

Livadia

A win-win situation for newcomers and the local economy.

by Olga Lafazani

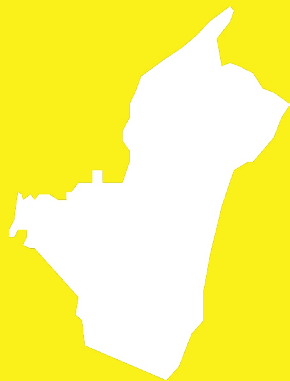


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1. Abstract & Takeaways

Key Takeaways:

1

Livadia's example proves that if city authorities are committed to creating structures to welcome refugees, there can be multiple benefits for both the refugees themselves and for local societies.

2

Good communication with locals was key to the success of housing programmes and prevented negative and racist reactions in the city.

3

Refugees were accommodated in the city centre rather than in camps, improving integration and dialogue with other residents.

What is unique about the city?

Better integration through accommodation in the city centre: Livadia was the first medium-sized Greek municipality, after Athens and Thessaloniki, to welcome refugees. In cooperation with UNHCR, it implemented the Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation programme (ESTIA) in November 2016. Since then, over 1,500 refugees have been accommodated in city centre apartments.

What are the key factors?

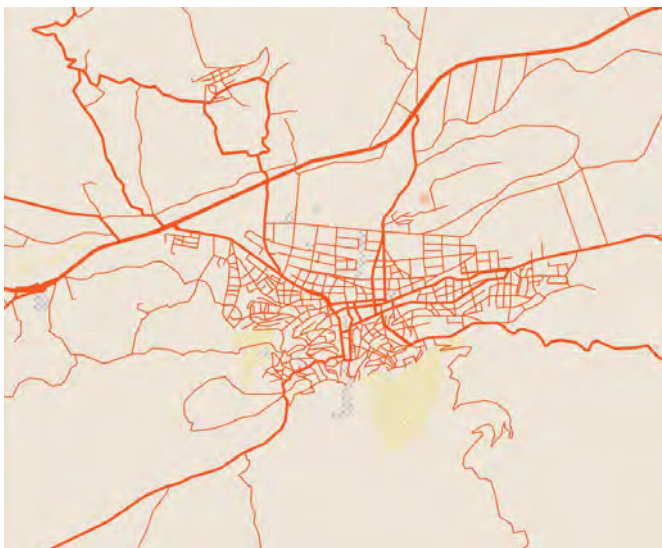
An open dialogue between city and citizens: The success of Livadia's refugee housing programme comes down to a few central factors. The first was a communications strategy based on dialogue with city residents, helping to create acceptance for the policy. Moreover, accommodating refugees in the city centre served also to stimulate the local economy with financial help from the ESTIA programme. Livadia's housing programme was also not managed by NGOs, as in Athens and Thessaloniki, but through the Public Benefit Enterprise of the Municipality of Livadia (KEDIL). This decision had multiple benefits for both local society and refugees. For example, these programmes also helped decrease unemployment in the city population.

What are the most outstanding results so far?

From housing to comprehensive social support: Since 2016, 1,500 refugees have lived in apartments in the city of Livadia. In addition to housing, KEDIL personnel also offer social support. Refugee children are enrolled in public schools through the ESTIA programme. Furthermore, assistance is provided for medical issues, for example when making an appointment. Lastly, KEDIL personnel assist refugees with administration of the different public documents they need. This can be a very difficult task, as the law changes constantly and different institutions, such as banks, may require different information.

Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

Livadia was among the first municipalities to be part of the Cities Network for Integration.



Population

31,315

Location/ region

Livadia is a town in central Greece and the capital of the Boeotia regional district.

Mayor (party)

Ioannis Tagalegas (Nea Dimokratia)

2. Local background and context

This chapter outlines how Livadia's refugee-supporting policies were conceived and implemented from 2015 until today. As G. Poulou, the ex-mayor of the city underlined, these policies made Livadia an example of refugee accommodation: twelve other Greek followed the same model.

An alternative to camps

After the summer of 2015, the period of the 'refugee crisis', different proposals for how to accommodate refugees in Livadia were heard. The Syriza Government, through the Ministry of Migration, was trying to find ways to settle many refugees. Following the leading model of the time, the ministry's proposal was to create a camp on the outskirts of Livadia.

The local municipal authorities under the mayor G. Poulou were aligned with Syriza; initially they tried to find a proper location for a structure that could accommodate up to 1000 refugees. However, they faced a backlash from the local community and (among others) the opposing parties of the municipal council and the commerce union.

The result of this conflict was a unanimous decision of the municipal council on the 31st of August of 2016.¹ The consensus was to start the ESTIA programme (Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation) and house refugee families in rented apartments in the city of Livadia in cooperation with UNHCR. Livadia was the first medium-sized city that applied the ESTIA Programme. Another twelve medium size cities all over Greece later followed the same model, and the 'Cities for Integration Network' was formed. Although the Network is an important asset for the cities that participate – as analysed below – it only includes 13 out of 300 municipal units in Greece, and didn't have a wider impact on public discussions around migration.

The fact that refugees are victims of war and as such need support from recipient societies was at the core of the arguments of the ex-mayor G. Poulou, repeated many times in her public interviews. In the same vein, G. Poulou stressed the importance of local authorities in dealing with refugees. She insisted that the 'solution to the refugee problem was the sharing of the responsibility among different municipalities' of the country, and said she was proud that the municipality of Livadia 'did not hide' from its responsibilities.

The importance of dialogue with the local community

Another point that G. Poulou stressed was the importance of dialogue about refugee settlement within the local community. She insisted that good communication locally was key to the success of housing programmes and for avoiding negative and racist reactions in the city. She further criticized governmental policies on refugee settlement as unplanned and disorganized. G. Poulou underlined that on the one hand refugees need support for their first steps in their new communities, and that this must be taken under serious consideration from the authorities. On the other hand, she raised concerns that refugee settlement did not include local communities and did not draw local actors into a conversation around the topic.

Continuation under a conservative government

2019 saw the election of a new mayor I. Tagalegas, aligned with the governing party Nea Dimokratia. Although in other Greek cities local authorities aligned to Nea Dimokratia were conservative or even racist in their views on refugee settlement, this was not the case in Livadia. I. Tagalekas continued in the political direction of the previous local authorities and insisted on welcoming refugees to Livadia. This decision derived partially from his own liberal views, but also from the fact that programmes already existed and were working well economically for the local community. According to I. Tagalekas, new initiatives should be

¹ <https://dimoslevadeon.gr/apofaseis-dimotikou-symvoulιου/suzhτηση-peri-tou-tropou-uloποιησης-τ/>

taken so refugees who wish to can find a way to settle permanently in the city. To this end, refugees should learn the Greek language and have access to the labour market.

3. Local migration and integration policies

In this chapter the main actors and projects for refugee reception are presented, while some of the fundamental problems – like the transitory character of migration – are addressed.

As mentioned above, Livadia was the first medium-sized Greek to run support and housing programmes for refugees – although larger cities of Athens and Greece had such programmes earlier. Unlike the latter's programmes, Livadia's are not managed by NGOs but through the Public Benefit Enterprise of the Municipality of Livadia (KEDIL). This decision had multiple benefits, as it will be analysed in detail below, for both the local community and the refugees.

The Cities Network for Integration

Livadia was also among the first municipalities to be part of the Cities Network for Integration. This network is active throughout Greece, comprising 13 different municipalities. G. Kamambokas, the project manager of KEDIL, insists that the Network is a very useful tool, coordinating cities that are applying programmes for supporting refugees. Different tools have been developed, city needs have been mapped, and several meetings among people who work on the field have been held. Through this process, Kamambokas underlines, shared solutions and strategies are developed. In parallel, the Network plans to establish a monthly meeting with the Ministry of Migration so problems common to different municipalities can be discussed with the state authorities.

A win-win situation for the local economy and newcomers

The first programme undertaken by KEDIL was the ESTIA programme, in cooperation with UNHCR (analysed in detail below). Since November 2016, more than 1500 refugees have lived in apartments in the city centre. Apart from housing refugees, the programme also provided a 'cash card' so refugees could cover some basic expenses, as well as offering services through KEDIL like assistance with documents and accessing public schools, hospitals and other public services. However, the ESTIA programme also offered cultural and financial benefits to the local community. Other actions were organized by the local community to promote coexistence and intercultural exchange. For the implementation of the ESTIA programme Livadia was awarded with the 'Best City Awards 2018'.

In the summer of 2020, refugees granted official refugee status started being evicted from ESTIA apartments as they were no longer categorized as beneficiaries. A movement by both refugees and residents showing solidarity against these evictions appeared all over Greece.² While the mayors of the other cities that applied the ESTIA programme remained silent on the issue of these evictions, the mayor of Livadia, G. Tagalegas, stated that there will be no evictions of refugees in the city of Livadia and that city will take over responsibility for housing.

The pitfalls of integration in a difficult environment

A continuation of the ESTIA programme was the HELIOS (Hellenic Integration System) programme, running from 2020 for those granted the official legal status of refugee. The programme aimed for beneficiaries to become equal with local Greeks in terms of self-sufficiency. Instead of depending on the material support of ESTIA, the goal was to give them tools and skills to pay rent, enrol children in schools, make appointments in the hospitals, etc. Free language courses and rent benefits were also offered.

In a different social and economic context, the assumptions of HELIOS – that refugees and locals could become equals, and that refugees do not need material support once they get legal status – might have been correct. However, in the crisis-ridden Greek economy very few refugees managed to find work, and in most cases the jobs were precarious and/or seasonal. In addition, as they lack social capital – from language skills to family and friend networks among the locals – it is difficult to access jobs or public services. Furthermore, racism and distrust make it even more difficult to be ‘equal’ members in the community. In this sense, when refugees are granted their legal status in Greece, they find themselves in a gap: fewer rights and benefits than before, and no means to survive in the local society. This is not only a problem in Livadia, but all over Greece.³ According to T. Krikou refugees who finally get their legal status often attempt to leave Greece and settle in Northern European countries where they believe they can have a better life.

The Greek Transit Problem

One major problem was highlighted in all the interviews conducted in Livadia. For most refugees Greece is a transit country. And even if there are quite important initiatives and well-planned projects running, most of the refugees see their future in the Northern European countries. There are three basic reasons for this. First, in the crisis-ridden Greek economy it is difficult for refugees to find a stable job with a satisfying salary. Second, the social state in Northern Europe is (still) much stronger and better developed; this impacts the subsidiaries and the assistance refugees get. For example, the assistance money through the cash card system a refugee family of four would get in Greece is around 350-400 euros; in Northern Europe this amount is 3-4 times higher. Finally, most of the refugees have family/friend networks in Northern Europe. There is also a ‘myth of Germany’ among the refugees who reach

² <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/25209/why-thousands-of-refugees-in-greece-face- eviction-and-where-they-can-turn>

³ <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-11-05/greece-s-new-asylum-law-poses-continuous-traps-refugees>

European soil. For all these reasons, the people working in the projects for refugee integration in Greece have the feeling of 'building in the sand' as people come and go all the time and are not really interested in being 'integrated' into local society.

The main actors in Livadia

The main institutional actors involved in refugee management are the city authorities and the Public Benefit Organization of the Municipality of Livadia (KEDIL, described in detail below). For the projects to be realized there is close cooperation with relevant ministries and international bodies like UNHCR.

There is also a civil society initiative that supports refugees settled in Livadia. The Citizens Collective for Human Rights Network is an initiative of active citizens in solidarity with Livadia's refugees, created when the first refugees started arriving in the city in March 2016. From 2016 till today the initiative has held open discussions and regularly collected food, clothes and personal hygiene items that are then distributed through KEDIL to the refugees settled in the apartments. Through meetings and exchanges with the city authorities, the Citizens Collective is pushing for more inclusive policies, emphasizing the need to include refugees in the labour market.⁴

4. Selected local approaches

4.1 Public Benefit Organization of the Municipality of Livadia (KEDIL)

As analysed below, the fact that a public local organization (not an NGO) was responsible for managing the projects around refugee housing proved to have great benefits for the refugees and for the city of Livadia.

The first unanimous decision of the municipal council to provide support and housing for refugees in Livadia included a crucial condition: that the programmes be run not by NGOs but by the Public Benefit Enterprise of the Municipality of Livadia (KEDIL). KEDIL was founded in 2011 as a municipal enterprise implementing local programmes for vulnerable groups, such as the 'help at home' programme for the elderly who need care, or the social grocery and pharmacy for the people who lack the means to survive during the economic crisis. Although the decision for KEDIL to run the programmes for refugees was taken in a climate of suspicion and mistrust against NGOs, it was a decision that had many benefits for both the local community and the refugees.

⁴ <https://www.radiothiva.gr/content/3410/synantisi-toy-gi-anni-tagkalegka-me-meli-toy-dik-tyoy-allileggyis-gia-toys-prosfy-ges-sti-libadeia->

How Municipal Enterprises generate Trust

KEDIL is a municipal enterprise connected to the local welfare system and controlled by local authorities. It was thus not perceived by locals as a 'foreign actor' that would only benefit refugees. In other places, such as the island of Lesbos, local discontent around the refugee issue was often directed at NGOs, who were described as 'the ones who bring the refugees here' to 'profit', not caring for the local community. For many reasons Livadia and Lesbos cannot be compared – the latter is an entry point into Greece from Turkey, and is where Moria, the biggest camp in Greece, is located. Nonetheless Lesbos provides a good example of the anti-NGO discourse which has become widespread among more conservative and xenophobic Greeks. In Livadia it was important that the institutional actor responsible for the programmes to assist refugees was a municipal enterprise already offering programmes for the local population.

Creating local jobs

KEDIL hired locals and did not bring its own personnel from abroad. This was also important for the way programmes like ESTIA or HELIOS were perceived. More than 30 people – many of them younger people with university degrees who could not find work – were employed by KEDIL to run the programmes. In this way these programmes not only assisted refugees, they also decreased unemployment in the city population.

Furthermore, the goal of the municipal authorities to communicate with the community about the refugee issue and build relations of trust was more easily achieved through a municipal enterprise with established relations with the actors involved, from public hospitals to the police.

The refugees further benefited from having local people to assist them, as this could become a first link in their social network and a first step for their participation in the local community.

Sustainable funding structures

KEDIL, as a local enterprise funded by organisations like the EU, tries to sustain its economic circle. Unlike an NGO that might close when funding dries up, KEDIL tries to maintain and expand its programmes. According to G. Kalambokas, the project manager, they are now applying for a new programme that would assist all the migrants in the wider area in and around Livadia. In this way, KEDIL is a stable local actor that deals with the issue in a more holistic and permanent way and is able to build deeper and longstanding relations with the local community and actors and the refugees and migrants of the wider area.

4.2 Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation programme (ESTIA)

Since 2016, about 70 apartments have been rented through ESTIA in Livadia's centre, housing more than 1500 refugees. This project has had an important effect on the lives of refugees and local people.

Within two months of its launch KEDIL – with the support of ex-municipal authorities – managed to find, rent and equip 55 apartments – an impressive achievement in a small city. In 2016, 330 refugees were settled in the apartments; in 2017 the total number of refugees reached 400 people living in 70 apartments. As the ex-mayor of Livadia G. Poulou stressed in public interviews, these projects helped the local administration become more efficient, which carried over into the services provided to locals.

Since 2016, 1500 refugees have lived in the KEDIL apartments in Livadia. As mentioned by G. Kalambokas, KEDIL also offers social support. Through ESTIA refugee children are enrolled in public schools. Assistance is provided for medical issues, such as making an appointment, accompanying patients to the hospital/ doctor, and taking care of the whole medical process and follow up. KEDIL also assists refugees in editing the public documents they need, a difficult task as there are constant changes in the law and regulations of the institutions involved (e.g. banks).

Inclusion beyond accommodation

Various actions to promote coexistence and integration in the local community were also organized. Through following the skills and the talents of the refugees different actions, from sport activities to cultural events, were organized. As G. Kalambokas put it, 'integration is not simple, it is a process. It takes time and effort, and happens step by step. Even if one refugee family meets a local person and says good morning, the next time they meet in the street is a step further'.

ESTIA had two major goals. First, for refugees to live in peace and safety. This goal was achieved as Livadia is a small, peaceful city and due to good communication with the local community there was little friction around the settlement of the refugees. Second, for refugee children to have the same opportunities as local children. The ESTIA staff are doing their best; however, and as stressed by G. Kalambokas, there are certain limitations mainly due to the lack of infrastructure. (For example, if all the refugee children wanted to go to the swimming pool this wouldn't be possible because it would exceed the room of the local swimming pool).

Benefits for the local economy

The ESTIA programme has also has important economic benefits for the local community. First, all the apartments that had remained empty were now rented, offering income to their owners. Second, work was created for the technicians involved in the apartments' maintenance, and income by the oil needed to heat them, etc. Finally, the refugees spend

money in the local economy, as they buy from local stores. According to the estimation of KEDIL, 5 million euros have been distributed through the local economy in the years that the ESTIA programme has been running. And as mentioned many times in the interviews, these important economic benefits make even initially sceptical locals more open and positive.

Room for improvement

Nonetheless, although the ESTIA programme is working well and seems inclusive, the underlying logic of the programme contains several mis-categorizations and exclusions. One of the foundational decisions for programme, as described in the archives of the municipal council, was to accept only families in the city, who are described as more stable and calmer than single men. Also, all the families accepted are Arab speaking, in order to avoid tensions between refugees of different ethnic groups and 'confusion' among locals unused to multicultural environments. This has led to divisions and hierarchies towards refugees. By arguing in terms of effectiveness, KEDIL follow a logic of 'managing' refugee flows while producing regimes of desert, privilege and deprivation based on gender, race and ethnic background.

The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of 28 progressive, solidarity-based cities and their strategies in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful local approaches to their migration policies.

Moving Cities is a project from Seebrücke, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and Heinrich Böll Stiftung, funded by Robert Bosch Stiftung and Stiftungsfonds Zivile Seenotrettung and supported by many more initiatives.

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