

Radicalization Dynamics In Refugee Camps: Analyzing The Situation In Greece And Research Directions For Romania

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Abstract: This research paper explores the potential of radicalization among Muslims living in refugee camps. Using qualitative analysis based on informal discussions with staff from the Schisto and Malakasa camps in Greece, this study provides insights into the factors that may contribute to radicalization in these environments.

The aforementioned field research, conducted during an international study program at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, highlights the complex interaction of a multitude of psychological, economic, and social factors faced by refugees. These factors may create conditions conducive to radicalization as individuals grapple with uncertainty, identity crises, and various obstacles—such as physical and mental health challenges, human trafficking, and more—encountered during their journey to destinations offering better living conditions.

Additionally, this study aims to compare the structure of the refugee reception systems in Greece—a country with a long tradition in this regard—and Romania, which could become a preferred destination in the future.

By examining these dynamics in Greek refugee camps, this paper aims to provide a framework for understanding similar risks that may emerge in Romanian camps, thereby contributing to a better understanding of refugee management and the counter-radicalization strategies developed by public administration.

Keywords: radicalization, Muslims, refugees, crises, public administration, authorities.

JEL: M100

1. Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the complexity and dynamics of the relationship between refugees and radicalization, offering a comparative perspective on two distinct country contexts: Greece and Romania. The opportunity for the fieldwork was provided by a course at the National and Kapodistrian University in Athens, where I studied the subject of refugees, especially those arriving in Greece.

My research question for this paper is: "What causes refugees to become radicalized?" This question is central to understanding the mechanisms and factors that contribute to radicalization, a phenomenon with major implications for social security and stability.

2. Literature review

Refugee crises are driven by a combination of political, social, economic, and environmental factors. According to UNHCR (n.d. (a)), the main reason armed conflicts and wars, which cause millions of people to leave their homes in search of safety. Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Yemen have caused massive displacement of populations.

Another major cause of refugee crises is political instability and oppression, where authoritarian regimes repress dissent and violate human rights, causing a mass exodus such as the Arab Spring. The latter began on December 17, 2010 in Tunisia, when Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit seller, committed suicide in protest after the police confiscated his goods and the government authorities rejected his complaint. This tragic gesture was the spark that started the popular revolt, caused primarily by the lack of decent living conditions, the high rate of unemployment, and the suppression of individual freedoms. As Elfatih Abdelasam (2015) and Cioculescu (2017) pointed out, these factors subsequently led to illegal migration.

Last but not least, systemic inequalities and injustices, including ethnic tensions, discrimination and marginalization, contribute to the displacement of vulnerable populations. Minorities, indigenous peoples, and marginalized groups often bear the consequences of violence.

In the table below, the International Organization for Migrants provides worldwide comparative figures in 2000 and 2022 for migrants as well as refugees and internally displaced persons, offering a glimpse of the changes over this period:

	2000	2022
Estimated number of international migrants	173 million	281 million
Estimated proportion of world population who are migrants	2.8%	3.6%
Estimated proportion of female international migrants	49.4%	48.0%
Estimated proportion of international migrants who are children	16.0%	14.6%
Region with the highest proportion of international migrants	Oceania	Oceania
Country with the highest proportion of international migrants	United Arab Emirates	United Arab Emirates
Number of migrant workers	–	169 million
Global international remittances (USD)	128 billion	702 billion
Number of refugees	14 million	26.4 million
Number of internally displaced persons	21 million	55 million

Source: International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2022.

The numerical data highlight that while some trends (the percentage of female international migrants and the overall percentage of the world's population who were migrants) have remained fairly constant, others (such as international remittances, which consist in a sum of money usually being sent by migrants to their family back home) have undergone dramatic changes. For example, international remittances increased from about \$128 billion to \$702 billion, underscoring the importance of international migration as a driver of development.

Also, according to the International Institute for Migration (2022), global international migration has increased by around 87%, the number of refugees by around 89%, and that of internally displaced persons by around 160%

Trauma experienced by refugees - potential factors of radicalization?

Refugees are considered to hold an intangible baggage consisting of their past experiences, grievances, social networks, and possibilities for mobilization. Eleftheriadou (2019), in her study on the potential for radicalization among refugees in Greece, states that some of these experiences are formed since leaving the country of origin, they interconnect with new ones, throughout the process of displacement and accompany them even to the destination, a place where one would assume they have to reshape their destiny.

Although an accumulation of psychological, economic, social and other factors can determine, in certain contexts, the radicalization of some individuals, the literature claims that this is not always the case. Other factors are important. According to Sude et al. (2015), in all the cases they analyzed where radical groups emerged among the refugees, the host states were inconsistent in terms of administering coherent policies for the treatment of refugees

Radicalization, associated with political violence, does not have a universally accepted definition, but is recognized as a process that occurs "before the bomb explodes." Although often attributed to personal traits and processes such as self-radicalization via the Internet, research shows that there is no distinct terrorist personality, suggesting that the motives lie at individual, group and societal levels, as stated by Vidino Lorenzo (2010).

Discussions of refugees contrast with those of radicalization in their emphasis on structural factors. According to Eleftheriadou (2018), refugees are seen both as victims of war requiring humanitarian aid and as active participants in conflicts. Negative coping mechanisms are common and the opportunity costs of joining rebel groups are lower. Pressures on public administration and infrastructure in host countries increase local grievances and exacerbate intercommunal tensions, often leading to increased violence and conflict inside camps.

The involvement of refugees in military conflicts in their country of origin affects 15% of crises generated by the phenomenon of radicalization, according to Eleftheriadou (2020), and can amplify violence in host countries, influenced by demographic changes and limited resources. However, refugee-related violence is concentrated in a minority of host states.

Refugee radicalization factors include socioeconomic issues and the roles of external actors. These factors have been examined at the individual, group, and societal levels.

At the micro level, radicalization unfolds around the individual, being influenced by personal experiences and feelings of injustice and discrimination. According to McCauley & Moskalkenko (2008), the belief in personal victimization can turn into a desire for revenge manifested through violent actions.

At the meso level, radicalization is supported by a radical environment that can act as a conveyor belt. While self-radicalization is rare, association with a radical organization or group of “followers” is common. Neumann (2016) notes that, in some contexts, Salafist subculture, for example, plays an important role in contemporary radicalization, although not all members of this culture become militants.

At the macro level, radicalization has a structural character, influenced by systemic and environmental factors. This process is reciprocal, affecting both radicalizations and the host society, which adopts more extreme attitudes. According to Sageman (2017), radicalization is linked to “lack of opportunity for political participation” and “general disillusionment with peaceful means of political protest,” making violence a choice of “last resort.”

The procedure regarding the reception and assistance of asylum seekers in Romania and Greece.

According to the Geneva Convention (1951), “As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

In order to be legally recognized as refugees, according to the European Commission (2024), individuals must apply for asylum in the state where they arrived, benefiting from the protection provided by the Geneva Convention. An important recent event in this context took place on 10 April 2024, when the European Parliament voted on the new migration rules, formally adopted by the EU Council on 14 May 2024. These rules allow the EU to tackle complex migration issues by securing external borders, guaranteeing human rights and a fair distribution of migration pressure between member states.

The Migration and Asylum Pact, part of these new rules, aims to manage migration and establish a common asylum system at EU level, delivering results and being based on European values. The European Union believes that the pact will strengthen and integrate key EU policies on migration, asylum, border management and integration.

The refugee system in Romania

In Romania, the asylum request can be addressed to the Border Police or the General Inspectorate for Immigration (IGI). Asylum applications are evaluated and resolved by the IGI and according to UNHCR (n.d. (b)), from the moment of application, people are considered asylum seekers and cannot be deported.

According to IGI (2022), the application process includes completing questionnaires and two interviews. The first interview details the reasons for leaving the country of origin and the journey to Romania, and in the second the applicant provides detailed information about fears, traumas and reasons for leaving, supported by relevant documents.

In addition to asylum status, Romania grants temporary protection, a rapid response to the

massive flow of displaced persons, ensuring immediate access to assistance. A subsidiary protection is also granted for those who do not meet the criteria for refugee status but are at risk of serious harm in their country of origin, such as torture or inhumane treatment.

Tolerable status is granted, according to the USA Embassy in Romania (2022), to those who do not meet the conditions for refugee status or subsidiary protection, but cannot be repatriated for various reasons. People with this status can work, but do not benefit from other provisions regarding social protection or inclusion.

At the level of the Romanian state, Law (122/2006) establishes the legal regime for foreigners seeking protection in Romania, the procedures for granting, terminating and canceling protection, as well as the procedure for determining the member state responsible for analyzing the asylum application.

Art.2. of this legislative act states that the assistance offered to applicants for international protection, which includes accommodation, food, hygiene and maintenance materials, clothing and footwear, as well as transport, can be provided in the form of goods, financial allowances or vouchers, or through a combination of these methods, according to the conditions established by a decision of the Government.

It should also be mentioned that in the following situations their abovementioned rights may be limited or withdrawn:

- a) if the applicant for international protection leaves the residence without prior notification to the regional center for procedures and accommodation for asylum seekers;
- b) if the applicant for international protection does not comply with the obligation to appear at the request of the General Inspectorate for Immigration to provide information or does not appear at appointments related to the asylum procedure, about which he was informed;
- c) if the applicant for international protection repeatedly violates the internal rules of the regional center for procedures and accommodation for asylum seekers.

The refugee system in Greece

According to Refugee Info Greece (n.d.) and to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum (n.d.), in Greece, asylum seekers must submit their application to the Greek Asylum Service. In addition to refugee status, subsidiary protection is also available. The check-in process varies depending on the place of arrival:

A. Arrival on the islands

- Applications for international protection are submitted at reception and identification centers or closed controlled access centers on the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos.
- Refugees go through reception and identification procedures, including nationality checks, medical tests and fingerprinting.
- The border procedure (a swift evaluation at the EU's external frontiers of whether applications are baseless or unacceptable) applies for a maximum duration of 25 days and includes applicants from the islands, except for the vulnerable, who may be exempted.

B. Arrival on the mainland

- ▶ Persons arriving on the mainland are transferred to the Reception and Identification Center in Filakio to submit their asylum application and undergo reception procedures.
- ▶ Those who have not registered their applications at a specific center can make an appointment for registration through the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, being later informed that they must live at the registration unit until the process is completed.

The procedure for obtaining asylum seeker status is as follows. After registering their asylum application, applicants are scheduled for an interview with the Asylum Service, which may include an 'admissibility interview' and subsequently an 'eligibility interview'. Asylum decisions are communicated either in person, by post, or by e-mail. In case of a positive result, applicants receive a residence permit and can apply for family reunification. In case of a negative result, applicants can appeal the decision within 30 days. If the decision remains negative, they can be detained and deported if they do not leave Greece voluntarily.

3. Comparison of refugee regimes in Romania and Greece

Regarding the research method used in this study, I used informal discussions with the staff of the refugee camps located near Athens, Schisto and Malakasa, which I had the opportunity to visit in April of this year.

The Facility for Temporary Accommodation of Asylum Seekers in Schisto

Schisto is one of the 54 accommodation centers for asylum seekers in Greece, with a capacity of approximately 2000 people. Most of the inhabitants are Syrians, Afghans, Iranians and Cameroonians. The center is located far from urban agglomerations and has limited access to public transport, which makes it difficult for refugees to travel to procure daily necessities and access medical services.

Given that refugees receive insufficient financial support, according to UNHCR (n.d. (c)) - 76 euros per month if they are accommodated in a camp where food is provided and 150 euros per month if food is not provided in the camp to cover transport costs -, and in light of the negative stereotypes in society, the use of public transport is complicated. Tenants have to walk long distances to reach cities.

The camp is home to vulnerable groups, including children and women, but security is limited due to low police numbers. Refugees are accommodated in containers and sanitary standards are respected. Facilities include a first aid center, a cultural center for women and an educational container for children, assisted by UNICEF and UNHCR.

Conflicts between residents, especially between members of the same nationality, are not uncommon (but I received no additional details on their actual frequency) due to limited resources and to differences in beliefs or ideologies. In the camp there is a mosque for Muslim refugees, who can express their faith within the established limits.

In the past, there have been cases of radicalization within the camp, but a team of specialists has been formed to counter this phenomenon. Since I was not given additional details, this aspect

will constitute a new direction of research for my doctoral work. I am to gather new data and study whether and when refugees can become a category of minorities at risk of radicalization.

The Reception Facility for Asylum Seekers in Malakasa

The Malakasa temporary reception facility, located 40 km from Athens near a military camp, had an occupancy of approximately 1,200 people out of a total capacity of 1,700 in April 2024. The majority of residents are Afghans, Nepalese, and Iranians.

The camp was built on the land of a former military camp and has a closed regime. It is divided into two parts: one (Malakasa 1) for the accommodation of asylum seekers for 25 days, until the necessary documents are drawn up, and another (Malakasa 2) for those who meet the preliminary conditions for obtaining asylum status.

Being a closed regime refugee camp (a type of detention facility where refugees are confined with restricted movement and limited freedom to leave the camp), from the outside, the feeling is similar to a prison: barbed wire, fingerprint access, etc. Upon entering the camp, we were told that it is strictly forbidden to initiate any form of interaction with the people accommodated there.

Discussions with UNICEF staff regarding the educational situation of the children revealed that, due to the linguistic and cultural differences between them, they often turn to the Turkish language as a means of communication, since, as Johanson (2001) claims, it is spoken in the countries bordering Turkey: Syria, Iraq, Iran. It is also known to be related to Azeri, Turkmen, Qashqai, Gagauz, and Balkan Gagauz Turkish, so among these languages there is a level of mutual intelligibility.

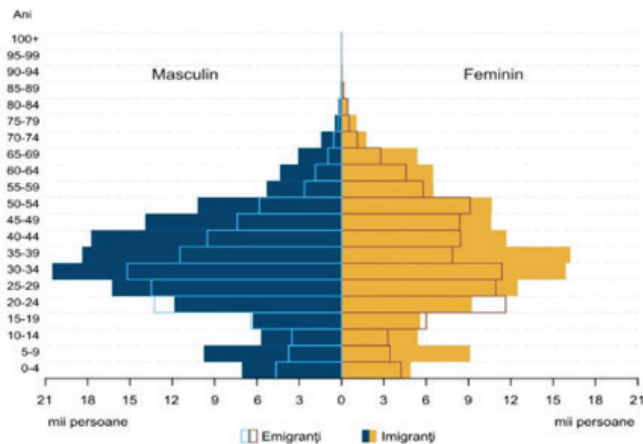
Conflicts in the camp are mentioned with caution, indicating the possible presence of dangerous people. The bus tour of the interior of Malakasa 2 camp reinforces this impression. The facilities include containers, a place for the manifestation of Islamic culture and a local market. Although staff are reluctant to provide detailed information, the possibility of radical beliefs among residents cannot be ruled out.

The situation of refugees in Romania

Romania has not been a preferred destination for refugees until recently, but this situation has changed in light of the war in Ukraine and other developments. Romania is a relatively new hotspot on the Balkan migration route, considered the “poor people’s route”. Lack of resources leads refugees to seek asylum here. Ammar El Benni (2021) recalls the case of two Afghan migrants who unintentionally crossed the Serbian border with Romania and requested readmission.

People who seek asylum in Romania due to lack of resources are vulnerable to terrorist radicalization. Research shows a link between poverty and radicalization. The study of the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, cited by Avraham Jager (2018), shows that young Somalis joined a terrorist organization for money, not for religious or personal reasons. Dizdarević and Brkić (2020) argue that the key factors of radicalization are global ideology, religion as a means of manipulation, money, and a deviant social environment.

According to the National Institute of Statistics (2022), immigration contributed to Romania’s demographic growth, with a positive migratory balance of over 85 thousand people in 2022. Most immigrants and emigrants are men.



Source: National Institute of Statistics (2022)

In addition to poor refugees, Romania also hosts people who tried to enter the state illegally. The report of the General Inspectorate for Immigration (2023) showed that, in 2022, approximately 5,200 people were identified in illegal situations and 4,300 return requests were issued. The report of the Romanian Border Police (2023) revealed that in the first quarter of 2023, 1,296 foreign citizens tried to enter Romania illegally, most of them at the border with Hungary.

In addition, 6,950 foreign citizens tried to leave Romania illegally in the first quarter of 2023, most of them at the border with Hungary. Many of them acted in groups organized with the support of traffickers, including Romanian citizens.

Romania has the following Regional Centers for Procedures and Accommodation of Asylum Seekers: Bucharest, Giurgiu, Galați, Timișoara, and Rădăuți. Although I have not conducted field research in these centers, I intend to investigate the risk of radicalization among residents of refugee camps in Romania.

4. Conclusions

The literature has revealed that there are multiple causes of migration, but there is no clear consensus regarding the radicalization of refugees. Factors contributing to migration include armed conflict, political persecution, poverty, climate change, and the search for better economic opportunities. The radicalization of refugees is a complex phenomenon and cannot be attributed to a single cause, being influenced by social, economic, psychological, and ideological factors.

The comparative analysis of the way refugees are managed in Greece and Romania revealed both similarities and significant differences. Greece, with longer experience in managing large flows of refugees, offers a well-established framework for receiving and accommodating them. However, Greece faces significant challenges, including limited resources, internal tensions, and an overstretched asylum infrastructure. Refugee centers in Greece, such as Schisto and Malakasa, illustrate these difficulties, with large capacities but also issues related to security and social integration.

The research highlights the need for coherent and well-implemented policies to manage refugees. These policies must include effective security measures, social integration programs and economic support, as well as monitoring and preventing radicalization.

Research into these issues may be extended with field investigations in refugee centers in Romania, to better understand the risks and formulate opinions regarding the possibility of preventing radicalization. It is essential to continue studying the phenomenon of radicalization, both to protect national security and to ensure successful integration of refugees into society. This research will contribute to the development of effective migration management strategies and to the promotion of social cohesion in a constantly changing global context.

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