for rent (Beirens et al., 2007). The beneficiaries communicate with their compatriots to find apartments through personal contacts and through special online groups on social media, such as on Facebook. In addition, it is often the case

that the migrant networks end up hosting a compatriot, for a small financial contribution, until they manage to find a better apartment. These informal communication and housing practices are prevalent.

Although there is a programme website (“HELIOS Home”) that includes apartments available for rent to refugees and is also supported by the programme staff, the beneficiaries mainly get information and find homes through the migrant networks. The site has only a few and expensive apartments. Whereas, from the migrant networks they can find cheap housing or they will find compatriots to share the expenses. (ILC Accommodation Support Officer)

With the implementation of HELIOS in provincial cities, such as in Crete and Larissa, it seems that the main goal of the refugees is to rent a house in the city centre. This is attributed by the interviewees to reasons similar to those of Athens, namely that there is easier access to social services, they are better networked and receive more support from migrant networks, they can find the products they need more easily and at better prices, and they also do not have to travel long distances, as in the provinces public transport can be very limited and tickets are expensive. Finally, the preference for city centres in the provinces is always connected to the need to be able to easily reach a port or airport, in order to travel abroad.

At HELIOS most refugees prefer to find a home in the centre of the provincial town, as it is close to the asylum service and other social services and is also close to the port, so can leave whenever they want for Athens, or get on a plane and go to another country. (ILC Integration Monitor Officer)

The methods that the refugees use to find housing in the provinces appear to follow the same pattern as those in Athens, although it seems that here the conditions are more controlled. The beneficiaries of the programme search in areas where their compatriots live and small or large migrant communities have already been created, in order to enjoy the security of mutual support. To a large extent, they learn about available accommodation from their compatriots, either through personal contacts or through social media. However, in the case of the provincial towns, there are stronger personal contacts with both the local community and the HELIOS staff. HELIOS staff in small towns are personally acquainted with the staff of other municipal social services and other agencies. Also, they are responsible for a smaller number of beneficiaries compared to the programme in Athens. This gives them a great opportunity to mediate in order to locate apartments for rent or to resolve any problems that may arise. Thus, in the case of provincial cities, there are opportunities for easier and faster renting of houses for the beneficiaries.

In the provinces, the HELIOS staff are more involved and offer greater support to the beneficiaries. In small towns, the social relationships and contacts are closer. Although the programme does not provide case management, there are no NGOs and there are not enough interpreters to assist the beneficiaries. The staff therefore turn to social services through their personal contacts, to support them. (ILC Coordinator)

The last dimension that emerges from the findings of the interviews regarding the effect of the rent subsidy is related to the housing conditions that the HELIOS beneficiaries find themselves in. In all the evidence available, there is a common assumption that the conditions of the apartments they rent are extremely poor. This is primarily due to the low level of rent subsidy, which does not allow them to find accommodation that offers decent housing conditions; after all, the programme itself does not set any minimum standards for the apartments to be rented. The financial inadequacy of the housing allowance has two main negative consequences. First, the rented houses are old and the buildings in poor condition. Second, the phenomenon of overcrowding is very common as refugee families are forced to live together in order to manage housing costs (Kourachanis, 2018b).

The houses that are rented by almost all the beneficiaries are old and in poor condition. They can be basements, on the ground floor or, at most, apartments on the first floor. (ILC Accommodation Support Officer)

There are no minimum specifications on what house they will rent. They can rent any house they want. But when the criteria are to be cheap and close to the town centre, then it is definitely not adequate housing. It will usually be in a small house. It can be a house of 40 sq.m. with five people living inside: parents with three children for example. And in fact, in areas, such as Kypseli or Omonia. (ILC Accommodation Support Officer)

I have come across cases where two or three families live in the same house together. I have come across other cases where they have gone to stay in the same house informally and other people who whose own HELIOS allowance has expired also stay there because they have nowhere else to go. (ILC Integration Monitor Officer)

From the above testimonies, it can be seen that there are significant inadequacies in the housing dimension provided to HELIOS beneficiaries. The level of the rent subsidy is low, as a result of which the beneficiaries settle in apartments with poor housing conditions, forced cohabitation, and overcrowding. Below are the findings for the integration courses and employability actions.

Integration courses

The HELIOS staff commented that the Greek language courses are the most beneficial intervention provided by the programme. Knowledge of the language of the host society is considered a valuable integration factor as it can free refugees in their day-to-day dealings with public services, their interactions in their neighbourhood and with locals, and significantly strengthen their prospects for labour market and social participation (Sorgen, 2015). This action acquires added value if we bear in mind that it is the first organised educational intervention for the teaching of Greek to foreign adult populations. The framing of the Greek language courses with additional soft skills acquisition actions relating to the Greek way of life and human rights seems to offer substantial support.

I would describe HELIOS as a school. Because education is the only pillar of the programme that can really benefit them, as they enter into the mandatory programme logic – three-hour lessons every day. And soft skills courses are positive in terms of learning to live in Greece. (ILC Integration Courses Officer)

The field research revealed several factors that during the implementation phase seem to weaken this interesting action. The main issue is related to what was mentioned in the previous section. The beneficiaries are opposed to the prospect of compulsory Greek language courses, as they wish to leave Greece. As a result, they do not want to spend three hours a day in class. The result of this reluctance is that only a very small part of the beneficiaries enter the process of learning Greek. The majority of the trainees only took the education courses because they are a mandatory HELIOS action.

There is no desire to learn Greek. Most refugees want to go abroad, so they do not want to invest in learning Greek. Most clearly say that I would like to get my travel documents and leave Greece. All this together leads to the fact that they do not want to learn Greek. So they do it solely to get the rent subsidy. (ILC Integration Courses Officer)

Some weaknesses in the design of the Greek courses were pointed out by a member of staff responsible for the educational pillar of HELIOS. The most important relates to the lack of teacher trainer and, moreover, to training in an intercultural education approach. This oral testimony states that the programme instructors simply followed the guidelines in a handbook and did not attend intensive seminars on how to teach the Greek language to foreigners.

There was no expert in intercultural education who did the language and educational planning, trained the educators and monitored the implementation of integration courses. The educators were just following a handbook. They were not properly prepared for intercultural adult education. It was a fundamental shortcoming of the language curriculum. (ILC Integration Courses Officer)

The Covid-19 pandemic further weakened the prospects for the usefulness of educational activities, as lessons were now conducted remotely. This created additional problems. Many beneficiaries did not have laptops or internet access to attend the lessons and the possibility of direct interaction between teacher and trainee in the classroom was lost. The educational process was further degraded.

Employability

The action that completes the range of HELIOS pillars is that of employability. This is a process that aims to familiarise the beneficiaries of the programme with the Greek labour market. The philosophy of the intervention is not to offer a job but to teach refugees how to look for employment. It is therefore a counselling process that aims at the capacity of refugees to be employable (Bagavos and Kourachanis, 2021), in order to achieve their own labour market integration (Lakes, 2011). In this context, the main dimensions are actions such as learning to write a CV or preparing for an interview to fill a job vacancy.

The programme does not find you a job. It teaches you how to look for a job. (Employability Support Officer)

The interviewees noted that job counselling in fact has a limited social impact. It appears that the specific means and tools used (curriculum vitae, interview) are not enough to create a sufficient matching between the skills of the refugees and the Greek labour market. On the contrary, the absence of mechanisms for channelling the beneficiaries to those sectors of the labour market that match their qualifications results in their placement in areas of the Greek economy that need a cheap workforce.

Basically, the employability activities teach them how to write a CV and how to talk in a job interview. However, the majority of them are channeled into low-paid, unskilled jobs. (Employability Support Officer)

There are rigidities in employability. The logic of promoting refugees in the labour market based on their skills doesn't exist, instead they end up working in undeclared work (for example, agricultural work). Employability activities end up not having any substantial effect on the employment of refugees. (Employability Support Officer)

Regarding employability, the employment consultants make informal attempts to reach out to employers who are looking for employees for their companies. The interviews show that the interest mainly comes from those offering jobs in the unskilled, poorly paid, uninsured, and precarious jobs in sectors of the Greek economy who want to take advantage of cheap labour, such as immigrants and refugees. In this way, the recognised refugees of HELIOS end up being channeled into the same sectors of the labour market into which the immigrant labour force has traditionally been channeled into in Greece for the last three decades. That is, in areas such as restaurants, tourism, agricultural work, and personal social care services (Kapsalis, 2018).

Through a platform an employer can contact us to ask for employees. Those who have a professional background will not find a job in their field. They only find unskilled jobs. (Employability Support Officer)

Beneficiaries usually manage to find jobs, for the men, in sectors like agriculture, restaurants, hotels and, the women, in domestic social care services: care of the elderly or babies or cleaning. I will never forget the phrase that a restaurant owner said to me, when we were in communication to find a job for our beneficiaries: “In customer service I want Greek employees, and in the kitchen and cleaning I want refugees.” (Employability Support Officer)

Conclusions

The objective of this research was to examine the social impact of HELIOS after two years of its operation. Its planning and implementation have taken place within the structural environment of a neoliberal welfare state and repressive migration policy that prevail as fundamental components of the EU policy and which the Greek State embraces for the management of social problems. Fundamental dimensions such as individual responsibility, social policy privatisation, and neoliberal actions such as housing benefits for the extreme poor, investment in human capital, and employability are found in the philosophy of this programme.

More specifically, HELIOS is the first organised intervention for the social integration of refugees in Greece, although this is a country that has been receiving large numbers of immigrants and refugees in the last three decades. The fact that this initiative was designed by an international organisation and implemented by local and non-governmental organisations is further proof of the structural inadequacies of the social policy of the Greek State for ensuring a dignified life for population groups experiencing extreme social marginalisation, such as refugees. This programme is therefore a welcome start, after decades of delays.

The findings of the field research show that HELIOS does not significantly contribute to the social integration of refugees. This is due to reasons related to the philosophy of the programme, the will of the beneficiaries, but also to inadequacies in the planning and implementation of its specific social actions.

HELIOS was originally designed as a short-term programme based on a philosophy that emphasises individual responsibility. A prerequisite of the programme is that beneficiaries carry out the necessary administrative procedures themselves, without receiving corresponding support actions from the host programmes (such as ESTIA or, even more so, accommodation in camps) and, mainly, without having learned the Greek language. This, combined with its limited duration (usually six months), makes any beneficial effect difficult to achieve.

The prospect of social integration is significantly hampered by the reluctance of refugees to stay permanently in Greece. Greece is a transit country for refugees, who aim to settle in European countries with higher levels of development. They are therefore not interested in participating in a social integration programme, except to temporarily benefit from its social actions. This situation leads to their nominal participation in the actions of HELIOS, with the consequence that the benefits of such social support diminish.

The above two dimensions interact negatively with the obvious social inadequacies of the specific pillars of HELIOS. The amount of the rent subsidy is extremely low, especially in a period when housing costs in the Greek rental market have increased greatly, with the result that the beneficiaries settle in apartments with poor housing conditions, forced cohabitation, and overcrowding. The choice not to include organised support in for finding a home in the design of HELIOS, forces the refugees to seek apartments through migrant networks, which are the main mechanism of informal solidarity and support. The inadequacy of the housing allowance is also highlighted by the fact that once it expires, many refugees are informally accommodated in the homes of their compatriots or return to the camps where they lived, or they manage to move to another European country.

The pillar of Greek language learning is the most fruitful aspect of HELIOS. This is the first organised action for teaching Greek to adult refugees and it can effectively promote the project of social integration. However, the intention of the refugees not to stay permanently in Greece, quite reasonably makes them reluctant to attend classes.

Finally, the pillar of employability does not seem to be synchronised with the real needs of the refugees and the reality of the Greek labour market. There is no organised effort to connect their skills to their occupational prospects in Greece. In contrast, limited work counselling tools, such as a narrow focus on learning how

to write a curriculum vitae or prepare for a job interview, have no social impact. Due to the structural deficiencies of the employability pillar the vast majority of refugees end up being channeled into unskilled, poorly paid, uninsured, and precarious jobs in sectors of the Greek economy that employ a cheap workforce, such as restaurants or personal social care services.

In conclusion, although HELIOS is ostensibly presented as a social integration programme, it actually seems to contribute to the welfare marginalisation of refugees by following the paths of previous interventions (such as camp accommodation and the ESTIA programme). It is therefore another intervention that is fully linked to the deterrent nature of EU immigration policy. The inadequacy of the social benefits from HELIOS forces refugees to seek support from migrant networks or to be channeled into undeclared employment until they can emigrate to the European country they wish to settle in. It is therefore a programme that mainly aims to extend the stay of refugees in a transit country, such as Greece, rather than their social integration into it.

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