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One century, two refugee crises in Greece: de-nationalising the past/de-naturalising the present

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ABSTRACT

A century ago, over 1.2 million Ottoman Christians were forcibly displaced to Greece after the Greek army's defeat in Asia Minor. In the summer of 2015, over a million people, mainly from Syria and Afghanistan, crossed the Aegean islands to reach Europe. These were the only two events in recent Greek history framed and managed as 'refugee crises'. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this paper employs the lens of *entangled histories* to examine how different *grammars of crisis* – discursive, institutional, and financial – have shaped the management of displacement across a century. By tracing continuities and ruptures in nation-building processes, in population management and in the production of 'refugee figures', it highlights how the framing of crisis has functioned as both a language of emergency and a mode of governance. This dialogue between past and present proves more fruitful than anticipated. It reveals that the 1922–24 displacement history is continuously written and rewritten to align with current national narratives. It also challenges us to critically rethink what is now accepted as common sense in today's management regimes. Thus, this paper seeks to both *denationalise the past* and *denaturalise the present*.

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Introduction

This paper presents reflections and findings from an entangled history research project[1] into two pivotal moments in Greek history when the large-scale arrival of displaced populations was framed and managed as a 'refugee crisis'. The first refers to the aftermath of 1922, following the Greco-Turkish War and the compulsory population exchange mandated by the Lausanne Treaty. The second concerns the period after the summer of 2015, when refugees fleeing mainly from Syria and Afghanistan reached Greek shores en masse.

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In the summer of 1922, the Greek army was defeated by the Turkish one and forced to leave Asia Minor in a disorderly fashion, thereby concluding what is conventionally referred to as the Greco-Turkish War of 1919–1922. Along with the army, a large part of the Ottoman Christians inhabitants of Asia Minor were forced to flee to Greece. The event was described as a 'refugee shock', at a time when the Greek state was in an economic and political crisis after ten years of wars, a 'national schism', and constant changes of national borders (Hadziiossif 2002). The Lausanne Convention of 1923 imposed a large-scale, compulsory exchange of populations – the first internationally ratified and executed population transfer between two countries – forcibly moving over 1.7 million people among Greece and Turkey (Iğsız 2018). As Iğsız argues, the exchange operated as a method of *unmixing*, deploying a segregative biopolitical logic to remake both states as ethnically and religiously homogeneous. The newly established Ministry of Welfare (1917), together with International Organisations such as the League of Nations, the Refugee Settlement Commission (RSC), and the Red Cross, launched an unprecedented humanitarian and developmental intervention to provide rehabilitation to the newly arrived refugee populations.

Nearly a century later, in the summer of 2015, around one million refugees and migrants crossed into Greece, seeking to reach northern Europe. Their arrival – mostly temporary and transit-oriented – was quickly named a 'refugee crisis'. When the EU – Turkey Joint Statement of March 2016 effectively sealed the Greek – Turkish border, around 60,000 people were trapped within Greek territory. This humanitarian emergency unfolded while the country was already under the economic and political strain of EU and IMF financial supervision, following years of austerity and social unrest (Hadjimichalis 2017). The newly established Ministry of Migration (2015), alongside international organisations such as UNHCR and IOM and hundreds of NGOs, coordinated an emergency response focused on immediate humanitarian assistance.

Although both episodes were framed through the vocabulary of 'crisis', their conditions, actors, and underlying logics differed profoundly. The causes of displacement, the geopolitical configurations, and the national and global economies in which they unfolded were not comparable in any narrow sense. In Greek national discourse, the refugees of 1922 are often portrayed as a case of successful integration – absorbed into the national body through presumed ethnic and cultural affinity. At the same time – at least at the international level – it was evident that a lasting solution was required: the provision of housing and productive employment to render refugees economically self-sufficient. By contrast, those who arrived in 2015 did so through unregulated routes and, in terms of language, religion, and culture, were perceived as 'others'. The humanitarian interventions designed to manage this more recent 'crisis' relied on ad hoc, temporary measures, offering relief without creating pathways for social, economic, or political participation. These differences will not be flattened but examined as historically and politically situated outcomes of distinct governance regimes.

The paper's guiding questions cut across both periods:

What defines a 'refugee crisis'? How have such events been governed – by whom, with what tools, and toward what ends? How did economic supervision, international intervention, and humanitarian management intertwine in shaping state capacities? And how have these modes of governing through crisis produced different refugee figures – legal, social, and political – across a century?

To address these questions, the paper adopts a methodological and analytical stance that seeks to de-nationalise the past and de-naturalise the present. By juxtaposing these two moments, it challenges national historiographies that portray refugee reception in 1922 as a national domestic achievement of successful integration, and contemporary analyses that treat the 2015 crisis as an exceptional, ahistorical humanitarian episode. Instead, it reads both as entangled moments in a longer history of governing through crisis – moments in which external financial and humanitarian interventions reshaped the relationship between sovereignty, economy, labour and population management.

Methodologically, this approach draws on the framework of *entangled histories* (Werner and Zimmermann 2006), which focuses on intersections and reciprocal transformations rather than bounded comparisons. When combined with a critical reading of crisis, this method exposes the *grammar of crisis*: the recurring discursive and institutional logic through which emergency becomes a mode of governance.

Methodological concepts and tools: entangled histories of events

Traditional comparative history has often juxtaposed discrete cases, reinforcing national boundaries and assuming the comparability of phenomena. This 'traditional' model, critiqued in the broader historiographical debate (Cohen and O'Connor 2004), tends to treat units of analysis as stable and bounded, which limits its capacity to capture processes of transformation. In the field of refugee and migration studies, such approaches risk de-historicising both displacement and refugees themselves (Malkki 1996). To counter this tendency, Bertossi, Duyvendak, and Foner (2021) propose the notion of *historical repertoires* – frameworks through which different discourses on history are mobilised to evaluate and justify the present. Following this line, our research juxtaposes policies from two different periods in order to de-nationalise the past and de-naturalise the present, by posing the same questions to two events described and managed as 'refugee crises'.

Werner and Zimmermann (2006) advance entangled history as a methodological framework that goes beyond mere comparison. Rather than isolating events or societies within fixed national or temporal boundaries, it highlights the intersections where practices, institutions, and categories are reshaped. This approach emphasises reflexivity and draws attention to asymmetries and transformations that emerge when trajectories cross – an orientation particularly valuable for studying refugee crises. The arrival of Asia Minor refugees in 1922 and the 'refugee crisis' of 2015, for instance, were not bounded national episodes but processes unfolding across local, national, and supranational scales. Institutions such as the League of Nations and the Refugee Settlement Commission, or later the European Union and UNHCR, did not merely manage these crises externally but acted as co-constitutive actors in shaping categories like 'refugee', 'integration', and 'crisis'.

Building on this framework, Gould (2007) stresses the mutual influences and asymmetric perceptions that connect seemingly distinct events, foregrounding the dialogical relations between them rather than treating them as self-contained episodes. From this perspective, the refugee movements of 1922 and 2015 appear as interconnected moments within broader European and international trajectories of migration governance. This methodological stance also resonates with the transnational turn (Clavin

2005), which advocates for historical research attentive to flows, circulations, and cross-border connections, moving beyond methodological nationalism (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994).

What happens, however, if we try to reverse space and time in these approaches?

Throughout our research, we developed and applied a methodology that combines multi-temporal analysis with attention to specific places. These events and locations are not conceived as bounded or static but as processes – as constellations of social, political, and economic relations that extend from the local to the global (Massey 1994). Combining entangled histories with the critical study of crisis challenges the temporal logic that crisis narratives impose. In this reading, crises do not appear as ruptures separating 'before' and 'after', but as relational configurations that connect actors, institutions, and imaginaries across different moments. By tracing these entanglements, we show how modes of governing through crisis – financial, humanitarian, or otherwise – circulate, sediment, and reappear in new forms. This methodological synthesis allows us to historicise and de-naturalise the present while provincialising the idea of crisis itself – questioning its status as a uniquely contemporary or exceptional event.

An entangled history of events, juxtaposing two different periods, necessarily requires distinct research tools and methods for each. Building on this methodological framework, our research design integrated differentiated approaches for the two periods under examination. For the refugee crisis of 1922 and the subsequent rehabilitation programme, we relied primarily on historical archives. The main collections consulted include:

- International archives: League of Nations materials, including the quarterly reports of the Refugee Settlement Commission (1924–1930), minutes of its Board of Directors, correspondence with Greek ministries, and surveys on refugee settlement, the Greek economy, and public finances.
- National archives: The General State Archives in Athens, particularly the Archive of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Social Insurance (1921–1999) and the Archive of the Prime Minister (1917–1927).
- Financial archives: The Historical Archives of the Bank of Greece, especially the personal papers of Emmanuel Tsouderos and Georgios Mantzavinos[2] concerning the Bank, loan negotiations, and the country's financial condition.
- Digital collections: The Digital Archive of Eleftherios Venizelos[3] from the National Research Foundation 'Eleftherios K. Venizelos'.

For the period after 2015, our sources and methods reflected the contemporary nature of the material. These included:

- A review of the literature and desk research.
- Processing of funding data for operations and projects from the European Union, the Greek State, UNHCR, IOM, and (I)NGOs.
- 36 interviews with representatives from local and international stakeholders (including government officials, (I)NGOs, grassroots groups, and refugees).
- Ethnographic work through participant observation in Malakasa camp.

The interviews followed a semi-structured design, combining comparability with flexibility to capture diverse institutional perspectives (Ritchie et al. 2014). Oral testimonies and ethnographic material were analysed in conjunction with policy documents and funding data, adopting a triangulated approach attentive to situated knowledge and the politics of representation (Abrahams 2016).

Ethical considerations were central throughout the study. As the National Hellenic Research Foundation (NHRF) does not have an appointed Ethics Committee, no formal approval ID could be provided. Nevertheless, extensive discussions on ethical standards were held within the research team, the project's advisory committee, and with NHRF representatives. To safeguard informants, particularly those living under precarious conditions due to European and national migration policies, all names were anonymised. All recorded material was transcribed by members of the research team and assistants, and data were securely stored on NHRF servers.

The grammar of crisis

When social phenomena are characterised as 'crises', they are described – not only in public discourse but also in academic literature – as unique, unprecedented, and extreme events, occurring solely in an emergent present and disconnected from wider social, political, economic, spatial, and historical relations (Dines, Montagna, and Vacchelli 2018; Lafazani 2018). As scholars who have critically examined the notion of crisis have shown, it functions less as a neutral descriptor of disruption than as a mode of reasoning and governance – one that imposes urgency, authorises intervention, structures inequalities, and renders precarity ordinary (Berlant 2011; Fassin 2021; Roitman 2013). Scholars working at the intersection of crisis and migration have further highlighted how the framing of crisis operates as a political technology: a tool for governing mobility, producing states of exception, and legitimising specific forms of intervention (Mountz and Hiemstra 2013; Squire 2020).

We are thinking around the *grammar of crisis* – a discursive and institutional logic through which emergency becomes a mode of governance (Benhadjoudja, Clark-Kazak, and Garneau 2025; Garcés Amaya and Pérez Rodríguez 2025). This grammar does not simply describe events but shapes how crises are framed, narrated, and governed. It determines who is authorised to act, which forms of expertise and knowledge are rendered important, and what kinds of interventions appear legitimate. In this sense, the 'grammar of crisis' structures the very field of possibility in which social and political action unfolds.

In the years following 1922 and the signing of the Lausanne Treaty, almost 1,200,000 refugees arrived in Greek territory, while over 500,000 Muslims fled Greece for the newly founded Turkish state. The refugees who arrived comprised 23 percent of the Greek state's population, which was 5,536,375 people according to the 1920 census. As Jamie Martin notes, 'the Greek project was an exceptional experiment for the League', made possible 'by the enormous refugee crisis Greece faced in the aftermath of its 1919–1922 war with Turkey and the population exchange that followed in 1923 – a crisis that threatened to bankrupt Greece and destabilise the region' (Martin 2022, 137).

However, if we examine the numbers of the current 'refugee crisis', it becomes evident that they are not as large as widely perceived. In fact, they appear demographically

insignificant. Since the summer of 2015, approximately 1,000,000 refugees – mainly from Syria and Afghanistan – arrived through the Aegean Sea into Greek territory, aiming to reach Northern European countries. This number represented 0.23 percent of the EU population, which was estimated at around 510 million in 2016 by the European Commission. Following the EU–Turkey Joint Statement, and according to EU and UNHCR estimations, 60,000 refugees were stranded in Greece. This number comprised 0.6 percent of the total Greek population, which was about 10 million people at that time.

Particularly in Greece, if we observe the numbers of arrested undocumented migrants and refugees during the fifteen years preceding the 2015 refugee crisis, we find comparable or even higher figures of undocumented people in the country. Why, then, did this relatively small number of refugees – demographically marginal at both EU and national levels, manageable in practical terms, and expected as a consequence of the Syrian war – produce such intense political and humanitarian mobilisation? Why was it framed as a 'refugee and humanitarian crisis'? And why did it trigger – as we will see in what follows – massive investments of people, institutions, and capital to manage it?

The invocation of crisis often serves less to describe a quantitative threshold than to activate a particular grammar of crisis – a set of discursive and institutional logics and practices that authorise particular modes of intervention, allocate responsibility, and moralise governance. An event framed as 'crisis' becomes highly politicised (Hutter and Kriesi 2022) and the decisive question then shifts from what happened to who will manage it, and how.

Nationality and religion reversed

The grammar of crisis is not only institutional and economic but also productive: it actively constructs the boundaries of belonging and exclusion. In Greece, these grammars have long been articulated through the entanglement of nationality and religion – a relationship that has shaped both historical and contemporary constructions of the 'refugee'.

In the dominant Greek national narrative, the refugees of 1922 have been portrayed as successfully integrated, their acceptance justified by the assumption of shared ethnic and cultural identity. In our research, in line with critical research on refugee history, we challenge this widespread concept. We argue that the history of the 1922–24 refugees has been written and rewritten many times over the past century, reframed to support the dominant narrative of national history (for more see Hadziiossif 2002 and Kritikos 2021). First and foremost, the vast majority of the refugees arriving in Greece had never lived in Greece before nor even visited it. In this sense, there was no 'homeland' to which they were returning. Many of them, especially in the first years after 1922, believed they would return to their homes in Turkish territory, as had happened in the case of the population displacements during the First World War.

Although the Greek government in 1922 issued the law 2870 declaring that the country would not accept any refugees from Asia Minor, in the reality of losing the war, thousands of Orthodox refugees fled alongside the Greek army, and in the following years, Greece was forced to accept the forced population exchange resulting from the Lausanne Convention.

Regarding the population exchange, the sole criterion was religion, not nationality, a fact more evident in the non-Greek literature where the term 'Ottoman Christians' is used (Clark 2006; Hirschon 2003; Rodogno 2021; Yildirim 2006). The characterisation of 'Greeks' underscores the complexity of identity in the late Ottoman Empire, where religious affiliation often transcended emerging national identities. For instance, Renée Hirschon (1998) notes that many of the refugees had never identified as 'Greek' before their forced migration, further complicating the notion of a homogenous national identity. Dimitris Pentzopoulos (1962) similarly emphasises that the exchange was based on religious rather than ethnic or national lines, highlighting the era's shifting paradigms of belonging and citizenship. Additionally, Asli Iğsız (2018) discusses how the exchange established a precedent for managing populations based on religious differences, impacting future policies in the region.

Hence, it remains a question how 'nationality' was framed, perceived, and experienced during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of nation-states in that region. We suggest that over the past century, religion was translated into ethnicity, thus constructing the dominant national narrative. As we claim in the next section, the refugees might not have been Greek when they arrived, but they became Greek through specific policies upon arrival.

Today, we observe the opposite movement. Regardless of their ethnicity or religion, migrants are often collectively framed as 'Muslims' – a characterisation that is made to carry significant ideological weight, as it is constructed as a threat to the 'European way of life' (Garner and Selod 2015; Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2020; Lucassen 2018). In the last decades, racism has been cloaked in sociocultural characteristics and, as it has been well argued within critical race studies, it has evolved into a form of 'cultural racism' (É. Balibar 2008; E. Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Blaut 1992; Chua 2017). In recent years, ethnicity and race have been translated into religion and sociocultural difference, a process that continues to reinforce national homogeneity – not through the inclusion of the newly arrived, as happened after 1922, but through their exclusion as external to and incompatible with the imagined purity of the national body.

These shifting configurations of nationality and religion reveal how categories of identity are mobilised within broader grammars of crisis. Whether through the inclusion of the 1922 refugees as 'Greeks' or the exclusion of the 2015 arrivals as cultural and religious 'others', both moments demonstrate how crisis operates as a technology of boundary-making – defining who is to be protected, governed, included or excluded. As the following section shows, such symbolic constructions were inseparable from the material and institutional mechanisms of governing through crisis across the century.

Governing through crisis

The period after 1922

Central to this paper's focus is the Lausanne Treaty's mandate of compulsory population exchange, which displaced over 1.7 million people. At that time, the Greek state – still in formation – faced the daunting task of accommodating over one million refugees under severe financial constraints. Given its precarious situation, Greece resorted to foreign loans. Yet, because of its weak financial standing, it could not secure loans directly;

instead, the newly established League of Nations acted as guarantor (Myers 1945). This was a much-debated decision as it would mean that the Greek state – already subject to extensive foreign financial control through the International Financial Commission (IFC) – would cede further sovereignty over managing its new citizens' productive capacities and infrastructure development (Martin 2022).

From the League's perspective, the decision to guarantee the Greek loans was neither straightforward nor uncontested. The main concern was that other nations might make similar demands to the League to act as a mediator of foreign capital. Nonetheless, the intervention was justified on the 'exceptionality' of the Greek case: the massive refugee crisis threatened to bankrupt the state and destabilise a region where nation-states were still taking shape. One way or another League's role – set up immediately after the end of the First World War – was to reorganise economies and societies and safeguard the post-Versailles legal order and balances (Mazower 1997; Pedersen 2007).

In this sense, the League framed its intervention in Greece as unique – necessary to maintain financial and political stability and prevent a wider crisis. As Jamie Martin notes, 'the League's role in settling Greek refugees was the first time that an international institution successfully channelled capital into a national programme for development' (Martin 2022, 136). This marked a significant shift in the League's approach, moving beyond humanitarian relief toward broader developmental goals.

It is important to note the differing interpretations in Greek and international literature. In Greek accounts, refugee settlement is primarily portrayed as a humanitarian effort focused on immediate relief – shelter, food, and basic services for those who had lost everything. In contrast, international literature often frames this initiative as a pioneering development project: the League's involvement aimed not only to provide short-term assistance but also to integrate refugees into the economic fabric of the nation by providing land, tools, and resources to become self-sufficient.

The Greek scheme was seen by those involved as a unique instance of the League acting as a development financier, demonstrating a new model of international intervention that combined humanitarian assistance with long-term economic planning. This dual approach sought both to address urgent needs and to stabilise and develop the Greek economy – preventing future crises. The League's innovative strategy in Greece set a precedent for later international development programmes, illustrating how humanitarian intervention could be aligned with developmental objectives to achieve sustainability.

By accepting League-mediated loans, the Greek government had to comply with externally imposed regulations. The League appointed experts in fiscal reform, production, infrastructure, and banking sector, and the Geneva Protocol of 29 September 1923 required Greece to provide the Refugee Settlement Commission (RSC) with at least 500,000 hectares of arable land. This land came from diverse sources – public estates, expropriations, agricultural requisitions, exchangeable properties, and monastic or former Bulgarian holdings. The land served as mortgage collateral for creditors, with revenues pledged as security. Furthermore, to ensure funds were not diverted – such as for military spending – the League created the Refugee Settlement Commission (RSC), a body largely controlled by League officials, which assumed primary responsibility for all refugee resettlement projects (Martin 2022; Mazower 1997).

This commission played a pivotal role in overseeing the allocation and use of funds, ensuring they were directed towards housing, agricultural development, and other forms of refugee rehabilitation. The logic of the refugee settlement was oriented to productive projects and development, in order also to facilitate the repayment of the loans. The creditors of international loans had to be reassured that their investment would not be directed to charity and temporary relief but to restore the refugees to self-support and economic usefulness (Rodogno 2021).

The Commission designed and implemented a comprehensive programme focused on productive employment and housing, mainly within the agricultural sector but also extending to other economic activities. It was financed through the 1924 Refugee Loan and supported by the land resources provided by the Greek state. The programme was conceived not merely as humanitarian relief but as a project of socio-economic transformation – aimed at rendering refugees economically self-sufficient within the shortest feasible timeframe while contributing to the stabilisation of the Greek state and its economy (Kapokakis et al. 2025; Kyramargiou 2023). Notably, refugees were granted full citizenship and voting rights as early as the 1923 elections.

By the summer of 1926, the Commission had successfully resettled 622,865 refugees. The vast majority – around 550,000 – were placed in rural areas, chiefly in Macedonia, while 72,000 were settled in urban centres, mainly Piraeus, Athens, and Thessaloniki (Kapokakis et al. 2025). The allocation of resources reveals clear priorities: by the mid-1930s, more than 10 million had been invested in rural resettlement, compared with only 2 million devoted to urban housing and integration. Despite this rural focus, the long-term social and demographic impact was most visible in the expanding urban peripheries, where thousands of refugees who were left outside official schemes built their own makeshift houses and neighbourhoods. In many cases, several refugee families were forced to share a single small house, resulting in dense and often suffocating living conditions in the urban settlements. Still, the houses in these urban settlements, a century later, remain home to working-class families and successive generations of newcomers – internal migrants after the Civil War, migrants from the Balkans and Eastern Europe after 1990, and migrants from the Global South in the new millennium.

The period after 2015

Starting in the summer of 2015, more than a million people arrived in Greece, aiming to reach northern Europe. During these initial months, neither the EU nor the Greek state mounted a coordinated response. Various NGOs, INGOs, and grassroots groups acted independently, using their own resources. The EU–Turkey Joint Statement of March 18, 2016, marked the closure of the Greek–Turkish border and the Balkan route. Two days earlier, on March 16, the Emergency Support Initiative (ESI)[4] had been created to assist Greece in managing refugees – signalling the first humanitarian operation ever conducted on EU soil.

Between 2016 and 2021, the EU allocated €3.39 billion to Greece. For comparison, during the same period Turkey received €6 billion, although it hosted between 3 and 4 million refugees, while Greece hosted fewer than 100,000. Of the total amount allocated to Greece, €450 million came from the Internal Security Fund for border protection, leaving nearly €3 billion for emergency support, asylum, migration, and integration.

Specifically, €2.27 billion of this came from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). Most of these funds went directly to international organisations[5]: UNHCR received nearly €1 billion, IOM €702 million, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum €526 million, and the Ministry of Defense €128 million.

Following the money makes clear that, as after 1922, the 'refugee crisis' was managed primarily by international organisations rather than by the Greek state. In the present day, this fact was presented as entirely normal and 'common sense', never debated in terms of national sovereignty or the role that international organisations would have in the management of populations. This silence surrounding the operations of international organisations, both in Greece and at the EU level, is also related to the way these bodies are funded – 'through voluntary contributions from governments, the United Nations, intergovernmental institutions, and the private sector', as noted on UNHCR's website. Their operations pose no cost to the nation-states where they function. Thus, their projects are perceived only as 'aid' and 'assistance' in different 'emergencies', rather than as 'meddling'. And although this question exceeds the scope of this paper, we need to ask why states, interstate organisations, and private actors fund international organisations to maintain large-scale operations all over the world. Is it solely for humanitarian protection, or does this humanitarian industry – by offering bread to the hungry and hope to the displaced – also serve to keep a watchful eye and unrest under control?

Despite the substantial EU funding relative to the limited number of refugees in Greece, its allocation followed a colonial logic characteristic of global humanitarian governance – ad hoc, donor-driven, and short-term. Assistance across all aspects of refugee management was organised through temporary projects rather than long-term strategies. The most telling example of this logic was the establishment of camps as the primary accommodation model, implemented hastily and without consideration of possible alternatives or sustainable solutions.

Our research shows that from March 2016 to March 2017, around 50 new camps were constructed across mainland Greece, most in remote and isolated areas. Although mainly funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), these camps did not promote 'integration'. Instead, they produced socio-spatial exclusion and reinforced the logic of 'unmixing' (Iğsız 2018). As an alternative, the ESTIA project[6] provided short-term urban apartments for 'vulnerable' refugees – while 'vulnerability' during that period was probably the only way for refugees to gain access to better living conditions. Even so, ESTIA operated under the same ad hoc, temporary logic, offering no long-term stability (Lafazani 2024).

Although the policies around granting legal status are very complicated and change periodically according to broader border and migration regimes, we will attempt to outline some basic parameters to provide a general overview for the period 2016–2021 (for a more analytical approach see, among others, Karamanidou 2021; Tramountanis 2022). Refugees often waited months, sometimes more than a year, to obtain the asylum seeker card – a precarious status allowing them to remain in Greece while awaiting a decision. The asylum process itself was lengthy and complex, determining whether applicants would be granted or denied the status of 'refugee' or 'subsidiary protection'. These legal statuses conferred differential rights, primarily concerning the duration of renewal and travel rights.

Policy design also discouraged formal employment. Refugees could not obtain work permits before receiving the asylum seeker card, and even afterwards they faced additional delays and bureaucratic obstacles such as securing bank accounts, tax identification numbers, and social security numbers (Bagavos and Kourachanis 2022). Tellingly, none of the state or international projects aimed to open actual labour positions for refugees.

In sum, after 2015, funds were not invested in people or productive activities with long-term developmental aims, as in 1922. Instead, they financed temporary infrastructures such as camps and the salaries of short-term NGO staff – reflecting a project-based, donor-driven, short-term logic. What is presented today as innovative, efficient migration management by leading international organisations is, in practice, far less effective and substantial than the model implemented a century ago.

Grammars of entangled crises: financial and refugee crises across a century

For the period following 1922, it is well documented that the management of the refugee crisis was deeply shaped by Greece's economic conditions and the external mechanisms of financial control. As Jamie Martin underlines, 'The aim of the 1924 Refugee Loan was not to shrink the Greek state for the sake of austerity, but to expand its powers while removing them from the control of elected governments, in order to place the lives of a large population of new Greek citizens under the watchful eye of investors who placed a bet on their future productivity. This was possible only because Greek public finances were already under the control of the International Financial Commission (IFC)' (Martin 2022, 147).

Following Greece's defeat in a short war with the Ottoman Empire in 1897, the country, already heavily indebted, was placed under the financial control of the International Financial Commission (IFC) established in 1898. This control stemmed from Greece's obligation to pay an indemnity far beyond its financial capacity to secure the evacuation of Ottoman forces from Thessaly. To service the indemnity loan and existing debt, the IFC, comprising representatives from leading European powers, took control of critical public revenue sources, including customs duties from major ports like Piraeus and Volos, as well as state monopolies on essential goods such as kerosene, salt, and matches while it held veto power on domestic policies including taxation and the issuance of currency and treasury bonds (Martin 2022).

However, in the present day, we tend to view the financial and refugee crises in Greece as two distinct events, disconnected from one another. This perception may stem from our temporal and spatial proximity to these events, having experienced them as separate, intense 'crisis' periods. Yet, as scholars of crisis have argued, the very framing of an event as a crisis – as an unprecedented rupture in time – produces a sense of exceptionality that obscures structural continuities and interdependencies (Mountz and Hiemstra 2013; Roitman 2013). Still, if we pause to reconsider the sequence of events that follow, the interconnections between the financial and refugee crises become evident: they appear less as isolated emergencies than as recurring configurations of governing through crisis.

Between 2007 and 2009, the first signs of economic recession became evident in Greece. The Greek economy began shrinking, influenced by the global financial crisis

of 2007-08, alongside structural deficiencies and the lack of monetary policy flexibility due to eurozone regulations (see among others Lapavitsas 2019). In 2010, the first Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Greek Government and the Troika – the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank – imposing on the Greek people 'the hardest austerity measures ever seen in modern Europe' (Douzinas 2010, 285). The MoU of 2010 marked the first-ever IMF intervention on EU soil.

Since then a rupture has occurred in the lives of the vast majority of people in Greece, with salaries and pensions severely cut, taxes increasing, unemployment rising to unprecedented levels, and social provisions, including health care and education, failing. From 2009 and onwards, the Greek state was largely depicted in dominant EU discourses as an incompetent state, incapable of managing and regulating both the economy and the society. Following this narrative, the Greek state was also depicted as unable to manage the refugee population. This led to the first-ever Humanitarian Intervention on EU soil – even for only those 60,000 refugees that remained in the country after March 2016.

As a DG HOME European Commission official underlined in an interview: 'Should the same crisis happen in Sweden, we would certainly not be there'[7] What he effectively meant was that no special funding mechanism would have been established, nor would EU monitoring have been imposed, had the crisis occurred in Sweden or in another financially strong member state.

The first funding for the Greek refugee crisis came through the Emergency Support Initiative (ESI)[8], DG ECHO's funding mechanism, which allocated 670 million euros directly to international NGOs and UN agencies, bypassing the Greek state. Interviews with key informants in the field revealed that this arrangement reflected DG ECHO's greater trust in institutional partners with whom it had long-standing collaborations in similar '*emergency*' operations in the Global South, compared to the perceived unreliability of the Greek state. Ultimately, the actors who received this first wave of substantial funding were the ones who effectively determined the management and organisation of the newly arrived refugee population.

Furthermore, the newly established Ministry of Migration, constrained by the memorandum's mandate to minimise the public sector, lacked both budgetary and staffing capacity. The overall distribution of EU funding followed the same pattern: the UNHCR's budget was twice that received by all Greek ministries combined. The narrative of an 'incapable' state, with civil society organisations stepping in as rescuers, was also uncritically reproduced within academic discourse (see, among others, Shutes and Ishkanian 2022), overlooking the political economies that sustain and benefit from such representations.

Finally, any attempt by the Syriza government during these two periods to propose an alternative management approach was met with threats of exclusion – Grexit during the economic crisis (Wodak and Angouri 2014) and Schengen exit during the refugee crisis (Kasparek 2016).

The framing of '*crisis*' in both these periods legitimised external intervention in Greece, though through markedly different practices and rationalities. In the 1920s, financial supervision operated through technocratic mechanisms of economic control, while in the 2010s, humanitarian governance combined fiscal discipline with moral

responsibility and border management. Yet both were organised through the *grammar of crisis*. From this perspective, the two moments are historically entangled not because they reproduce identical mechanisms, but because they reactivate earlier repertoires of oversight and dependency under new institutional and ideological guises. The temporality of crisis is thus not linear but recursive: each new 'emergency' invokes the past to authorise the present, transforming Greece once again into a laboratory for evolving techniques of governing through crisis, and into the first EU member state where emergency governance mechanisms for refugee management were deployed.

Entangled grammars of crisis: producing refugee figures across a century

Across scales – from local administrations to national bodies and international institutions – the grammar of crisis operates not simply as a language of emergency but as a productive apparatus. Through specific governing practices, it manufactures displacement, shapes subjectivities, and produces shifting figures of 'locals' and 'refugees' over time.

In the case of 1922, finding permanent solutions to the refugee issue was a central concern from the very beginning. From the League of Nations' perspective, this meant providing not only housing but also employment, in order to make refugees economically self-sufficient as quickly as possible. Employment was seen as critical to their full rehabilitation. The Refugee Settlement Commission contributed to this process either through the direct construction of industrial infrastructure – such as weaving mills – or by granting land to investors for the establishment of new industries and crafts. In this context, and with refugees as pioneers, the carpet industry flourished for the first time in Greece. By January 1925, five carpet workshops producing Oriental carpets had been completed, with 200 looms in operation and two more under construction. It is estimated that around 700 refugees were employed in these workshops, while many women also worked on home looms (League of Nations Archives 1925). Certainly, the spectacular growth of the carpet industry could not have occurred without the labour of refugee women, who were paid below subsistence level (Hadziiossif 2002). By 1926, the four refugee quarters of Athens and Piraeus already contained 36 industrial establishments. These comprised 27 carpet factories, four weaving workshops, a dye and chemical products factory, a chocolate factory, a nail factory, and ceramic works, while a rubber goods factory was under construction. Together they employed 342 men and 4,532 women (League of Nations 1926).

Another rapidly expanding sector was construction, which absorbed a large portion of the male refugee population. Yet this expansion also raised concerns: after the completion of the housing programme, many workers would inevitably become unemployed. The construction boom attracted numerous refugees from rural regions of Asia Minor who sought urban employment, leading to fierce competition that left little room for negotiating wages or working conditions. Those who turned to self-employment without capital converted parts of their dwellings into coffee houses, grocery stores, or small workshops, or became street vendors in central markets.

A major concern for both the Greek authorities and the League was the proletarianisation of refugees and the fear that they might become politically radicalised (Kapokakis et. al. 2025). For this reason, priority was given to rural resettlement and to transforming

refugees into economically self-sufficient small-scale farmers. A 1926 memorandum to the League's Council captures the contrast between the presumed stability of rural life and the precarity of urban survival:

> 'The settlement of a farmer is a task which looks clear and simple, and which really is so, provided there is enough land. Even supposing that the available land does not possess all the qualities required for the cultivation to which it is intended to devote it, it may acquire them with time. That is a privilege enjoyed by nations whose social edifice is normally developed and based upon the firm support of a large rural population. But what about the townsman? How shall he replace that slow but sure work which the land does for him who looks after it provided it receives indispensable attention? Can he create his custom? Can he inspire confidence? And even if he is able to do this, who can guarantee that both custom and confidence will not disappear within a year or six months? It must be admitted that we here approach the most difficult aspect of the heavy task which the Greek nation so courageously took upon itself.
>
> (League of Nations Archives 1926, 175–76).

The policies pursued by the Commission were not unprecedented. After World War I, the new states of Eastern Europe undertook agrarian reforms under the twin pressures of integrating agricultural production into national and international markets and liberalising land ownership. Land redistribution aimed to create small, independent farmers who would increase productivity and strengthen food security and national self-sufficiency. Against the backdrop of social unrest and fears of Bolshevism following the October Revolution of 1917, land reform was also seen as a way to preempt radicalisation among returning soldiers and impoverished refugees. Authorities sought to settle vulnerable groups in rural areas, viewing cities as potential centres of political agitation (Venturas 2022).

At a broader level, the refugee policies of 1922–24 provided ownership, means of production, loans, and employment opportunities. Refugees were immediately granted citizenship and the right to vote – effectively granting them full legal and political inclusion, social recognition, and, crucially, political agency.

This emphasis on long-term solutions, sustainability, and self-sufficiency stands in striking contrast to the short-term, service-oriented projects that characterise the present. The policies implemented after 2015 – not only restrictive border and asylum regimes (Léonard and Kaunert 2022) but also those framed as 'integration' – are exclusionary. Refugees are placed in camps located in remote areas; they receive work permits only after many months, and even then, their isolation limits access to labour markets. They depend on services – health care, education, catering, cash cards – provided irregularly by multiple actors and bound to unstable funding cycles. To obtain even temporary legal status, they must navigate complex, protracted bureaucratic procedures. Notably, no state or international projects focused on creating actual employment opportunities for refugees. Instead, the few initiatives addressing labour were confined to 'employability' measures – such as training sessions on CV writing or a few job fairs designed to connect refugees with potential employers – without any structural provision for access to stable work.

Contemporary policies are thus short-term, project-based, and donor-driven. Their effect – if not their purpose – is to maintain refugees in a condition of protracted precarity, producing forms of dependency that sustain the very humanitarian apparatus

designed to 'assist' them. By contrast, the 1920s settlement policies produced refugees as self-sufficient members of society – legally, economically, and politically part of the country. Today's migration and border regimes, however, construct the refugee as temporary, undeserving, and devoid of entitlement to rights, while systematically reproducing political and economic inequalities.

A quite telling example can close this section. By 1930 – less than a decade from the refugee arrival – the leadership of the growing communist party was almost entirely composed of refugees (Karpozilos 2024). Today, we can hardly think of any politician, academic, journalist, or author in Greece who has migrant origin, even if we include the people who arrived in the country since the early 1990s and their children. These entangled histories attest that the grammar of crisis is not merely descriptive but constitutive, producing differentiated regimes of belonging and exclusion and distinct 'refugee figures' shaped by the political and economic rationalities of their time.

Epilogue

Across a century, the management of refugee movements in Greece reveals less a story of rupture than one of recurring repertoires – techniques, languages, and institutional logics that reappear under new guises. Both after 1922 and after 2015, 'crisis' became the dominant grammar through which displacement was framed, legitimising external intervention and reshaping the role of the state. Yet the directions these grammars took could not be more different.

In the interwar period, refugees were governed through a developmental logic that sought to transform them into productive citizens. These policies reflected the social, economic, and geopolitical conditions of the time. Having lost the war, Greece was compelled to accept the compulsory population exchange stipulated by the Treaty of Lausanne, which followed a logic of 'unmixing' aimed at stabilising peace among newly formed nation-states and preventing further ethnoreligious conflict in the former Ottoman territories. A different economic paradigm also prevailed – one in which development, productivity, and stability were closely tied to nation-building. At the same time, governments and international organisations feared the radicalisation of destitute refugees, particularly in an era when communism was perceived as a global threat (Venturas 2022). Thus, the incorporation of the newcomers as 'Greeks' served both economic and political purposes: expanding and homogenising the nation while containing potential unrest.

In contrast, in the period following the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015 – despite the far smaller numbers involved and despite the unprecedented financial resources made available through the EU – the response was short-term, service-oriented, and project-based. Managed primarily by international organisations, it generated dependency and vulnerability rather than stability or participation. These policies are equally products of their time: an era of neoliberal governance in which social, labour, and political rights are increasingly suspended, and migration is treated not as a historical and social phenomenon but as a securitised 'problem'. National homogenisation persists, but now through exclusion rather than inclusion – by framing refugees and migrants as threats to the imagined coherence of the nation. States and international organisations continue to operate under a logic of 'unmixing', albeit through new mechanisms: the

illegalisation of arrival, detention, deportation, encampment, and the multiplication of differential legal statuses. The rhetoric of 'crisis', and the policies that accompany it, serve less to accommodate or integrate than to deter and discipline – both refugees and citizens alike.

Entangling the histories of past and present is neither simple nor symmetrical. It requires avoiding reductive comparisons while cultivating an understanding of how different historical contexts produce distinct yet interconnected regimes of governance. Still, the exercise is profoundly productive, for these shifting grammars of crisis expose the political and economic rationalities of their time. To denationalise the past is to refuse the comforting narrative of the 1922 refugees as a natural extension of the Greek nation; it means recognising that 'becoming Greek' was a political project produced through specific policies and institutions, inclusions and exclusions. To denaturalise the present is to question the taken-for-granted normality of humanitarian management and the assumption that temporary aid and containment are inevitable.

If alternative models of coexistence and participation seem unimaginable today, then perhaps it is time to turn to history – not as a repository of nostalgia or policy templates, but as a reservoir of insights into possibilities that have been suppressed or erased, as traces of paths not taken yet.

Notes

1. For more about the project visit the website: https://1c2rc.eie.gr/en/
2. Tsouderos was elected to the Hellenic Parliament and served as Minister of Transportation under Eleftherios Venizelos and as Minister of Finance under Themistoklis Sophoulis. Following the establishment of the Bank of Greece in 1928, he was appointed its first Vice-Governor and, in 1931, became Governor. Between 1919 and 1929, Tsouderos represented Greece at numerous international conferences on economic affairs, public finance, and public debt.

   Mantzavinos began his career in 1906 at the State General Accounting Office, where he steadily advanced through the ranks, eventually becoming Director General in 1928 – a position he held until 1936. During this period, he represented Greece on the Financial Committee of the League of Nations and participated in several international conferences. From 1929 to 1939, he also served as a regular member of the League of Nations Tax Committee, having been elected by the League's Council.

   For more information, see the Historical Archives of the Bank of Greece: https://www.bankofgreece.gr/en/the-bank/culture/historical-archives/archives
3. Venizelos was the leader of the Liberal Party (Komma Fileleftheron) and Prime Minister.
4. See more here: https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/greece-end-activation-emergency-support-instrument-dg-echo-echo-daily-flash-13.
5. Still the total funding of INGO's for the Greek operations was not solely from EU. For example, on 2020, 80% of UNHCR funding was from the EU but another 20% was given from other donors (for more see UNHCR Greece Factsheet September 2020, available at https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/83090).
6. https://migration.gov.gr/en/ris2/filoxenia-aitoynton-asylo/
7. Interview with European Commission DG HOME Official based in Greece, September 2023.
8. See more here: https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/greece-end-activation-emergency-support-instrument-dg-echo-echo-daily-flash-13.

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