

### 6.3. Parents' mobilizations during the refugee crisis. A brief overview of the Oraiokastro and Samos cases

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#### **Abstract**

Since 2010, Greece has gone through a deep crisis with an important social impact. This crisis initially appeared as a fiscal one, but it quickly evolved, leading to major political implications. Mainly due to the Syrian Civil War, Greece became the first gate into the EU for millions of migrants. The Dublin III Regulation, under which migrants should apply for asylum in the first EU state they enter, has led to EU external border States to bear the brunt of migrant arrivals. As a consequence, Greece faced a chronic overcrowding. Especially, as the asylum process is running at a slow pace, Greek islands such as Lesbos, Chios and Samos, were overloaded.

As a response, hosting centers and hot spots in various areas throughout the country were created. This caused turbulence within the local communities. Especially the government's effort, which started in 2016, to incorporate the immigrants and refugees into the local societies by placing their children aged 6-15, into the public schooling system, has triggered a period of high mobility.

This project aims to investigate actions and reactions of the Parents' Associations in six primary schools in four different areas, Oreokastro, Profitis, Philippiada and Samos. We are particularly interested in exploring what brought parents of different political views, educational levels, and statuses, together. What triggered these mobilizations, and whether the perceived goal was achieved. We also want to see how homogenous the mobilizations were, how they evolved through time and what kind of local support they received.

Methodologically, we have conducted a cross-sectional survey poll, fielding a representative sample from the population of an urban area (Oraiokastro) and from an island (Samos island). The findings of this poll will be enriched by findings from the semi-structured interviews of participants or bystanders of the parents' movement mobilizations. Semi-structure interviews' sampling units will be selected by convenience and/or snowball sampling.

**Keywords:** Refugee Crisis, Social Movements, Mobilization, Collective Action, Public Opinion

#### **Introduction**

The civil war in Syria has led millions of people towards leaving their own country. For many of them Greece became the first gate into the European Union. In 2015, Greece faced an enormous increase in the numbers of border crossings; More than 850K people used the Eastern Mediterranean route -from Turkey to Greece-, predominately by sea, from the Turkish coastline to the Greek islands, or by land, through the Evros river, to the Eastern Greek mainland. This chronic overcrowding was a consequence of the Dublin III regulation which mandates that migrants should apply for asylum in the first EU state they enter.

In order to control the numbers, the Greek government created hot spots and hospitality centers, spread throughout the country. The basic hospitality centers of Moria in Lesbos and Souda and VIAL in Chios were overloaded, with many instances of violent incidents (CnnGreece, 2019a; 2019b). In order to decongest the islands and exacerbate the tension, the government ordered the urgent move of a number of refugees and

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immigrants towards the mainland. In an effort to make the incorporation of immigrants and refugees easier and smoother into the Greek society, the government decided to place their children, aged 6-15 into the primary and secondary public schooling system. This decision triggered a period of high mobility, throughout Greece. Parents reacted through their associations' boards primarily in the public elementary schools.

This paper tackles with the breakout of the parents' movements in two main areas with adjacent hospitality centers. The main research question investigates the way that the parents' mobilization broke out and the characteristics of the movements, such as their demands, and the dynamic, referring to the degree of support of local communities etc. In the following sections, we present the methodology and research design, as well as the main findings of the cases under investigation.

### **Methodology**

In response to the main research question, our research project aims at studying the actions and reactions of the Parents' Associations in areas that this movement gained publicity and durability. On an attempt to capture attitudes and stances towards the issue, we followed a mixed mode research design. A cross sectional survey with CATI mode of data collection was fielded on a random sample of 649 participants from Oraikastro and Samos. The cross-sectional poll included respondents that either had or hadn't children in the elementary schools. Further, in order to triangulate, we have conducted 6 semi-structured, in depth interviews from parents from the 1<sup>st</sup> Elementary School of Oraikastro. Samos and Oraikastro have distinct characteristics. The first is an island, located in the main Aegean Sea, and the later a landlocked rural area in the northern part of Greece.

We analyze these movements through the prism of the Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT). The RMT could explain the birth of the specific movements, as the notions of demand and supply seem to perfectly fit in our case (Leeson & Russ, 2017). It also rejects the element of spontaneity and supports that the decision of participating or not in any movement is taken after a rational process has taken place (Klandermans, 1984, Jenkins, 1983). In addition, the RMT claims that grievances can be manipulated, an argument that is supplemented by the Framing Theory (FT). The Framing Theory (FT) and the construction of collective identity could provide some explanatory dynamic in order to be able to understand the whole mobilization process. In addition, the FT could assist in the overall interpretation of the general public's opinion on important for the society issues (Scheufele, 1999, Owen, 2017).

### **The cases of Oraikastro and Samos**

Oraikastro is an urban area, located 11 km from the center of Thessaloniki, with a population, of approximately 38.000 people. The government's decision to open up six hotspots and hospitality centers, with a capacity of approximately 6800 people, within a radius of 12 km caused anxiety within the local community. For weeks on, the main discussion topic in Oraikastro was the relocation of the immigrants and refugees close and to the area. People believed that the government's argument of trying not to create immigrant and refugee

“ghettos” did not apply in their case, as they felt they were being surrounded by hot spots and hospitality centers, hence they felt cut off.<sup>3</sup>

There was a feeling of disappointment and anger as they felt that the western part of Thessaloniki, being always the lower middle-class area was chosen once more to bear the biggest numbers of the immigrants and refugees for resettlement. The main issue was the lack of communication between the state and the local authorities and consequently the local community.<sup>4</sup> Before the government announced the official list of schools that were going to function as Refugee and Immigrant Education Centers (DYEP), the council of the Parents’ Association of the 5<sup>th</sup> Elementary School of Oraiokastros (ex Melisohori, Skaras) publicized a letter of protest against the entry of immigrant and refugee children into the public schooling system, which was followed by the 1<sup>st</sup> Elementary School of Palaiokastros.

This caused the immediate reaction of the justice department which ordered a prosecutor’s urgent investigation on the grounds of “racist violence”. Once the government announced the official list, the Oraiokastros 1<sup>st</sup> Elementary School’s Parents’ Association expressed their concerns through a letter addressed to all the public officials involved, primarily focusing on health and safety issues. The parents felt that they were given no assurance on the health (both physical and mental) condition of the children who were going to attend classes. In addition, the then mayor himself, urged people to mobilize, protest and react to the immigrants’ settlement there. This marked the beginning of the parents’ mobilizations for the case of Oraiokastros.

In Samos, it all started in November of 2018, when the Minister of Immigration Policy Vitsas, acknowledged that the situation on the island is “marginal and difficult.”<sup>5</sup> The hospitality center which was created and designed to accommodate 700 people had, at the time, more than 4,000 people inside, and an additional 2000 people outside, in an informal hot spot set up by mainly Afghan and African nationals. Due to the long delays in the asylum process, people have been stranded on the island for many months. As a result of the long delays, people were irritated, and the outcome was the constant clashes among the refugees and the immigrants as well as the former with locals inside and outside the hospitality center. In an assembly which took place on March 4, 2019, the parents of the Elementary school of Vathi decided to have their kids abstain from classes for four days (from Tuesday March 5 to Friday March 8, 2019), while, at the same time, they organized a protest outside the building of the District’s Primary Education offices, inviting all the Parents’ Associations of the district of Samos.

### **Exploring the causes**

We’ll test three hypotheses, each of which corresponds to the main research question. These hypotheses are referred to (a) the environment in which the protest was prepared and broke out, (b) the context of the reaction

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<sup>3</sup> Interviews, personal records.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews, personal records.

<sup>5</sup> For further information see: Minister’s press conference, November 15, 2018.

in respect to the specific demands of parents' mobilization and (c) the overall assessment of the perceived success of the protest.

### H1. The favorable environment of the parents' mobilization

In the local level, both the parents and the general public agree that the number of immigrants and refugees is very big in Greece. This is in accordance to the general (nationwide) public opinion eminent in all surveys that deal with immigration (Marantzidis & Siakas, 2019). In addition, with lower, yet still quite high, percentages, both the general public (over six out of ten people) as well as the parents (seven out of ten people) agree that immigration has increased criminality. The percentages that regard immigration and unemployment are the lowest of the negative answers, with four out of ten participants and parents still believe that the immigration is capable of increasing unemployment.

**Table 1. Oraikastro & Samos public opinion attitudes towards refugees and immigrants**

Immigrants' presence	%
Is too extensive	91
Increases criminality	62,5
Increases unemployment	41
Has positive effect on the economy	30
Helps cultural enrichment	38,5
Helps the demographic problems	24,5

Regarding the potential positive effect on the economy, only three out of ten survey participants believe that immigration could become an asset. This is even lower among parents. More people believe that immigration can offer cultural enrichment. The lowest percentages of all appeared when asked about whether immigration can help the demographic problem of Greece. The fact that both parents and the general public score higher on the negative questions and lower on the positive ones happens primarily due to the general belief that the majority of the immigrants and refugees do not want to get incorporated into the Greek society, hence they believe that the immigrants and refugees will be the misfits. This negativity regarding the immigrants and refugees can offer a favorable atmosphere for the creation of movements against them.

In addition, and although initially it looked like the Golden Dawn was hiding behind the parents' mobilizations, we found out in the process, that although the GD tried to be a part of the mobilizations by sending members to the General Assemblies, held by the boards of the parents' associations, they were not accepted to take part and be present in the auditoriums. According to personal testimonies, the parents were not willing for their mobilizations to have "colors" and be connected to any political party.

As already mentioned, the context of the environment has a significant role in the mobilization birth and evolution. The interviewed people, for example consider that "The society, the people of Oraikastro were with us" (Thodoris M., Male, 46). Moreover, the fact that the case of Oraikastro gained publicity by being a prominent issue, as it was projected by prime-time TV shows in major nation-wide media and gaining for the

most part negative press, brought the local society closer together. As an illustration, Pelagia K., (Female, 37) said that “.... the society supported us. I am telling you, everybody was stigmatized, not just the parents of the 1<sup>st</sup> E.S. Everybody was labeled as fascists.... Everybody was trying to prove that they were not elephants...”. Also, a member of the parents’ mobilization group insisted on the public support of this collective action. “The society, the citizens did not oppose to what we were doing.... They all said well done!”, said Eleni V. (F, 48).

## H2. The blurring mobilization discourse.

Previously, we’ve established that the overall setting was hostile to the immigrants’ presence. This was affirmed by the findings of the cross-sectional targeted poll and also explained by the semi-structured interviews. But, apparently, the environment alone could provide a fertile ground, but the initiative should be based on a specific agenda. This agenda was also apparent in the cases under exploration.

Participants were asked to provide us the reasons why they thought parents were so strongly opposed to the government’s decision to incorporate immigrant and refugee children into the public schooling system. We have noticed an oxymoron in their responses. The percentage of the parents who believe that they mobilized just because the kids were not wanted and that everything was just an excuse is the highest one and reaches almost 60%. So, on one hand we could illustrate some concrete arguments about the denial of the immigrants’ children, but on the other, there is a significant majority who considers that all the arguments present a thin centered argumentation that covers other principal causes.

Exploring the reporting arguments, we could notice that the “health factor” is considered to be the primary reason for mobilization. More than 50% of the parents in both Oraiokastros and Samos supported that. This is also supported by the personal interviews. Of course, one of the major concerns in this argumentation is that parents were not given the appropriate assurance by the Greek State and officials that the immigrant and refugee children were in good mental and physical condition to attend school. With regard to another argument, the capacity factor, the public opinion doesn’t consider it as an issue. Only in Oraiokastros, it is considered a secondary factor, as the 1<sup>st</sup> Elementary School is the oldest school in the area and its facilities do not respond to the increasing numbers of the population, with portable classrooms being placed in the school’s courtyard.

**Table 2. Oraiokastros & Samos public opinion attitudes towards arguments on children’s’ presence**

Arguments related to parents’ mobilization	% among parents	Population %
Health issues was the most important matter for mobilization	56	47,5
Simply they didn't want them and provided excuses	57,5	52,5
Serious capacity issue	44	40,5
Children’s presence creates learning difficulties	42	40
Helps Greek children to get along with new cultures	60,5	68
Helps children’s integration into Greek society	73	78,5

Although there were major objections to the government's decision of incorporating the refugees and immigrants into the Greek society and the local communities by placing their children into school, there is an apparent general consensus that this, indeed, does assist with the integration of the immigrants and refugees and the easier transition from their home countries to Greece. Further, both parents and the general public agree that the entry of the immigrant and refugee children into the schools and the interaction with the Greek children could help the latter get acquainted with different cultures, hence broaden their horizons, get used to living in a multi-cultural environment and deal with globalization in general.

On the opposite direction, the argument of the slower learning pace and the creation of learning difficulties to the Greek children doesn't seem to be supported. Nearly one out of four -both parents and the general population- believe that placing immigrant and refugee children into the classrooms together with Greek native speakers could essentially create learning difficulties for the Greek children, primarily due to the lack of knowledge of the Greek language. So, although the parents mobilized, they mostly agree that only good things could come out of the immigrant and refugee children placement into the classrooms, which supports even more the argument that the parents' objections were not directed towards the children because they were not Greek but mainly towards the State and what they thought to be insufficient assurance of the health conditions of the immigrant and refugee children.

### **H3. The assessment of movements' success.**

The cross-sectional survey reveals an overall conservative assessment on the mobilization movement; 14.5% of the general public and the 21.5% of the parents consider the mobilizations as being successful, although we have noticed that participants' definitions of success varied. For example, some have assessed the success as the simple result of "gaining time", in the sense that the Immigrant and Refugee Education Centers did not start at their schools. At the same time, some more sophisticated attributes could be spotted, such as the opportunity to wider the audience and offer a larger impact on the overall parents' objections to be widely spread. The most common answer among the interviewees was that they considered the mobilizations successful due to the fact that the DYEP was postponed throughout the Oraiakastro area. Eleni V, F, 48 mentioned that "So far they (the mobilizations) have been successful. We do not have DYEP in our schools at all".

Some other protestors claimed that the main goal of the mobilizations was for the parents to be heard, their arguments to be known and in that sense, they consider the mobilizations as being successful as well. "One thing they (the mobilizations) managed to succeed was the awakening of the society. I saw people "waking up". I was one of them .... The second thing was, I think, that we managed to be heard" said Dimitris K., M, 51. Further, there are participants who define success as an act of further precaution on the part of the State and at the same time an act on behalf of the central government to show local interest ("The entry criteria became stricter, the government started looking deeper..... For me the 3-year delay was a victory" (Vicky K., F, 43).

## **Conclusions**

Our attempt to study parents' actions and reactions regarding the entrance of immigrant and refugee children into the public schooling system could become an important asset in the effort of the deeper investigation and understanding of social issues in the current situation of the extensive migration of populations in a small border country, such as Greece. The RMT, complemented by the FT, could well explain the birth of the specific movements and the notions of demand and supply. The RMT rejects the element of spontaneity and supports that the decision of participating or not in any movement is taken after a rational process has taken place, something that is clear in our case through the personal interviews held. The RMT also claims that grievances can be manipulated, something that is very well supplemented by the Framing Theory.

The Framing Theory and the construction of collective identity could help us understand our cases mobilization process. Furthermore, the Framing Theory can help us interpret the role of the Media and how they can shape the general public's opinion on important for the society issues. In order for people to mobilize there must be a favorable environment which will provide the grounds for the creation and growth of a movement. This is apparent in our case, as there is a general negativity regarding the immigrants and refugees primarily, we believe, due to their extensive numbers. In addition, the parents' overall opinion towards the immigrants and refugees seems to be even more negative than the general population. These is, of course, mainly due to the fact that the parents are the ones "mostly affected" by the entry of immigrant and refugee children into the Greek public schooling system, which, in return, affected their feelings towards immigrants and refugees in general.

The overall setting in Oraioakastro and Samos, in alignment with the overall mood nationwide, was hostile for the immigrants' presence. But, apparently, although the environment alone could provide a fertile ground, the reported upheaval is based on a specific agenda. This agenda was also apparent in the cases under exploration. The primary cause for mobilization is the fact that parents thought were not given enough assurance by the State on the health condition of the children who were going to attend classes in the program; yet they all recognize the positive impact of the interaction among the immigrant and refugee and the Greek children, as well as they admit that such an effort would make the transition not only of the children but also of their parents into the local societies easier.

The mobilizations do not seem to be perceived as being successful by the local communities. This is not the case for the parents, as almost one out of four parents think the movements were successful one way or another. The support (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) given to the mobilizations by the local communities, seems to differ as well, as almost four out of ten parents thought that the local communities were being supportive. On the other hand, three out of ten participants in the survey were against the mobilizations and therefore were not supportive of them. It might be too early to say whether mobilizations such as these ones will take place in the future in Greece. We will leave this up to time to tell.

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