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The challenge of irregular migration in the Aegean Sea: an analysis of its causes, impact, and solutions

Migración Irregular en el Mar Egeo: Migración irregular en Grecia, causas, consecuencias y contramedidas

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Abstract

This article examines irregular migration in the Aegean Sea, focusing on its causes, consequences, and countermeasures. The study employed a narrative literature review to identify key themes and synthesize findings on irregular migration, offering a qualitative and interpretative overview of the current situation along the Eastern Mediterranean route. The research delves into the complexities of illegal human movements in the Aegean, analyzing statistical data on sea arrivals and apprehensions. The Turkey-Greece corridor's appeal for asylum seekers is explored, alongside contributing factors to the increase in irregular migration. The refugee crisis has prompted Greece and the EU to implement strategies such as Frontex, Integrated Border Management, Hellenic Coast Guard modernization, agreements with neighboring countries, and enhanced border security to address this challenge.

Keywords: irregular migration, Aegean Sea, Greece-Turkey corridor, refugee.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la migración irregular en el Mar Egeo, centrándose en sus causas, consecuencias y contramedidas. Utilizamos una revisión narrativa de la literatura para identificar temas clave sobre la migración irregular, sintetizando y analizando los datos para resumir hallazgos e identificar lagunas. Nuestra investigación ofrece una perspectiva cualitativa e interpretativa, presentando una narrativa coherente sobre el estado actual de la migración irregular a lo largo de la ruta del Mediterráneo Oriental. El estudio aborda diferentes enfoques para interpretar la migración irregular y describe las peculiaridades de los movimientos humanos ilegales en el Mar Egeo. Se analizaron datos estadísticos que muestran el número de llegadas por mar y detenciones en la región. Analizamos por qué el corredor Turquía-Grecia es preferido por muchos solicitantes de asilo y los factores que impulsan el aumento de la migración irregular. La crisis de refugiados ha obligado a Grecia y a las autoridades de la UE a implementar estrategias para contrarrestar este fenómeno en el Mar Egeo. Estas estrategias incluyen la creación de Frontex, la implementación de la Gestión Integrada de Fronteras, la modernización de la Guardia Costera Helénica, acuerdos con países vecinos, y la mejora de la seguridad fronteriza.

Palabras clave: migración irregular, mar egeo, corredor greco-turco, refugiados.

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Introduction

The social, economic, political, and technological developments that have occurred recently have created the premises for significant changes in human movements. Currently, human migration has been one of the top public concerns and political agenda items in the world. Both historically and currently, most migrants move to take advantage of opportunities since they migrate between rural and urban territories (Guresci, 2022), developing and developed regions (Oleribe & de la Fuente, 2022), or they flee war, violence, or natural disasters seeking safety, protection, and access to human rights (Alarcón, 2022; Javanbakht, 2022). In some cases, people may decide to migrate in an irregular manner because they consider legal channels limited or time-consuming due to restrictive immigration policies, long waiting times for visas, or strict eligibility criteria.

It is not always easy to define what irregular immigration means and which individuals can be considered as irregular migrants. Although the concept is treated as evident in media and political discourses, it is not easy to find agreement on the best term with which to denote irregular migration (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023). In the context of European Union (EU) legislation, there is no accurate terminology to describe irregular migration since the migration management systems of the 27 EU member countries differ from each other (Morehouse & Blomfield, 2011). Irregular or illegal migration refers to policy of admission of foreigners into a different national space and the aspirations to mobility of people who are not entitled to enter or settle in (Triandafyllidou & Bartolini, 2020). Other researchers indicate that irregular migration movement of persons takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the state of origin, transit or destination (Sigona et al., 2021). Irregular migration can occur in the different ways. Firstly, it is associated with legal entering another country but providing false information and documentation (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022). Secondly, it happens when a person enters another state legally but exceeds the legal duration of residence granted (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023). Thirdly, irregular migration deals with giving birth or being born in the country of illegal transit (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022). Fourthly, irregular migrants encounter expiration of legal residence or work permit duration due to loss of status (Morehouse & Blomfield, 2011). An extensive literature shows that the increasing irregular migration is related to the effects of globalization because open borders bring complex and multileveled transformations and become the reason for states' weakness and ineffectiveness in controlling international migration (Çıtak, 2019; Echeverría, 2020; Shakun, 2022). Predictably, such situation creates the aspirations for a new legal paradigm aimed at governing the large movements of migrants and refugees across international borders (Filipova et al., 2021).

In addition, digitalization has a significant effect on illegal migration, influencing various aspects of the phenomenon through information dissemination, communication and coordination, online recruitment, digital surveillance and border control (Kryvoshein, 2023; Morgan, 2023). Currently, irregular migration is a growing concern in migration policies across Europe (Purkayastha et al., 2023). According to Frontex, around 330 000 irregular border crossings were detected at EU's external border in 2022. This is the highest number since 2016 and an increase of 64% in comparison with the previous year (Frontex, 2023b). The migration route of the Eastern Mediterranean is one of the regions where these irregular migrations are prevalent. The rugged structure of the Aegean coast between Turkey and Greece and the close physical between the Aegean islands of Turkey and Greece can facilitate irregular crossings. Undoubtedly, the uncontrolled immigration has caused serious problems in the Aegean, which has become the main "gates" of illegal entry (Keady-Tabbal & Mann, 2023; Tzagkarakis et al., 2021). The present study provides a descriptive analysis of irregular migration in Greece, its causes and consequences. Also, we outline the effective countermeasures against irregular migration in the Aegean Sea after the Arab Spring process started in 2011 and the subsequent political and social events led to significant movements along the Eastern Mediterranean migration route.

From 2021 to 2023, irregular migration in the Aegean Sea continued to be a significant issue, reflecting ongoing geopolitical tensions and the impact of regional conflicts. In 2021, Frontex reported a noticeable increase in irregular crossings in the Aegean Sea, driven primarily by migrants and refugees fleeing instability in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Turkey. This wave was noticed after a period of relative calm during the COVID-19 pandemic, with around 60,000 irregular crossings recorded by Frontex that year (Frontex, 2021). The following year, 2022, saw a continued but fluctuating flow of irregular migration. The number of crossings remained high, with approximately 50,000 recorded incidents. Factors contributing to this trend included shifting migration routes and strengthened border controls (Frontex, 2022). The Greek authorities and their European counterparts intensified their efforts to manage and reduce

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these flows through increased surveillance and border patrols. In 2023, irregular migration in the Aegean Sea demonstrated a further decrease, with around 40,000 irregular crossings reported. This decline can be attributed to enhanced cooperation between European nations, stricter border enforcement, and the implementation of various EU migration policies aimed at controlling flows and improving border management (Frontex, 2023a).

However, the situation remained changeable due to ongoing regional conflicts and the sophisticated tactics used by smugglers and migrants (Augustova et al., 2021). The efforts by the EU and national authorities to address the root causes of migration and improve reception conditions continue to be crucial in managing this complex issue. The authors consider that the understanding and interpreting irregular migrations occurring on the Turkey-Greece route in the Eastern Mediterranean could provide conceptual benefits to migration research.

Research design and methods

In the present study, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to investigate the concept of irregular migration in a holistic and truly manner and to address struggling against irregular migration in Greece to find an adequate and shared response. Since the literature review is a way of synthesizing research findings to show evidence on a meta-level and to uncover the areas in which more research is needed, it is an important approach that is widely used to develop the theoretical frameworks and build the conceptual models in the field (Snyder, 2019; Turnbull, Chugh, & Luck, 2023). Besides, the narrative literature review oriented towards revealing causes, consequences and effective countermeasures against illegal migration was designed to conceptualize the topic differently and examine it in detail within diverse disciplines such as history, economics, politics, law, sociology, environmental studies, media, and security science.

In the context of irregular migration in the Aegean, we applied a narrative literature review that represents a summary and synthesis of existing literature on the particular topic, given in a narrative format (Basheer, 2022). The research provided qualitative and interpretative overview of the literature and aimed at presenting a coherent narrative about the current state of irregular migration along the Eastern Mediterranean migration route. The narrative literature review was conducted in three stages: (1) organization of the literature, identification of key themes and concepts related to irregular migration; (2) synthesis and analysis of the literature, discussing conflicting findings and alternative theories in the field, development of the narrative itself; (3) summarizing the main findings, identifying gaps in the current literature, suggesting potential directions for future research.

In preparing a manuscript, we relied on the qualitative methods to analyze, organize, and present the literature in a meaningful way. The methods we applied included: literature search to identify a broad range of studies that contribute to the understanding of the topic of irregular migration; categorization and thematic analysis to organize the selected literature into categories based on key concepts, themes, and trends related to the process of irregular migration in the Aegean; critical evaluation to assess the methodological quality, strengths, and limitations of individual studies in the area; synthesis of findings to develop a coherent narrative, to identify patterns across different investigations, and discuss how each contributes to the overall understanding of the research problem; narrative development to structure the review in a logical and chronological manner. When conducting the narrative literature review on the problem of irregular migration along the Eastern Mediterranean migration route, the authors adhered to ethical principles to ensure the integrity and responsible use of scientific data.

When studying the research topic, several research tiers were revealed. Firstly, a number of scholars refer to the analysis of migration routes and patterns (Manafi & Roman, 2022; Rowe & Patias, 2020). They examined the routes taken by irregular migrants and the factors influencing migration decisions and the impact of changing border controls and policies. Secondly, some works are devoted to the refugee crisis in the Aegean. Öztürk & Erkan (2023) discussed the humanitarian conditions faced by migrants and the security measures in the region. Thirdly, the problems of border control and enforcement were discussed by Beste (2021) and Martins (2023). Fourthly, the impact on host communities was investigated in the works of Kousis, Chatzidaki, & Kafetsios (2022). And fifthly, some studies deal with the legal and ethical dimensions of irregular migrations (Keady-Tabbal & Mann, 2023). Here, the legal frameworks governing migration and asylum, including the rights of migrants and refugees under international law, were evaluated.

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In this regard, it is considered that this study could provide a new perspective to the existing literature and a different viewpoint on the issue of irregular migration. Also, it could assess the effectiveness of existing migration policies in Greece and explore the alternative approaches to managing irregular migration in the Aegean Sea that has been demonstrating the highest increase in the recent years.

Results and discussion

Irregular Migration in Stormy Waters: The Aegean Sea and the Turkey-Greece Corridor

Geographical location plays a critical role in terms of the characteristics and occurrence of irregular migrations. Factors such as being an intercontinental transit route, bordering important land and sea routes, etc., can create appealing effects in terms of migrations. Greece served as the initial point of the "Balkan corridor" while transferring asylum seekers, under the Dublin Regulation had been suspended, between EU countries with high social and economic development levels and the Middle East region known for political and economic instability including government crises, civil wars, and human rights violations (Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2022). Irregular migrants when choose Greece that is often referred to as a "Soft Spot" to enter into the EU are influenced by a combination of geographical, geopolitical, and socio-economic factors. Primarily, it is geographical proximity of the country to several source regions in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa that makes Greece a natural entry point (Kuschminder & Waidler, 2020). Also, the Eastern Mediterranean Sea serves as a common route for irregular migrants due to its numerous islands (İçduygu & Altıok, 2024). The physical proximity of the Greek islands and geographical formations in the Aegean Sea to Turkey, the ambiguity of the Turkey-Greece continental shelf, the geographical structure of the sea and coasts allowing for irregular crossings, favorable climate, and the long and rugged nature of coastal borders create opportunities for irregular crossings through this region (Dinas et al., 2019). Other factor deals with the fact that Greece is part of the Schengen Zone, an area within the EU where passport controls are largely abolished. Once migrants enter Greece, they gain easier access to other Schengen countries without facing additional border checks (Kuschminder & Waidler, 2020). At the same time, Greece shares a land border with Turkey, which has been a transit country for migrants attempting to enter Europe. The challenging topography, especially in the Aegean region, has made it difficult for Greek authorities to fully control and monitor the border (İçduygu & Altıok, 2024). Other findings state that the choice of entry point can be influenced by the variation in asylum policies among EU member states (Dimitriadi, 2023). For example, migrants may choose countries perceived to have more favorable asylum policies. For Greece, until 2011 it lacked a sufficient legal framework to process and host asylum seekers and had been severely criticized for failing to provide to asylum applicants a functioning asylum process (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2020; Dimitriadi, 2023). In addition, the present of human smuggling networks facilitating irregular migration routes can influence migrants' choices. These networks may advertise certain routes or destinations, including those leading to Greece (Kinacioğlu, 2023). In the first six months of 2013 approximately 3,000 irregular migrants were caught at the Turkey-Greece border corridor. The number increased to 23,000 in the first six months of 2014 that highlights the size of the problem posed by irregular migration (Dimitriadi, 2022). According to the Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG, 2021) Headquarters, they apprehended 9,357 irregular migrants and refugees in the Aegean Sea, and the number reached 847,930 in 2015. In recent years the number has been decreasing. In 2020 and 2020 the number of irregular migrants and refugees was 9,837 and 4,184 respectively (Makri et al., 2022)

Figure 1 shows apprehensions in the Aegean Sea between 2013 and 2021.

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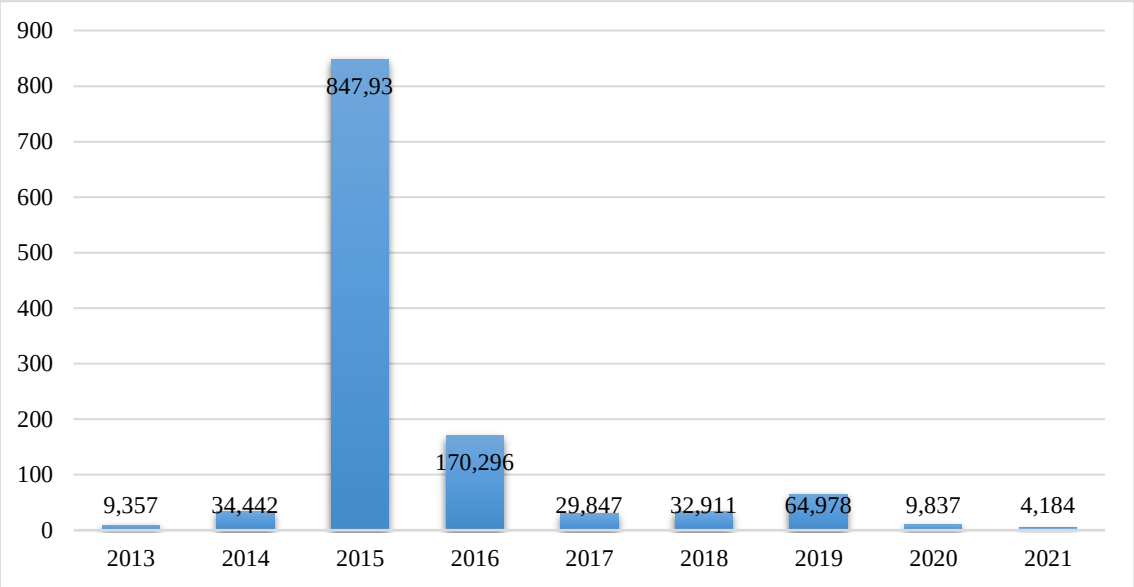

Figure 1. Number of irregular migrants and refugees apprehended in the Aegean Sea between 2013 and 2021. Source: Makri et al., (2022)

According to the data published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), approximately 1,000,000 refugees entered Greece through irregular migration over Turkey via Eastern Mediterranean Migration Route in 2015 and 97% of these were sea arrivals. As of 2023, the number of irregular border crossing via sea routes prevail and accounted for more than 85% from the total. So far in 2015 there were 799 deaths and disappearances in the Eastern Mediterranean. Table 1 shows total arrivals through the entire Eastern Mediterranean route.

Table 1.
Total arrivals in the entire Eastern Mediterranean.

Year	Sea arrivals	Lans arrivals	Dead and missing
2023	41,584	7,160	710
2022	12,758	6,022	343
2021	4,331	4,826	115
2020	9,714	5,982	105
2019	59,726	14887	71
2018	32,494	18,014	187
2017	29,718	6,592	56
2016	173,450	3,784	441
2015	856,723	4,907	799
2014	41,038	2,280	405

Source: UNHCR (2024).

It is worth mentioning that thousands of migrants have made their way illegally into Greece from Turkey, using smuggling networks. Every year Greek authorities have arrested people for allegedly smuggling migrants across the Aegean Sea. Taking into account the data of the HCG Headquarters, in 2013 118 smugglers were apprehended. In 2015 there were already 482. Since 2018 their numbers have decreased and reached 79 in 2021 (Makri et al., 2022). The islands of Lesvos (Midilli), Chios (Sakız), Samos (Sisam), Kos (İstanköy), and Leros (Leryoz), located in the Aegean Sea and belonging to Greece, are among the first locations, where refugees arrive first, due to their proximity to Turkey (Katsanevakis, 2015). The proximity of 95 habitable islands in the Aegean Sea to Turkey makes irregular migrants to establish a permanent life there (Dinas et al., 2019). However, since the geographical, social, and economic capacities of these islands are insufficient to absorb these refugee populations, various problems may occur in areas including shelter, nutrition, health, and education (Alarcón, 2022). Many migrants crossed the Meriç (Evros) River which runs along most of the land border between Greece and Turkey (Pavlidis & Karakasi, 2019). Greece attempted to prevent uncontrolled and irregular migration by fencing off the shores of the river, but this was not a definitive solution (Öztürk & Erkan, 2023). Considering that most of refugees, who reached

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Europe in 2015, were irregular migrants crossing from to the Aegean islands, it can be clearly seen that irregular migrations became a global issue of concern, not only for Greece.

Causes and Effects of Irregular Migration in Greece

Greece's borders with Turkey in the east and south and the border with Albania in the north are common passage routes for numerous migrants, particularly from Africa and Asia (Nikas & Aspasios, 2021). The Turkey-Greece corridor is preferred by many asylum seekers from such countries as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sub-Sahara, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine trying to enter Europe as they are forcibly displaced from their homeland, being victims of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Many of irregulars are usually undocumented labor migrants (Pries & Savci, 2023; Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2022).

Many irregulars flee due to the deteriorating humanitarian conditions, such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, violence, and insecurity, natural disaster, or famine in the states of origin. Turmoil or warfare, like in the Horn of Africa and Sudan, constitutes another major driver. In addition, the so-called "Arab Spring" caused a surge of irregular migrants running to Europe, including Greece. Full-fledged wars or armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have also increased migration flows significantly (Makri et al., 2022). Other factors include terrorism, prolonged repressive regimes, and inequality. These have affected the decision of individuals residing in the Middle East to migrate (Boissonneault & Costa, 2023). Furthermore, lack of legal rights, limited access to services such as healthcare, education, municipal services, and banking, severe working conditions, problems experienced regarding work permits, poor living standards, experiences of marginalization or discrimination, have led to leaving the state of origin (Ferwerda & Gest, 2021) 60% registered refugees, who sought asylum on the Greek islands from the beginning of 2015 to 3 July 2015, were Syrian (Katsanevakis, 2015). In 2018, top three nationalities of irregular migrants apprehended in the Aegean Sea were from Afghanistan, Siria, and Iraq (Makri et al., 2022).

According to the UNHCR, in 2023, the majority 4,749 refugees and asylum-seekers, who arrived in Greece by sea, are from the State of Palestine (23%), Afghanistan (11%), Somalia (10%), Eritrea (9%), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (9%). Women account for 22%, children for 21% and men for 57% (UNHCR, 2024). Approximately 1% of irregular migrants entering via the Turkey-Greece route were individuals Iran, facing various challenges such as conflict, persecution, or economic hardship, may also choose to seek asylum or better opportunities within the EU (Ballière, 2023). In 2024, the Eastern Mediterranean still remains as a preferred route for many people seeking for asylum. Thus, 1,331 irregular arrivals were counted and 1,157 of them were done in the Aegean Sea (UNHCR, 2024). Figure 2 shows the designations of irregular migrants in the Aegean Sea in 2024.

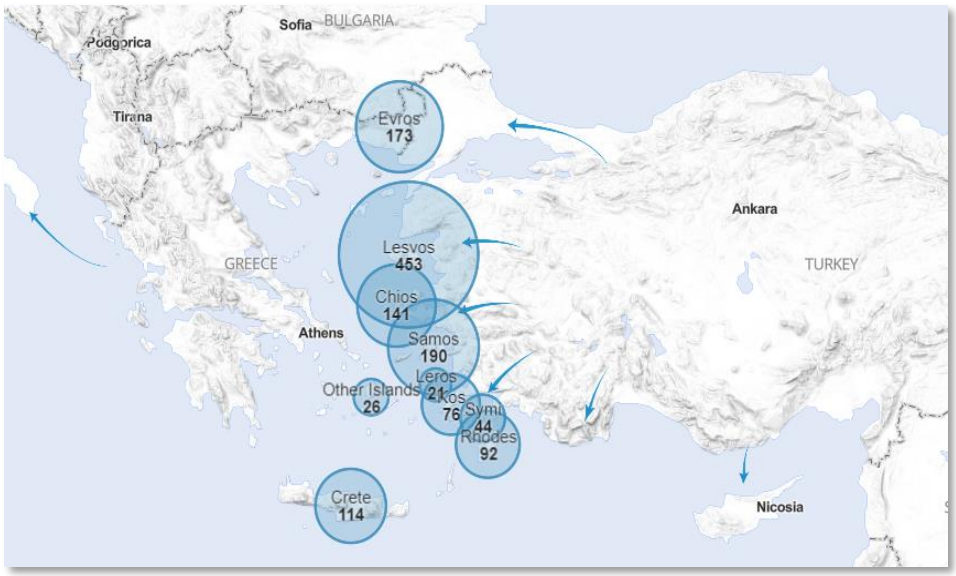

Figure 2. Number of irregular migrants who arrived to the Aegean islands in 2024. Source: UNHCR (2024).

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As irregular migration can be defined as the unlawful entry to another country or unlawful residence within that country, many individuals use illegal means to irregularly migrate to other countries, often seeking to circumvent official immigration channels. Some findings show that the reasons for this method involve avoiding danger as the action is prohibited and believing that they would access a secure and guarded route through migrant smugglers since they lack legal documentation (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023). A number of irregulars had applied for legal permits such as work permits, student visas, family reunification programs, and residency permits, but they chose this route due to negative responses (Haddeland, 2021). At the same time, many individuals decide migrate, hiding in unsanitary compartments of land or sea vehicles or being transferred to another vehicle, in ways that do not befit human dignity. Migrant smuggling networks are the methods used for these illicit crossings (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022; Tedeschi, 2022). Figure 3 shows refugees trying to illegally cross the border to the EU. Importantly, a significant portion of irregular migrations occurs due to technological applications such as GPS, mobile maps, and online cartographic information that facilitate these crossings (Alencar, Kondova, & Ribbens, 2019).

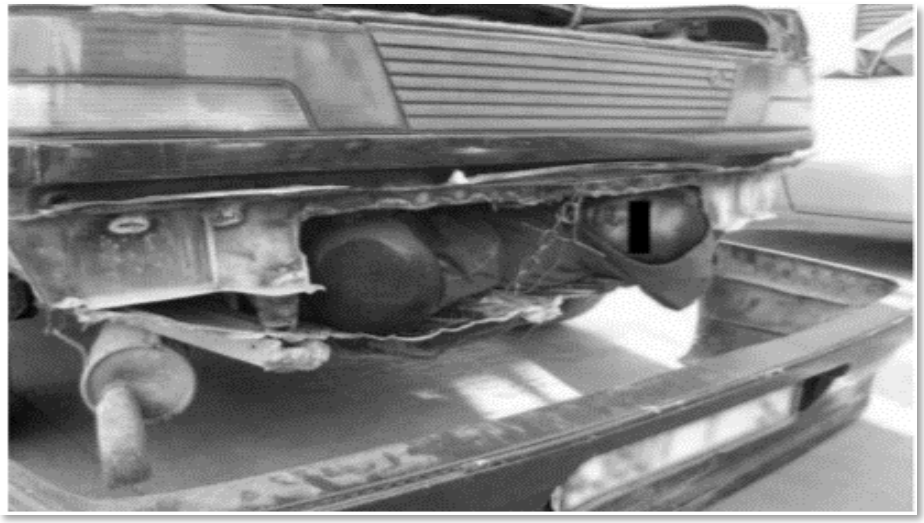

Figure 3. Refugees trying to illegally cross the border to the EU when hidden in a vehicle compartment. Source: UNODC (2011).

For the last years Greece has been experiencing a serious economic recession which was exacerbated because of during COVID-19 pandemic (Maris & Flouros, 2022; Stylianidis & Souliotis, 2019). Increase in unemployment rates, decreases in purchasing power, structural issues in the public sector, and high taxes can lead to increased social tension. The influx of migrants from Asia and Africa, deepened the illegal migrant and refugee crisis in Greece (Stylianidis & Souliotis, 2019) and affected social, economic, and political aspects.

According to recent findings, in Greece the economic impact is significant, especially in regions with high concentrations of migrants (Megalokonomou & Vasilakis, 2023). Local resources and services may be strained as municipalities deal with the increased demand for housing, healthcare, education, and social services (Alarcón, 2022). The presence of a large number of migrants affects the local job market significantly and there can be concerns about potential competition for low-skilled jobs and downward pressure on wages (Blouchoutzi et al., 2023). The integration of migrants into the Greek society can be a complex process due to cultural and linguistic differences, varying levels of education and skills. Moreover, the influx of migrants causes the increased demand for public services, including healthcare, education, and housing (Ferwerda & Gest, 2021). The arrival of migrants, especially those in vulnerable situations, raises humanitarian concerns.

Greece, as an EU member state, is part of broader discussions and agreements regarding the management of migration flows. The handling of the migrant influx can influence Greece's relationships with other EU member states and impact broader European cooperation on migration issues. Thus, on September 23, 2020, the European Commission released its draft Pact on Asylum and Migration aimed to launch an effective approach to migration based on "flexible solidarity," allowing different member states different roles, contain the elements of a successful migration policy (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2020).

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Thus, the negotiations have been still ongoing since the Pact require agreement among EU member states on certain aspects, including issues related to the distribution of responsibility and solidarity among member states, may face challenges due to differing opinions and interests.

In addition, irregular migration is a concept considered to be in connection with human trafficking, migrant smuggling, international terrorism, and transnational crimes. This is because irregular migration events have been associated with terrorist attacks and bombings, leading to discussions on national security and border security (Baker-Beall, 2019). The fact that the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the bombings in Madrid in 2004, the attacks in the UK in 2007, and the terrorist acts against the Charlie Hebdo magazine in France in 2015 were committed by migrant, we observe the cases citizens are against the presence of settled migrants. This situation has had serious effects on anti-immigrant sentiment, racism, xenophobia, and voter behavior, including the strengthening of far-right, racist, anti-migrant political parties (Dinas et al., 2019; Galantino, 2022; Vitiello, 2022). Therefore, irregular migration and the presence of asylum seekers may have a significant impact upon the security situation in Greece, including border security and law enforcement (Makri et al., 2022); social tensions Tsourapas & Zartaloudis (2022); capacity strain of services; integration challenges, engagement of irregular migrants and asylum seekers in criminal activities, often due to economic desperation (Ferwerda & Gest, 2021); spread of broader transnational issues, including cross-border crime (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023). Obviously, comprehensive and well-coordinated countermeasures that address migration will enhance border management and promote integration of irregular migrants.

Countermeasures of the EU and Greece Against Irregular Migration

Greece, a member of the EU, has become increasingly associated with significant irregular migration flows and a refugee population. Erupted in 2010, the refugee crisis has made Greece a key topic of domestic and foreign policies (Megalokonomou & Vasilakis, 2023) making Greek and EU authorities search for adequate solution.

In 2004, to safeguard its borders and enable member states to combat irregular migration the EU established Frontex (European Border and Coast Guard Agency) which undertakes a significant responsibility in addressing the migration pressure (Frontex, 2019). Well-equipped, Frontex personnel are actively engaged in counteracting to irregular migration movements. However, the harsh treatment of migrants by Frontex officials with military equipment raised the question of the balance between security and freedom. Also, the strict passport and visa policies of the EU, especially exemplified by Greece, intensify the talks about "securitization" and "externalization" of borders (Cusumano & Riddervold, 2023). Additionally, the concept of Integrated Border Management (IBM) was introduced that is implemented as a shared responsibility of Frontex or European Border and Coast Guard Agency and the national authorities responsible for border management, including coast guards to the extent that they carry out maritime border surveillance operations and border control tasks (Makri et al., 2022). In the context of irregular migration in Greece, the HCG is responsible for law enforcement at sea, ports and coastal areas, maritime border control, counteracting to irregular migration and human trafficking, drug interdiction, search and rescue jointly with the Hellenic Air Force and Hellenic Navy, etc. (HCG, 2021)

Another method employed by the EU and Greece to manage irregular migration is the agreements with neighboring countries. The agreement signed between the EU and Turkey on March 18, 2016, also known as the Aegean Agreement, which primary purpose is to establish a legal framework for the prompt and orderly return of individuals who have entered the EU irregularly and are found to be unauthorized to stay (Urbaneja Cillán, 2020). From April 2016 to November 2017, 1,360 refugees were readmitted to Turkey under the readmission agreement, 216 of whom were Syrian individuals (Alpes et al., 2017). At the same time, some authors claim that the readmission agreement erodes international legal principles and cause risk of serious human rights violations (Janmyr & Skribeland, 2020). Moreover, the agreement has contributed significantly to prevention of deaths in the Aegean Sea and dismantle networks of irregular migrant smuggling (Çavuşoğlu, 2016). Currently, the EU seeks the possibilities to establish migration cooperation agreements with North African countries. For example, on June 2023, during the negotiations in Brussels the EU Commission President proposed a broad cooperation agreement, potentially worth over €1 billion, to Tunisian President. The draft agreement if oriented towards combatting people-smugglers, strengthening maritime border control by Tunisians, and sea rescue and repatriation of Tunisians staying illegally in Europe (Jacqué, 2023).

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Reception is one of effective strategies of asylum management and concerns service provisions like identification, screening and submission of an asylum application rendering the individual under the care of the host state. Also, reception guarantees an access to legal assistance, counselling, healthcare, shelter, food, interpretation, education particularly for children, and special accommodation for vulnerable groups (Mantanika & Arapoglou, 2022).

In Greece there are two types of administrative detention centers: closed centers for illegal immigrants who are under administrative detention; open centers for asylum seekers where they get language training, legal assistance, and can undergo social integration programs (Marmani, 2023). With staffing shortages and financial limitations, the Asylum Service becomes operational only in 2013, and the first Regional Asylum Office outside of Athens, opened in 2015 in Thessaloniki, with branches in Thrace, Epirus, Thessaly, Western Greece, Crete, Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Rhodes. The First Reception Center in the land border of Evros (Fylakio center) was opened in 2013 (Dimitriadi, 2023).

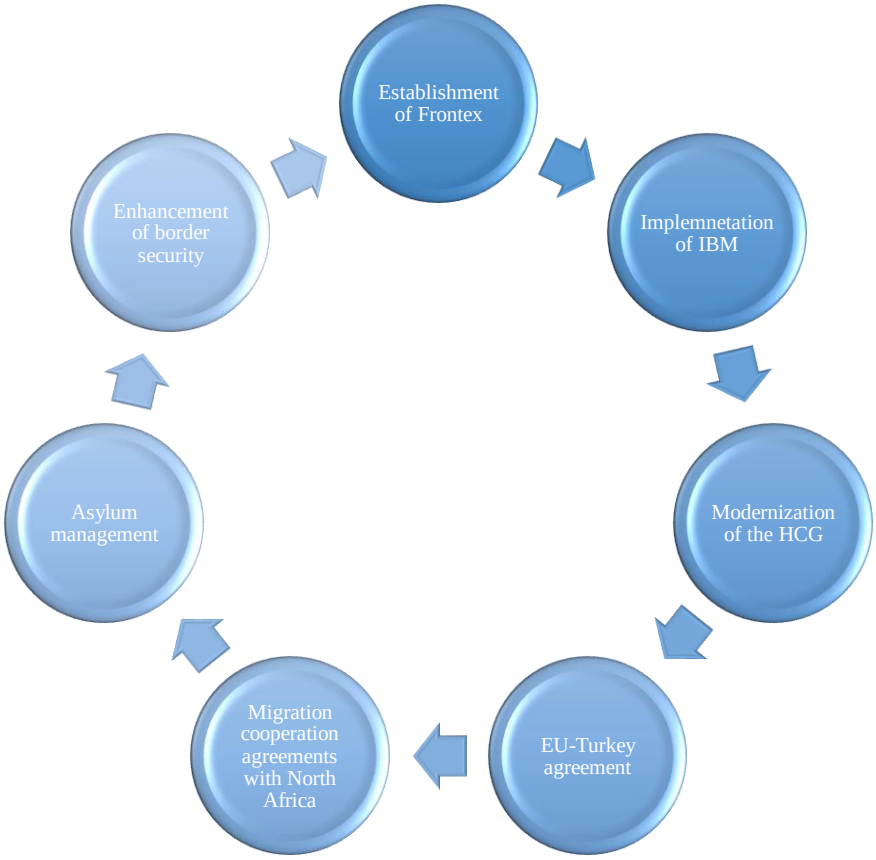

Figure 4. The strategies of the EU and Greece against irregular migration.

Besides, Greece has implemented various measures to enhance its border security, particularly in response to challenges related to irregular migration and the movement of people across its borders. The enhancement of border security includes: deployment of border patrol and coast guard personnel to key border areas, including land borders and coastal regions (HCG, 2021); the use of technology, including surveillance systems, drones, and sensors to improve monitoring along the borders Castiglione (2022), construction of physical infrastructure along the land and sea borders like fences, barriers, and checkpoints Castiglione, (2022), Karamanidou & Kasparek (2022) close cooperation with Frontex to benefit from joint operations and information exchange (Perkowski et al., 2023); advanced training border control personnel, providing them with the necessary skills and knowledge to address the complexities of irregular migration and border security (Karamanidou & Kasparek, 2022). Figure 4 summarizes the strategies of the EU and Greece against irregular migration.

We must admit that addressing irregular migration in the Aegean Sea requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach, involving not only border control measures but also efforts to address root causes, protect human rights, and ensure a fair and efficient asylum process. The effectiveness of these strategies

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may vary over time and may be influenced by factors such as geopolitical developments and changes in migration patterns.

At the same time, the research refers to a number of political and social implications that were formulated from the complex issue of irregular migration. Definitely, on the one hand, the influx of irregular migrants tensed the relations between the EU member states, particularly between frontline countries like Greece and other EU nations. Misunderstandings often arise over the distribution of responsibility for managing migrants and effectiveness of EU migration policies. On the other hand, the impact of irregular migration is significant, affecting both the migrants themselves and the local communities. Irregulars often face not comfortable conditions, which lead to health and safety concerns. For locals, the sudden arrival of large numbers of people strains public services and infrastructure, creating social tensions. Therefore, the research outcomes may be used to provide effective integration measures within the communities, contributing to stabilization of the situation in the Aegean. Other solutions must include enhancement of regional cooperation to address the root causes of migration, such as conflicts and economic instability in countries of origin. Besides, the findings can be implied for the development of efficient processing systems for asylum seekers as well as the implementation of various innovative technologies and approaches for border management to create a more balanced and sustainable pattern to counteract to irregular migration in the Aegean Sea.

Conclusions

Irregular migration refers to policy of admission of foreigners into a different national space and the aspirations to mobility of people who are not entitled to enter or settle in. Irregular migration can occur in the different ways: through legal entering another country but providing false information and documentation; entering another state legally but exceeding the legal duration of residence granted; giving birth or being born in the country of illegal transit; encountering expiration of legal residence or work permit duration due to loss of status. Currently, the increasing irregular migration is related to the effects of globalization because open borders bring complex and multileveled transformations and become the reason for states' weakness and ineffectiveness in controlling international migration.

The migration route of the Eastern Mediterranean is one of the regions where these irregular migrations are prevalent. The rugged structure of the Aegean coast between Turkey and Greece and the close physical between the Aegean islands of Turkey and Greece can facilitate irregular crossings. Irregular migrants when choose Greece to enter into the EU are influenced by a combination of geographical, geopolitical, and socio-economic factors. Primarily, it is geographical proximity of the country to several source regions in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa that makes Greece a natural entry point. Also, the Eastern Mediterranean Sea serves as a common route for irregular migrants due to its numerous islands. Other factor deals with the fact that Greece is part of the Schengen Zone, an area within the EU where passport controls are largely abolished. At the same time, Greece shares a land border with Turkey, which has been a transit country for migrants attempting to enter Europe.

Findings show that many irregulars flee due to the deteriorating humanitarian conditions, such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, violence, and insecurity, natural disaster, or famine in the states of origin. Full-fledged wars or armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have also increased migration flows significantly. Other reasons include terrorism, prolonged repressive regimes, and inequality. Furthermore, lack of legal rights, limited access to services such as healthcare, education, municipal services, and banking, severe working conditions, problems experienced regarding work permits, poor living standards, experiences of marginalization or discrimination, have led to leaving the state of origin. Today, the majority refugees and asylum-seekers, who arrived in Greece by sea, are from the State of Palestine, Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Women account for 22%, children for 21% and men for 57%. The influx of migrants from Asia and Africa, deepened the illegal migrant and refugee crisis in Greece and affected social, economic, and political aspects.

The refugee crisis has made Greece a key topic of domestic and foreign policies making Greek and EU authorities search for adequate solution. According to findings, the countermeasures include establishment of Frontex; implementation of IBM; modernization of HCG; concluding agreements with neighboring countries like the agreement signed between the EU and Turkey on March 18, 2016; establishment of migration cooperation agreements with North African countries; introduction of effective strategies of asylum management; enhancement of border security.

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At the same time, these strategies, addressing irregular migration, has its weaknesses. For example, Frontex sometimes faced criticism for limited operational capacity. The implementation of IBM and the modernization of the HCG contributed to enhancement of surveillance and border control. However, these measures can be hindered by insufficient resources and non-systemic training of personnel. The establishment of agreements with neighboring countries often encounters some obstacles related to political instability and different national interests that worsens the situation with the irregular migration in the Aegean. Additionally, the introduction of effective asylum management strategies and enhancement of border security struggle with a number of challenges, particularly balancing security with humanitarian concerns. Therefore, the effectiveness of the above-mentioned strategies often relies on broader regional cooperation and political will, which can be inconsistent. As a result, the research may not fully reveal the complexities of irregular migration in the region. Further research should concern the verification of countermeasures effectiveness and comparison of Greece's migration policy with legislation of other Mediterranean countries facing irregular migration.

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