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### **ESTIA: A New Home for Those in Limbo**

“In my country, the Taliban and Al Qaeda kill us in one go with a bullet. Here we’re dying gradually over a year. If we knew that Europe, that Greece, is like this, I would have preferred to die in my country.” This quote comes from a woman seeking refuge in Europe from turmoil in her home country (Kitsantonis, 2017). But along the way, just as she enters Europe, she faces a roadblock: the terrible conditions immigrants must live in for weeks, months, in Greece. Greece has been facing an influx of immigrants over the past several years, largely because of the wars tearing the Middle East apart, and the country was simply unprepared. Now, immigrants in Greece are facing terrible living conditions - conditions that can lead to starvation, malnutrition, and disease - that make immigrants question why they ever left their homes.

Greece is a country in southern Europe that has a population of roughly 11.2 million people. Of those people, about 79% live in urban areas, with the other 21% inhabiting the rural areas, according to Worldometers. Greece has a Representative Democratic Republic, with a Prime Minister and a Parliament leading its people. Although Greece has a Mediterranean climate, with mild, wet winters and hot, dry summers, it struggles agriculturally. This is due to the fact that less than one-third of Greece’s land is cultivable (Britannica). Mountains cover four-fifths of the country, with rocky plains and valleys making up the rest of the land. Where they can, the people of Greece grow barley, corn, wheat, sugar beets, tomatoes, peaches, olives for olive oil, and cotton, which makes them the only European Union (EU) cotton producer. The farms where these crops are grown are relatively small compared to American farms, which, according to Eurostat, are about 5.6 hectares on average, or roughly 14 acres.

Greece has a high immigrant population relative to other European countries. Many of these immigrants originally come from countries in the Middle East, and have fled to Europe to escape war. According to the New York Times, over a million immigrants entered Greece from 2014-2016, and many of them did not intend to stay. Many families enter Europe through Greece, but their final destinations are countries farther into Europe, like Germany and Sweden. Still, immigrants can end up staying in Greece for years, and some families ultimately decide to settle there. These families, generally, are small at first, and only consist of immediate family members until they settle into their new homes. Then, they may contact more extended family members, or even a second parent if only one made the original journey, to come join them in Europe. Many families have small children, and often, it is these children that are most susceptible to hunger, disease, and weather conditions (Sessa-Hawkins). Oftentimes, immigrants are unable to secure stable jobs when they first settle in Greece, so they receive federal aid that is supposed to provide them a basic living wage - however, this aid is part of the problem.

In contrast, family is an important aspect of traditional Greek culture. Typically, the nuclear family (the parent, or parents, as well as children) live together in one household. Still, extended family members are valued, and they usually remain close and in contact with immediate family members (Cultural Atlas). As stated above, the majority of Greece is urban, so more families live in urban areas than in rural areas. In 2008, Greece faced the beginning of an economic emergency, one that it is still recovering from, and the crisis’s effects were felt by families across the country. Many people faced unemployment, and, as their sources of income diminished, so did their food supply, according to Helena Smith of The Guardian, who wrote, “Against a backdrop of record unemployment, and with the country ensnared in its worst crisis in modern times, hardship is surfacing in ways that few would ever have foreseen. Hunger and

undernourishment are part of that spectre.” Today, even a decade later, families are facing hardship as a direct result of the crisis.

In 2010, according to Silvia Amaro, Greece received the first of three bailouts from other countries that were aimed at keeping Greece afloat economically. Although the bailouts were hefty sums, up to the equivalent of 8.4 billion American dollars, according to the New York Times, they were not as effective as many would have hoped. An article from the New York Times reads, “The money was supposed to buy Greece time to stabilize its finances and quell market fears that the euro union itself could break up. While it has helped, Greece’s economic problems have not gone away. The economy has shrunk by a quarter in five years, and unemployment is about 25 percent.” The article goes on to explain that most of the money in the bailouts went to paying off foreign debts, instead of going into Greece’s economy.

This meant that many Greek citizens saw little change in their daily lives, even though monumental improvements have been made. Still, things are looking up for Greece’s economy. According to CNBC, “2019 is expected to be the country’s third consecutive year of growth, at a pace of about 2.2 percent.”

Although the state of Greece’s economy is improving, the recent crisis complicates many things for many people. As stated above, it means that some Greek citizens, even today, face unemployment and food insecurity, and Greek immigrants fair no better. They too face food insecurity, malnutrition, and no source of steady income. The difference comes in the fact that, for immigrants, salvation may be farther down the road. The immigration reform that is discussed later in this essay would not come cheap, as with most government policy, meaning that, in a time where Greece has no money to spare, immigrants and their basic needs may be put on the backburner.

Countries across Europe have faced similar issues with immigration, and implemented different policies to try to find the best solutions. For example, in 2015, Germany opened its borders to almost one million immigrants, according to the Washington Post. However, this was met with much backlash, and the German government was pushed to abolish the policy. In Turkey, a country that has faced the immigration crisis head-on, the policies concerning immigrants and the aid they receive, particularly for cities and municipal organizations, is relatively vague. For example, M. Murat Erdogan states, “Municipal Law No. 5393 states that services are to be given to “citizens.” However, the law’s exact definition of who constitutes a citizen and whether those without Turkish citizenship may be eligible for municipal services is unclear.” Greece is not alone in its crisis to cope with its high levels of immigration; however, that does not mean it cannot work to develop a solution.

In 2016, three immigrants died in a camp on the island of Lesbos, which is one of the factors that spurred change (Kitsantonis). These three people are just a fraction of the victims of Greece’s flawed immigration system. In fact, over 3,500 people died on their journeys through Europe in 2015 alone. Granted, this statistic includes the entire journey immigrants make, but for many, that journey includes Greece. Essentially, it came down to Greece being unprepared for the influx of immigrants. As a country, it was used to a slower trickle of immigration, and their facilities and programs were only able to accommodate those people. Then, when the surge of immigrants began several years ago, the only thing Greece could do was react (Kitsantonis). Although Greece, compared to other EU countries, has suffered economically in recent years, meaning many of its citizens have fallen on hard times, their living conditions are still much, much better than the immigrants they share a country with.

Thankfully, immigrant populations entering Greece have reduced recently to more manageable levels, but thousands of immigrants are still affected each year. To combat this issue, Greece and the EU have created a “game changer,” as quoted by the European Commission’s head of humanitarian aid. Flavie

Halais writes, “In August, the European Commission announced a 209 million euro (\$245 million) emergency support package to provide cash assistance and rental housing for refugees in Greece.” This support package is part of a larger program called ESTIA, which means “home” in Greek. This program assists immigrants by providing them apartment housing in cities and a ‘basic living wage’. It also tries to assist immigrants in securing jobs and paperwork necessary to become legal residents of Greece (Halais). Although ESTIA may be a game changer, it is still flawed. ESTIA faces three major challenges: first, the apartments immigrants are set up with are not quality living spaces, and in some cases are entirely unlivable. Second, the ‘basic living wage’ immigrants are provided with is just not enough, and lastly, ESTIA does not account for the thousands of immigrants that do not wish to stay in Greece, and are only trying to pass through; those immigrants are still left in limbo.

ESTIA requires several simple modifications, but the new ESTIA could benefit so many more people. Firstly, the apartments and places of living ESTIA provides need to be addressed. Currently, apartments are sold to ESTIA, and then ESTIA works to help immigrants establish their homes in those apartments (European Commission). There are two major kinks in this plan. For one thing, the condition requirements that the apartments sold to ESTIA must meet are quite loose, which means that many immigrants are left with low quality places to live. Secondly, since ESTIA owns the apartments instead of a private landowner, the people living in those apartments have no one to contact when their heaters break or their water pressure is low (Halais). Essentially, immigrants are given broken apartments and no way to fix them.

Financial compensation in any situation only works when the money that is given is actually enough. ESTIA provides immigrants with what is called a basic living wage, but their aid often falls short. According to Flavie Halais, ESTIA provides immigrants in the program between 90 and 550 euros per month, compared to 586 euros per month, the legal gross minimum wage for a worker in the private sector, and 711 euros per month, the minimum wage for a worker in the public sector (KAT). Coupled with the fact that it is often difficult for immigrants to secure stable jobs, the compensation that ESTIA provides cannot truthfully be called a ‘basic living wage’.

According to PBS.org, close to 800,00 immigrants in 2015 alone chose to journey into Europe through Greece, to try to reach countries like Germany and Austria. Since ESTIA works to establish lives for immigrants staying in Greece, these 800,00 immigrants are left in the cold. They must stay in the traditional camps, the same camps that ESTIA tries to rescue people from. There is no doubt that ESTIA is a revolutionary program and one that has helped so many people, but now it needs to be expanded to help even more people: the forgotten people, the people living in limbo.

The answer to all three of these issues is simple to say, but it may be more difficult to implement. Essentially, ESTIA and the rest of the Greek government, along with the EU, should work to create hubs for immigrants as an alternative to traditional camps. These hubs would provide immigrants with a quality place to stay, and would eliminate the need to provide them with a basic living wage, since everything they would need would be in the hub. In addition, these hubs would be open to all immigrants, both those who choose to stay in Greece and those who are trying to journey through it to the rest of Europe. Although the hubs may seem more like college dormitories than five-star hotels, college dormitories are still leaps and bounds ahead of tent villages.

ESTIA's hubs would be completely self-sustained, thanks to the people who live there. Produce could be grown in the hubs in the form of greenhouses or even vertical farming, where beds of produce are stacked one on top of another in sturdy shelf-like structures. Vertical gardening is mentioned here to help combat the inevitable issue of space. Especially in large cities, it would be difficult to build sprawling hubs, so vertical farming would lessen that burden by growing up instead of out. ESTIA could work to employ immigrants to help maintain the produce and the hubs in general in a sort of symbiotic relationship: ESTIA gives refugees a place to stay, and refugees help to maintain that place. ESTIA could even pay immigrants who work a 'basic living wage', which, since they are already living in the hubs, would allow immigrants to save their money and have something to draw from in the future.

These hubs would serve a dual purpose, depending on if the people benefitting from them wanted to stay in Greece or travel to the rest of Europe. Hubs could be built in a sort of train across Greece, so that immigrants who travel through it would always have a place to stay along the way. For people who stay in Greece, the hubs would give them a foundation to build their life off of. For these people, ESTIA could help to establish lives for immigrants outside of the hubs.

These hubs may sound like a sort of Utopia, but they would be difficult to implement. For one thing, there is the issue of money. These hubs would no doubt cost a handsome sum, and where Greece could get that money remains in question. The EU has assisted Greece with millions of dollars in the past to help deal with the immigration crisis, and they could again, but that cannot be something that is relied upon like a crutch. Instead, the burden may fall on the people: citizens of Greece, and of the world, that work to raise funds for the program. Secondly, space and where to build these hubs is also an issue, even with vertical farming. However, the solution to this particular issue is simpler. There are already established places and camps that immigrants stay in throughout Greece, and hubs could be built there. In addition, these hubs would take time to establish. It could take months, years, alone to raise the funds needed for the hubs, if an organization like the EU were not to step in. However, with a passionate group of people with set goals and the supplies they need, an original network of hubs could be established within a year. Lastly, there is the fact that ESTIA's hubs can only be so big, and there will always be more refugees passing through. A time limit of how long immigrants could stay in these hubs would have to be established so as to make sure that the maximum number of people benefit from the program. In exchange, ESTIA would have to continue to assist immigrants in establishing lives outside of the hubs.

Although an extended ESTIA program is not without its flaws, it would greatly improve the lives of thousands of immigrants and refugees searching for better lives. The program would allow Greece to act proactively to try to address the issue of immigration, and even when the current crisis dies down, they would be equipped with strategies to cope with the next one. Even now, there are people in Greece living in a sort of limbo, forgotten by the world and Greece and the very program that is supposed to be helping them. This *would* help them, and so many more people too. If the solutions outlined in this paper were implemented, it would allow ESTIA to do exactly what its definition says: give people a home.

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