

November 2021

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‘Constrained mobility’: a feature of protracted displacement in Greece and Italy

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People living in protracted displacement in Italy and Greece are frequently more mobile than is generally recognised in public discourse and policy.

Protracted displacement is often implicitly associated with passivity and immobility, and it is not by chance that protracted displacement is often described through the metaphor of ‘limbo’. But people living in protracted displacement are far from immobile. On the contrary, both in their everyday lives and over time, they experience ‘constrained mobility’ at different scales (from local to transnational) and in pursuit of different goals (primarily subsistence and administrative status). While heavily constrained by a complex and constantly evolving combination of legal and socio-economic factors, these mobility patterns are a crucial form of ‘agency under duress’.

In this article, we use the cases of Greece and Italy to explore what protracted displacement looks like in reality. These countries share at least three common structural features. First, both are ‘first entry’ countries in the European Union (EU), where asylum seekers’ mobility is constrained by Dublin Regulation rules. Second, both countries have comparatively low administrative capacity, in particular in the fields of reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees. Finally, they are both characterised by stagnant official labour markets and sizeable underground economies. All of these factors deeply shape the patterns of (im) mobility and inclusion/exclusion of migrants living in protracted displacement.

Immobilising effects of EU and national regulations

Intra-EU mobility constitutes a major challenge for both asylum seekers and protection beneficiaries¹ in Italy and Greece. For asylum seekers, secondary movement within the EU is often (although not

exclusively) motivated by family reasons. The Dublin Regulation represents a massive obstacle, especially for adult asylum seekers who have family members in other EU countries whom they would like to join. Often these relatives do not fall under the Regulation’s strict definition of ‘family’, which includes only the applicant’s spouse or children (under the age of 18). Even when asylum seekers are allowed to move within the EU (as in the case of unaccompanied minors), they face extremely long waiting times and many administrative obstacles. For protection beneficiaries holding an Italian or Greek residence permit, and who are able to obtain travel documents, EU law allows them to move freely across the EU for no more than three months – although many opt to overstay this period, accepting the risk this carries.

However, there are deep differences between the two countries as regards mobility between countries, especially for asylum seekers. While both countries have adopted the ‘hotspot’ approach, in Greece – where it was introduced in conjunction with the 2016 EU–Turkey deal – it has become a key mechanism of migration control, turning the country into an internal EU ‘buffer zone’. Migration journeys were interrupted, both to other member States but also within the country itself. This is because asylum seekers’ mobility in Greece is directly impacted by the different types of reception facilities and procedures, which in Greece have three distinct forms: a) the forced containment of asylum seekers in hotspots on five eastern Aegean islands until a decision is reached on their asylum claims (with some exceptions); b) asylum seekers’ accommodation in isolated ‘open temporary accommodation sites’ (camps) on the mainland, subject to specific regulations and mobility restrictions; and

c) the accommodation of the most vulnerable in urban apartments.² Mobility across these reception facilities is strictly regulated.

In contrast, asylum seekers do not stay in hotspots in southern Italy while their asylum applications are examined but are instead dispersed to reception centres across the country. Their mobility is regulated less strictly than in Greece, although those hosted in reception centres similarly risk losing their accommodation if they are absent for a prolonged period without permission. For asylum seekers and protection beneficiaries who are no longer in the reception system, onward movement within the country is extremely common.

Constrained mobility as a survival strategy

In both countries, migrants living in protracted displacement develop a wide range of mobility-based survival strategies permitting them to navigate the complex asylum systems at both national and EU levels in order to reunite with their networks, meet their basic needs or seek better opportunities elsewhere.

Asylum seekers in Greece may for instance attempt to escape from the islands to the mainland, or to move from their officially allotted camp to another, where they usually remain unregistered. They may also travel for seasonal work (running the risk of losing their camp accommodation and financial assistance if their employment becomes known) or they may remain official residents of the camp but actually move to a rented apartment in the city.

For migrants living in protracted displacement in Italy, regardless of their legal and administrative status, mobility within the country represents a major survival strategy. This is typically an employment-driven circular mobility, with migrants following employment opportunities across the country (for example, seasonal agricultural workers who follow the harvest seasons).

Intra-European movements may take different forms, depending on integration prospects (however limited), labour market

opportunities (however precarious), and political geography itself (with Italy bordering three other Schengen countries while Greece borders none). Overall, 'secondary movements' are widely practised, even when not strictly legal. Intra-EU mobility from Italy, in particular, is usually a 'two-way' path with frequent back-and-forth movements; movements from Greece, by contrast, are mainly 'one-way'.

It is very common for protection beneficiaries in Italy to move to another EU country, find an informal job and settle irregularly. This subsistence migration is circular, involving periodic returns to renew their Italian residence permit (every two or five years, depending on the form of protection granted). However, in order to renew the permit, an official residential address in Italy is needed. As migrants rarely have such an address, a profitable illegal market has developed to provide fake documents. This situation is often defined by migrants themselves as a 'trap' whereby, in order to remain 'legal' in country A, one has to stay irregularly in country B and resort to illegal activities.

Similarly, intra-EU mobility is widespread among protection beneficiaries in Greece, triggered by harsh living conditions and limited integration prospects, and also related to where forced migrants have networks in the places they wish to reach. Some migrants attempt to entirely avoid the asylum system's immobilising effects from the very beginning, for instance by crossing the northeastern land border with Turkey. Such a strategy enables them to avoid being identified by State officials and prohibited from onward travel, and to cross subsequent borders irregularly (supported by illegal markets providing housing and fake documents). Similar channels may be used to later pursue legal mobility routes: a spouse, or even children, may be smuggled to relatives in a northern European country, in order to allow, at a later stage, asylum applicants in Greece to reunite with family members under Dublin. A paradox thus arises, by which irregularity allows mobility whereas 'legality' actually prevents it.

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The additional immobilising effects of COVID-19

COVID-19 restrictions produced further disruptions of mobility at different levels: within Italy and Greece, across the EU and to/from countries of origin or transit. Measures restricting mobility and imposing social distancing had an especially heavy impact on migrants living in protracted displacement, with those hosted in reception facilities subject to increased prohibitions and controls. Almost all transfers, entries and exits from the asylum system were suspended, and migrants lost their limited educational and recreational opportunities, and their meagre sources of income.

Travel bans and border closures led to a drop in transits to other European destinations. In the Italian case, during the first wave, the complete freezing of secondary intra-EU and internal mobility deprived seasonal agricultural workers of their only means

of subsistence, impoverishing them further. At the same time, those who found themselves temporarily outside the country (whether elsewhere in Europe or in the countries of origin) were then stuck and could not return.

The constrained mobility strategies described above became impracticable in both countries, transforming life into “a sort of hyper-limbo, where the usual levels of immobilisation and marginalisation are enhanced by COVID-related restrictions”, as an interviewee in Rome told us.

Policy implications and future outlook

The important role that constrained mobility has in shaping everyday lives and prospects of migrants living in protracted displacement in Greece and Italy is either ignored or stigmatised by official policy discourse. It is ignored as long as mobility takes place under the radar of the media and regulatory agencies, as is usually the



Mória refugee camp, Lesvos (Greece), 2018.

case with seasonal employment-driven movements within receiving States. However, when constrained mobility takes place across State borders it quickly becomes a target for media stigmatisation and administrative obstructionism (or even criminalisation). This is counterproductive, as it neglects the potential of mobility as a resource capable of mitigating suffering and reducing the losses experienced by people living in protracted displacement. Such mobility may even be seen as a 'fourth durable solution', as suggested elsewhere in this special feature.

However much it may be needed, a different and more positive attitude towards migrants' mobility would require overcoming massive political obstacles at both the domestic and European level. It is difficult to normalise and facilitate employment-driven circular mobility – for example, by providing proper housing, registered residence and health assistance on agricultural sites – because of the largely irregular and highly exploitative nature of employment in these sectors, both in Italy and in Greece. A step forward could be to relax the excessive controls and prohibitions over asylum seekers' mobility while in reception facilities.

A strategy which recognises and enables intra-EU cross-border mobility faces even bigger obstacles due to the entrenched resistance of most member States to any legalisation of such movements. This was clear during the disrupting (but revealing) legal and political battle over the EU's 2015 relocation schemes. The undocumented status of a large proportion of migrants living in protracted displacement is an even more serious political hurdle.³ For this especially vulnerable cohort of people, some form of collective amnesty or case-by-case regularisation procedure would be necessary before any pragmatic reflection on facilitating mobility could begin. However, there is currently very little appetite among EU governments to pursue this option. Unless these political hurdles can be tackled it may be pointless to explore different potential technical

solutions (such as complementary pathways, intra-EU job search visas, and free movement for protection beneficiaries).⁴

Finally, it is worth commenting that there is now growing awareness of the risk posed when marginalised migrants, especially if undocumented, are not effectively included in COVID-19 vaccination campaigns.⁵ In addition to leaving migrants unprotected, slower and lower-than-average vaccine coverage may also increase the risk of migrants being scapegoated as potential vectors of virus variants and future waves of contagion. Targeted efforts to ensure vaccine equity are therefore critically important to avoid further marginalisation, additional immobilisation and an overall worsening of protracted displacement.

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1. People who have been granted 'international protection' status (including both refugee status and subsidiary protection) or national-based complementary forms of protection (which in Italy are mainly used).
2. The ESTIA accommodation programme provides (temporary) housing in rented apartments in Greek cities to the most vulnerable asylum seekers until one month after their asylum claim decision. From late 2020, its management gradually shifted from UNHCR to the Greek government and since January 2021 the programme (renamed ESTIA 21) has been entirely managed by the Greek government. <http://estia.unhcr.gr/en/>
3. A 2019 study estimated the number of undocumented migrants living in the EU in 2017 at between 3.9 and 4.8 million, about half residing in Germany and the UK alone. <https://pewrsr.ch/3neyKQw>
4. Wagner M and Katsiaficas C (2021) 'Networks and mobility: A case for complementary pathways', TRAFIG Policy Brief No 3 bit.ly/2X4L8lg
5. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2021) 'Reducing COVID 19 transmission and strengthening vaccine uptake among migrant populations in the EU/EEA' bit.ly/3jVxwYC