Refuge CANADA'S JOURNAL ON REFUGEES REVUE CANADIENNE SUR LES RÉFUGIÉS

"A Total Black Hole": How COVID-19 Increased Bureaucratic Violence Against Refugees in Greece

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ABSTRACT

State responses to COVID-19 were unevenly felt across society. Negative consequences of lockdowns and travel restrictions for the upper classes were largely restricted to not seeing friends or taking holidays. For those with little or no right to have rights (Arendt, 1970), those relegated to society's margins—such as refugees and asylum claimants—state responses to COVID-19 metamorphosed into Kafkaesque restrictions, surveillance, and control. Informed by participant observations and 10 interviews with civil society actors conducted in Athens in 2021 and 2022 at the height of the pandemic, this paper shows how the Greek state weaponized COVID-19 to further exclude refugees from society, deny asylum procedures, and reduce service provision for those awaiting the outcome of their asylum claims.

KEYWORDS

asylum seekers; refugees; bureaucratic violence; Athens; Greece; COVID-19

RÉSUMÉ

Les réponses étatiques à la COVID-19 ont été ressenties de manière inégale à travers la société. Pour les classes supérieures, les conséquences négatives des confinements et des restrictions de voyage se sont limitées à l'impossibilité de voir des amis ou de partir en vacances. Pour ceux avec peu ou pas de droit d'avoir des droits (Arendt, 1970) et relégués aux marges de la société, comme les réfugiés et demandeurs d'asile, les réponses de l'État à la COVID-19 se sont métamorphosées en restrictions, en surveillance et en contrôle kafkaïens. S'appuyant sur des observations participantes et 10 entretiens avec des acteurs de la société civile menés à Athènes au plus fort de la pandémie en 2021 et en 2022, cet article démontre comment l'État grec a instrumentalisé la COVID-19 afin d'exclure davantage les réfugiés de la société, refuser les procédures d'asile et réduire les services offerts aux personnes en attente de l'issue de leur demande d'asile.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has been labelled the "great amplifier" of inequalities, likened to an X-ray revealing pre-existing societal disparities (Crawley, 2021, p. 4). Those wealthy enough to continue working from home were able to cocoon in metaphorical glass houses, as they were hardly impacted by the virus in terms of infection and mortality rates, or by the consequences of nationwide restrictions. They might have been unable to see friends and family or take a vacation, but their livelihoods were not severely affected by pandemic-related official responses. COVID-19 state measures, such as lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, widened the health disparities

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experienced by marginalized groups such as refugees and asylum seekers,[1] who prior to COVID-19 were already living in conditions of restricted movement, overcrowding, and unhygienic housing (Crawley, 2021), and were therefore at greater risk of contracting the virus (Brakefield et al., 2023; Caron & Adegboye, 2021; Dalsania et al., 2021; Franco-Paredes et al., 2020). Yet, not only were COVID-19 infection rates about to be higher for the refugees residing in camps or insecure accommodations, but COVID-19 has also been used as a pretext to brand refugees as vectors of disease. Within a context where the virus has been constructed as the external enemy against the nation (Poenaru, 2021), asylum seekers and refugees, through their very feature of "foreignness," have been made out to be the ultimate infectious threat (Alrob & Shields, 2022).

People have differential access to the services of the welfare state according to their immigration status. Citizens have the most protections, followed by permanent residents, then those with temporary work permits; migrants with irregular status (i.e., the undocumented), refugees, and those seeking asylum are at the bottom of this hierarchy. These outsiders to the nation (Sharma, 2020) have the least right to claim state protection. The nation can expel them on any occasion. State measures to contain COVID-19 widened these divisions between citizens—those with full rights to state protections—and outsiders—those whose lives are defined by the wait to gain the right to access fur-

ther rights (Arendt, 1970)—such as health care, education, and employment (Bohnet & Rüegger, 2021; Crawley, 2021; Topak, 2020). Measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 did not consider how restrictions on movement would harm those with insecure migration status. Similarly, most COVID-19 measures failed to facilitate access to health care by irregular migrants if they contracted the virus (Alawa et al., 2020; Bohnet & Rüegger, 2021; Fouskas, 2020; Tsourdi, 2020).

It is in this context that this paper explores how COVID-19 has been weaponized to exclude the refugee population in Greece, a country that has been at the height of media attention for its treatment of irregular migrants. We argue that the Greek state instrumentalized the pandemic as a pretext to implement stricter rules for people on the move—specifically, to justify violent bureaucratic responses that restricted their access to asylum and other public supports. Our data, which are based on interviews with service providers and non-governmental organization (NGO) personnel, reveals the difficulties facing refugees in Athens, Greece. These include a web of bureaucratic entanglements, such as delays with asylum processes and scarce service provision due to extended lockdowns, that stripped the refugee populations from their mobility rights. In a way, these bureaucratic measures became bordering practices in themselves (Alrob & Shields, 2022), materializing into a second border that asylum seekers had now to get clearance from to secure admission into the nation. The paper also discusses the impact of the COVID-19 measures on service provision and shows how service providers subverted the implementation of such rules, shedding light on the creative efforts of civil society to resist bureaucratic violence.

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[1] We use the terms **refugees**, **asylum seekers**, **people on the move**, and **irregular migrants** interchangeably to refer to the subjects of our paper who are seeking asylum and/or refugee status in Greece. Refugees are those who have secured some status in the nation, while asylum seekers are those awaiting a decision regarding their status; both the refugees and the asylum seekers in our study experienced a similar kind of bureaucratic violence that was different from that experienced by citizens. In this article we use these categories of migrant subjects interchangeably to denote lack of permanency in the nation and citizenship.

REFUGEES' EXPERIENCES WITH BUREAUCRATIC VIOLENCE

Violence is a contested concept. Some argue that what constitutes violence reflects the value system of a given society at a given time (Davies, 2022). In other words, what is considered violent in a liberal democracy is likely to be different in a dictatorship. Liberal states pride themselves on humanitarian values and respect for human rights, yet liberal bureaucracies routinely exercise a banal kind of violence on groups possessing limited rights in society (Eldridge & Reinke, 2018; Heckert, 2020). Classist, racialized, and ethnocentric notions that see some people as belonging to the nation while relegating others to exclusion play out in arbitrary administrative practices that detain migrants, restrict movement for some while enabling the movement of others, and designate bodies according to their origin, their nationality, and their usefulness to national economies (Adam & Hänsel, 2021; Ammaturo, 2019; Morales, 2021; Spathopoulou et al., 2020; Topak, 2020).

Within nation-states, bureaucracies delimit the territorial sovereignty of the nation and culturally delineate its national ethos. National television, national bank, national museums, national hockey team, national language, national emergency number, national insurance, national social security numbers—all are markers of a collective appurtenance that is territorially defined and culturally understood. The idea of a nation implies an "imagined political community" with limited boundaries that define it as separate from other nations (B. Anderson, 1983). This imagination posits a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (B. Anderson, 1983, p. 7) in virtue of which, despite existing problems and intrinsic domestic inequalities, the members of the imagined community become an all-encompassing totality. This is

why it is considered honourable to die for the Ukrainian nation, for Ukraine's right to self-determination in the face of Russian aggression, yet, as Benedict Anderson argued, it is not as morally honourable to die for the "Labour Party, the American Medical Association or perhaps even Amnesty International" (1983, p. 144). It is these very same ideological principles of maintaining the nation that become bureaucratically materialized in institutions whose primary scope is to guard national interests. Bureaucracies contain the legal apparatus to maintain the national imagined community, to consolidate the nation, and to make its sovereignty recognizable to others.

Philosophically speaking, bureaucracies are not inherently violent. However, since they function to preserve the nation and to manage the "relationships of force exercised by institutions and power apparatuses" (Balibar, 2015, p. 75) between national subjects and outsiders, bureaucracies become violent: they guard the entry to the nation and delineate who has the right to belong to the nation. Outsiders, then, are selectively chosen by bureaucracies based on what the nation needs at particular points in time. COVID-19 has been used as a management tool to restrict mobility on national needs. Within this nation-based hierarchical selection process, asylum seekers and refugees are among the last on the ladder that the nation cares about. The nation does not know from the get-go how to use these subjects, what roles they can perform inside the nation, what skills and what other attributes they can bring to strengthen the national economy; hence, state bureaucracies treat them as surplus that can only be invited in at certain times, that the host nations have legitimate reasons to keep out in a state of crisis, such as a public health crisis.

National bureaucracies, then, become indirectly violent towards outsiders because their legal apparatuses exist for the benefit of those who belong to the nation and not for those relegated to the outside. And while it might be immoral to bestow fewer rights on migrants, foreigners, or refugees as compared with citizens of the nation, it might not be unethical in terms of the social functioning of the nation, since the nation exists primarily for the sake of its citizens and to protect its citizens. This is why most Western societies grant citizenship on jus sanguinis (by blood) principles, meaning that appurtenance to the nation seem to be inherited. And when jus soli (by birth) regimes grant citizenship, subjects still need some national appurtenance. For instance, France gives jus soli citizenship at birth only from the third generation; Germany grants it from the second generation, if at least one parent has lived in Germany for a minimum of eight years, and if the applicant renounces their former citizenship when acquiring German nationality; Britain grants conditional jus soli at birth if one parent is a citizen or permanent resident; Netherlands grants conditional citizenship at 18 years of age for those with Dutch residency since birth (Honohan, 2010). Territorial birth, as these examples show, becomes the basic criterion for granting citizenship, the primary principle that demarcates between belonging to the nation and not belonging. Being part of the nation also implies a territorial attachment that stands as the basis of the nation producing regimes of accessing rights: "The condition of foreignness is projected within a political space or national territory to create an inadmissible alterity" (Balibar, 2015, p. 69).

Walls, barbed-wire fences, border patrols, and pushbacks are tools employed by national bureaucracies to exclude those with less appurtenance to the nation and to keep those unwanted outside its borders. For outsiders who enter the national territory as asylum seekers and refugees—the category of noncitizen and non-national subject par excellence—bureaucratic procedures tacitly discipline them as threatening subjects (Abdelhady, 2020; W. Anderson, 2016; Bohnet & Rüegger, 2021) by denying them access to essential services (Adam & Hänsel, 2021), such as "healthcare, education, police protection and work, but also the right to social relations and freedom of movement in public spaces" (Khosravi, 2010, p. 90); by imposing arbitrary surveillance (Molnar, 2019); and by implementing complicated procedures to access asylum (Topak, 2020). The bureaucratic violence enacted by the state has resulted in what some have called the "politics of exhaustion," in which deportations, substandard living conditions, and the continuous threat of violence embody the way in which "exhaustion is employed as a tool of governance and control" (Welander & De Vries, 2016, p. 2).

Even in wealthier democracies such as the United Kingdom, Denmark, Germany, and Sweden, which are more financially equipped to respond to large influxes of people, refugees continue to be seen as a threat in need of special governance despite these countries' rhetoric of being welcoming to foreigners (Abdelhady et al., 2020; Afouxenidis et al., 2017; Canning, 2020). In Greece, the post-2008 recessionary climate and poverty have been fuelling restrictive policies for asylum seekers. Greece's austerity measures have coincided with the country closing its border with Turkey in 2011 (Afouxenidis et al., 2017; Cabot, 2019). In 2012, Greece launched "Xenios Zeus," a police operation supported by the European Union (EU) External Borders Fund, which involved house searches and mass arrests in places

in Athens known to host irregular migrants (Afouxenidis et al., 2017).

The 2016 EU–Turkey agreement (European Council, 2016) is another example of bureaucratic violence. This agreement, which sends irregular arrivals to the Greek islands back to Turkey and declare all applications for asylum inadmissible, has led Greece to implement a "hotspot" system (i.e., first-entry reception centres) on the Aegean islands. In theory, the hotspots were intended as reception facilities to fast-track asylum procedures (Bousiou, 2020). In practice, however, they have become open-air prisons with people waiting to be deported. Most operate as detention centres, with barbed-wire fences and police presence, and are located outside urban centres, restricting the movement of refugees but also keeping them at distance from the public (Bird et al., 2021).

More than 40,000 refugees are currently in hotspots in Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Leros, and Kos. Many also live in tents and ad hoc structures around the overcrowded camps (Ayata & Fyssa, 2020). Various forms of violence overlap in these hotspots: the coercive violence of confinement, the symbolic violence of waiting and surveillance, and the physical violence manifested in inadequate food and lack of essential facilities (W. Anderson, 2016; Ayata & Fyssa, 2020; Gordon & Larsen, 2016). Topak (2020) likens the waiting at the Moria camp on Lesvos to a form of bio-political violence, with asylum seekers lacking control over their own time and any power to change the asylum procedures affecting them. When one is forced to wait, powerlessness increases and subordination is normalized (Abdelhady et al., 2020). Refugees at Moria were often targets of unwanted police surveillance, yet they were never considered worthy of the kind of surveillance that would protect them (Adam & Hänsel, 2021; Topak, 2020). Many also had to cope with the trauma

of violence they had experienced in their home countries and along their migration routes as the camps are also sites of sexual violence, self-harm, and suicide (Adam & Hänsel, 2021; Ausubel, 2019; Belanteri et al., 2020; Bohnet & Rüegger, 2021; Bousiou, 2020; Topak, 2020).

In mainland Greece, Athens in particular, for a couple of years after 2015, asylum seekers could, to some degree, escape the violence inflicted on those residing in the camps. Entire neighbourhoods in Athens, such as Victoria Square, Acharnon, and Exarcheia, have for years been friendly to refugees (Bejan, 2022). In Exarcheia alone, several refugee squats were set up in 2015 in Gare, Spirou Trikoupi 17, Rosa de Fok, and Clandestina (Bejan & Souvlis, 2019). Greek anarcho-communist activists occupied the famous City Plaza Hotel and ran it as an egalitarian co-op to house refugees (Lafazani, 2018). NGO actors operating near these areas provided much-needed support to refugees that the state had failed to offer, including education programs, Greek- and English-language classes, shelter, escort to medical appointments, and assistance in accessing the labour market and filing asylum claims (Bejan, 2022).

During the left-wing Syriza coalition government, police regularly raided these refugee squats in Athens, but when the right-wing New Democracy party won the elections in 2019, the new government took a much stricter law-and-order approach (Bejan & Souvlis, 2019; Boukala, 2021). New Democracy promoted a rhetoric grounded in fear of the other and directly targeted refugee communities (Bejan & Souvlis, 2019; Karlin, 2022). The 2019 and 2020 raids on the refugee squats in Exarcheia need to also be understood in terms of the market-friendly ideological orientation of New Democracy, which aimed to gentrify the neighbourhood

and transform it into a tourist and foreign investment enclave (Bejan & Souvlis, 2019; Pettas et al., 2021). The presence of refugees did not fit with the ambitions of private entrepreneurship. In this context, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis's aim to have a "refugee-free capital by 2023" (Greenwood, 2022) was expected to magically lift Greece out of poverty. Throughout 2022, police forcibly removed hundreds of people camped around Victoria Square and Omonia. Simultaneously, the Greek state initiated a phased closure of most camp accommodations around Athens (Greenwood, 2022). Irregular migrants had to evacuate, but they had nowhere to go. Some NGO workers saw the violence against asylum seekers in the Greek islands in 2016 as now being replicated in Athens (Greenwood, 2022).

The New Democracy government has also forced international humanitarian actors operating in Greece to register as Greek NGOs (Refugees Support Aegean, 2021). Grassroots organizations that refused registration faced criminalization (Micinski, 2019; Schack & Witcher, 2021). Frontex and the Greek Coast Guard also declared that they would penalize humanitarian teams rescuing refugees at sea; however, since the Greek Coast Guard could not handle the number of arrivals, penalizing humanitarian rescue teams ended up being a death sentence for refugees at sea (Bousiou, 2020).

COVID-19 arrived in Greece when the state was already working to dispose of the refugee population in Athens. Infection rates among asylum seekers hosted in Greek reception facilities were up to three times higher than in the general population (Hargreaves et al., 2021). These higher figures were generally attributed to large numbers of asylum seekers residing in cramped and unsanitary accommodations with no access to medical treatment on site (Baker, 2021). Yet despite

high levels of COVID-19 infections in the Greek camps, no policy responses were formulated to reduce transmission and protect the health of asylum seekers (Hargreaves et al., 2021). Instead, COVID-19 restrictions became a "pretextual cover" to restrict the rights of asylum seekers (Damon-Feng, 2022), with the Greek bureaucracy, as this paper will show, restricting the mobility of refugee subjects on claims of curbing infection rates in the country.

Border closures have left displaced populations in limbo everywhere on the globe, with many states, including the United States, forcibly returning asylum seekers to unsafe countries (Damon-Feng, 2022). COVID-19 has become a "crisis of mobility," with border restrictions acting like a much more solidified wall denying entry into the nation. What mattered was not only to protect the nation from security threats, as was the case pre-pandemic, but also to protect it from outsider asylum seekers seen as carrying the virus. Perfectly sealed borders showed that national bureaucracies saw the refugee groups as "subjects who cannot be protected from the pandemic if allowed inside [the nation] and, at once, as potential vehicles of contagion—'Corona spreaders'—and thus as dangers on a bacterial-hygienic level" (Tazzioli & Stierl, 2021, p. 539).

As little consideration was given by state bureaucracies to respecting human rights during a pandemic, it is from within such context that this paper adds an empirical backdrop to the little scholarly literature on how COVID-19 was instrumentalized to restrict the rights of refugee populations while also focusing on how the Greek civil society resisted such nationalistic efforts.

METHODOLOGY

The findings of this paper are informed by 10 one-on-one interviews (8 in 2021 and 2

in 2022) with Athens-based service providers, complemented by participant observations and desk research encompassing reviews of both academic and grey literature. Our intention is not to generate universal claims about refugee service delivery in Greece; we merely aim to offer a snapshot of what some service providers in Athens dealt with at the height of the pandemic.

The interviews were conducted in English, which was not the first language of most participants. They started with some demographic questions about participants' age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and how long they had been in Greece. Questions focused on participants' professional background, training and education, NGO history, and organization's relationship with the Greek state. Other questions asked about service delivery, in particular, eligibility for services, the target populations served, and coordination of service delivery among civil society actors. Participants were then asked to provide an overview of what they knew about refugees in Greece: estimated numbers, demographic composition, and integration into Greek society as regards access to education, health care, housing, language programs, labour market, social integration, and/or citizenship acquisition. Lastly, participants were asked about how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted service provision.

Service providers in our sample were representatives of local and international NGOs registered in in Greece. Some were based close to Victoria Square and Acharnon, two Athens neighbourhoods known for their refugee presence. Others were in the core of the city at Syntagma or Exarcheia. Some were providing education support, while others were working on housing, family assistance, legal aid, and resettlement support for those wanting to move to western Europe. Others were providing skills training for refugees,

including computer literacy and vocational training such as cooking. Some were giving Greek-, English-, and French-language classes. Some were catering to women or pregnant women needing maternity services, accompanying them to hospitals for medical appointments. And some were providing a range of arts-based and self-care activities such as acupuncture, yoga classes, drama therapy, crafts, and visual arts.

Interview data were anonymized during transcription. Transcripts were imported into NVivo software and coded for common themes and subthemes in relation to the study's objective of exploring the challenges to service provision during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several participants had experience in the field of forced migration, having volunteered in other parts of the world, such as Myanmar, Vietnam, and Burma, before relocating to Greece when the refugee crisis started in 2015. Most were working for small, direct-service grassroots organizations, including a group set up as a squat. We also interviewed two people from a large, well-established network dedicated to service provision for migrants.

All participants identified as female and were between the ages of 30 and 70. All had undergraduate university education, with three holding graduate degrees. Most participants were foreign nationals, from North America, Latin America, the UK, and western Europe. Their nationalities included Albanian, American, Argentinian, British, Chilean, Canadian, Greek, Spanish, and Filipino. Three participants mentioned that they had not intended to stay long in the country, but once they started working, they saw a need for their services and extended their stay.

Through participant observations, we took detailed notes on the interview locations,

including descriptions of the surrounding area, the building, and the office, as well as on gestures and communications observed between various service providers within the same organization. To get a better sense of each organization and the area in which it operated, we walked to each interview location in Athens.

FINDINGS: COVID-19 AS A WEAPON OF EXCLUSION

Suspension and Delays in the Asylum Process

Once COVID-19 hit, the asylum process stopped for several weeks during the first lockdown in 2020 and during the subsequent lockdowns in 2021. Service providers found themselves not knowing how to advise people about what they should do. One provider called the entire period "a total black hole."

During the first lockdown, from mid-March to mid-May 2020, the Greek asylum office reviewed a limited number of applications without processing any interviews or registrations. As one participant observed, the only interviews conducted were those the asylum office deemed arbitrarily essential. Discretionary decision-making translates into a bordering practice that excludes undesirables, those who are outsiders to the nation (Alrob & Shields, 2022).The use of discretionary measures to establish who is deemed essential to be interviewed brings attention to the fact that the national community functions like a "club to which one can be either admitted or refused access" (Balibar, 2015, p.75) based on what the nation considers its priorities in a specific period of time. Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, processing asylum seekers—hence, deciding whom to allocate the right to access further rights—was not a priority, as the state's priority was primarily the well-being of its citizens. The pandemic

measures became then, a pretext to manoeuvre access in society for those in limbo, those waiting to hear about their right to further access state services.

Participants shared that after the first lockdown, the volume of claims the asylum service processed remained below pre-pandemic levels. People continued to wait in line for days, often starting to queue at 4:30 a.m. only to be told to come back the next day. Service providers witnessed people waiting for hours in the street for an appointment: "You see a lot of families with babies sleeping in the streets because maybe you have one appointment at 10:00 a.m. [the next day] for the asylum office." That the outsiders to the nation must wait in line for hours and days only to be allowed a more secure waiting status inside the nation is, in itself, a form of symbolic violence (Topak, 2020). It is well documented in the literature that waiting has long-term effects on refugees' emotional and physical health. Forcing refugees to wait for an asylum appointment on behalf of protecting the health of the citizens institutes bureaucratic procedures that lead to poorer health outcomes for these very same refugees, hence symbolically communicating that only the national population's health is important.

Throughout 2021, asylum appointments in Athens continued to be delayed. Interviews were conducted over Skype and people had to book appointments online, which were difficult to secure. Providers said asylum seekers tried repeatedly to call the asylum office in Athens (colloquially referred to as Katehaki because it is close to the Katehaki metro station) but were unable to schedule a consultation. Many lost their reserved time slots because they had no guidelines or support in how to navigate the online platform and could not access their appointments. Successful appointments were those with

forms completed online by lawyers. This had the effect of asylum claimants having to pay lawyers from their own pockets, a challenge for those with little money. Service providers stated that generally, asylum seekers were paying €100–300 for legal aid to complete their online applications. Lack of money has always been a barrier to accessing services in society for asylum seekers (Chatty, 2021). That the state pushes them to use fee-based lawyer services merely to submit applications that they have the legal right to submit shows how the Greek state has been imposing violent measures on the refugee population, hence exacerbating already existent vulnerabilities.

Participants also reported issues related to their asylum cards expiring. Without an active asylum ID, claimants had difficulty securing jobs and accessing public services, including health care, as they would be considered undocumented in the country. One service provider detailed:

> Due to COVID, asylum cards have been extended because people didn't have the possibility to physically go to the asylum service to renew. At the end of June 30 [2021], no new extension was given by the ministry. And there has been an announcement saying that every asylum seeker would take an appointment to renew [their] card. But the platform [for making appointments] doesn't work properly or has many criteria that are unknown to us. As a result, the majority are [un]able to have their renewed card. This means that [you] don't have legal documentation in Greece. This means that in a police check, you will be detained because you don't have documents. This means that for the persons who have a job contract, they cannot continue with their jobs, which means that for [those] who have a contract [for] a house, this might create some issues, and the most important thing is that without this card, they don't have access to health care.

For many, expiration of their asylum cards triggered a cascade of consequences, such as the inability to obtain a social security num-

ber (known as an AMKA), which makes it possible to access the Greek state's social services, including health care and other social benefits. Others were in danger of losing their housing because they could not renew their asylum documentation. One participant described:

> For the past six months Katehaki was closed. So now, they don't have AMKA. I have a student … he was removed from a shelter because he became 18. He's now living in a house in the municipality, but he received asylum last month. And once you have asylum, you have 30 days, and then you don't have housing and you don't have cash cards. So, he [might] lose his house at any moment. But he doesn't have any papers because his papers are expired since Katehaki only opened this month [August 2021]. He has an appointment [now] for next week. Hopefully, he can renew his papers, but he's been working illegally for the past month, because what can he do? Working under the table, doing all kinds of little jobs, even though he has asylum here, he has AFIMI [Greek tax number], but because his ID card expired and his AMKA expired, he can't apply for a proper job.

For those whose card expirations forced them to work illegally, the rate of pay was minimal and generally would not cover basic living expenses. In the above-mentioned case, the young man had to accept a wage of €15 a day for up to 12 hours of work per day. This works out to be around €1.25 per hour, or close to €300 a month, significantly lower than the Greek minimum wage, which in the summer of 2022 was set at just over €750 per month (Eurostat, 2022).

These examples show that the expiration of asylum cards suspended the very processes of inclusion in society for asylum seekers. Regardless of how the state classifies categories of migrants and how it endows them with differentiated set of rights, the state has the responsibility to include, at least minimally, everyone that resides within its territorial confinements. For those in the standard (though imperfect) refugee-

determination process, although they do not have the entitlements of permanent residents, they at least have the right to access state-supported integration programs, such as language classes or labour market assistance. What the expiration of asylum cards triggered was the withholding of the "handholding" assistance typically provided under the refugee-determination process. This withdrawal measure was not directly violent in its design, since there was no direct policy geared to strip integration rights, but certainly it was a measure that carried violent bureaucratic effects as, indirectly, it halted the right to inclusion for asylum seekers in Athens.

Harmful and Extended Lockdowns

COVID-19 lockdowns were forcefully implemented in Greece. Participants discussed how all residents had to send a text message to a centralized system prior to leaving their residence, stating the reason for going out. Those unable to text had to sign a self-declaration form stating the purpose of their errand. If police stopped someone lacking such documentation, they would issue a fine. Such measures were enforced differently for citizens compared with migrants; police violently discriminated against refugees and issued fines solely for being outside their camps. COVID-19 guidelines were more relaxed for the general population but more strictly enforced for irregular migrants. As one participant commented: "Nobody [was] permitted to go outside. In Eleonas [refugee camp in Athens], if the people went outside of the camp, and they were arriving in the city centre, a police patrol [would] probably give them a fine."

Participants speculated that the Greek state appeared to have kept the camps closed, on both the islands and the mainland, under the guise of protecting public health,

allegedly to shield refugees from COVID-19, but the actual motive seemed to have been to curtail the free movement of refugees by tacitly branding mobile populations as vectors of disease. The state and media have long described people on the move as threats to public health (Wagner-Egger et al., 2011); recent media representations of Syrian refugees in Turkey, for example, have treated refugees as carriers of disease (Yücel, 2021). Unsurprisingly, then, deportations were at some of the highest levels ever during COVID-19 (Alrob & Shields, 2022)—despite forced removals from a nation-state involving higher public health risks, as deportations rely on the physical interaction of several actors, including border agents and airport transfers (Alrob & Shields, 2022). In line with such violent bureaucratic procedures, service providers offering residential services also felt targeted by the police under the guise of respecting physical distancing rules. One participant described how police visits were frequent in Athens during the lockdowns, on the presumption of sharing overcrowded spaces:

> Police came to the building because we are a lot of people together in the same area, in the kitchen or on the deck. But this is our house. We tried to explain that, yeah, we are more than 10 people here, but we are 100 people living here, so what can we do? We are in our house, we are eating, we are cooking, this is our house.

Service providers also mentioned that the lockdown was particularly challenging for children in the refugee camps. Children struggled to understand the concept of a lockdown, and they found it difficult to adapt to the provision of education through online classes, which were mainly conducted via Facebook and WhatsApp groups. One education provider in the Eleonas camp in Athens shared that although they were conducting online lessons, children were continually asking, "Why are we not doing

any lessons?" They asked this question because they were not going to school, and they were only seeing their teachers online. Online instruction proved most difficult for children not fluent in Greek, particularly because mastery of language is what makes a student pedagogically engaged in content delivery.

Participants shared that most refugee children fell behind in schoolwork during the lockdowns, as the pandemic hindered their ability to take part in formal education. Online classes disrupted traditional curriculum delivery. As well, students were restricted from taking part in regular school activities (e.g., arts programs), which generally help second-language vocabulary learning (Olioumtsevits et al., 2022); they also lost their familiarization with nonverbal practices common in formal school settings, which also tend to promote rapid language acquisition (Simopoulos & Magos, 2020). Research has found that the in-person formal learning experiences of refugee children in Greece were among their happiest moments since arriving in the country. A study interviewing 21 refugee teenagers from Syria and Afghanistan found, for instance, that participants expressed positive views about their education in Greece, especially in relation to feeling accepted and maintaining relations with their peers (Palaiologou & Prekate, 2023). Some have argued that the inclusion of refugee children in formal classrooms is a predictor of school completion, while periods of separation from peers (as happened during COVID-19) lead to poor school attendance and increase the likelihood of dropping out (Mavromara et al., 2023). Formal schooling has also been found to be a "protective factor for mental health, alleviating the symptoms of past trauma, providing opportunities for socialization with local peers, offering a wider range of enriching daily activities outside the camp, and fulfilling children's expectations about their new country of residence" (Palaiologou & Prekate, 2023, p. 9).

Participants noted that the extended lockdowns also resulted in many refugees losing their jobs or having their wages slashed. Other refugees working as live-in caregivers were forced to spend all their time in the company of their employers.

The bureaucracy of the Greek state once again halted inclusion of those waiting for their right to reside and make a living inside the nation. Welcoming of refugees is not simply defined through the act of opening borders. Welcoming also means facilitating participation in the labour market and the social sphere, enabling access to civic rights, and cultivating a sense of belonging (Spencer & Charsley, 2016). Suspending the right to access the labour market is a violent consequence of the COVID-19 lockdowns that again disproportionally affected asylum seekers compared with the general population.

Lockdowns also impeded access to medical care. When appointments had to be conducted by phone, many struggled to communicate with the doctor, especially without interpretation services. One participant explained that from 2015 to just before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Greek state funded cultural mediators to assist with interpretation for asylum seekers when accessing medical care. The system soon broke down and refugees had to rely on assistance provided by NGOs. When COVID-19 hit, NGO personnel were left scrambling to provide these services.

Lockdowns also had gendered effects, disproportionately burdening women. The COVID-19 lockdowns were associated with high levels of gender violence across all segments of society. Yet the impact was greater for refugee women experiencing

domestic abuse, as the lockdowns prevented them from accessing support and recourse to safety (Piquero et al., 2021). Moreover, refugee women could not access medical care because they had no place to leave their children when the schools closed. By contrast, local women, permanent residents and citizens, could tap into a web of informal childcare arrangements by virtue of having access to established personal networks of support, considering they had been part of the national fabric for longer. Some refugee women also could not provide for their children, as they were afraid to leave their houses to go to their jobs:

> Poverty increased a lot. Many women had informal accommodations, and so came abuse from the owner. In the middle of the lockdown, we supported and found safe accommodations for single mothers. There were times that we called the ambulance in the middle of the night to provide the necessary supports to the mother and the children. There were, for example, undocumented women that couldn't work because they were working in the black market, so they couldn't even provide food for themselves, or they were scared to go out because they were going to be stopped.

The gendered impacts of the COVID-19 bureaucratic measures meant that, working in the informal economy or in domestic care, in other people's homes, women often had to make a choice between risking infection by going to work or staying put at their place of employment and losing their right to mobility.

Impact on Service Provision

The work of service providers was also impacted by the COVID-19 state responses. During the first lockdown, service provision stopped altogether. NGO workers could no longer work face to face with refugees, so they adjusted their services in a very short time to support refugees remotely through digital applications, phone, or online mes-saging. Workers described feelings of hopelessness about not being able to assist refugees, especially those who had come to Athens from the islands, who were often in desperate situations. Others witnessed outright discrimination against the people they served. Physical distancing regulations were often used as an exclusionary pretext, especially for limiting access to medical care. One participant stated:

> Someone [from the NGO] went with one of the pregnant women to the hospital. They had to wait outside because of the coronavirus. Okay, waiting for the appointment … she needed to go to the toilet and the people at the door said, "No, you go to the street." A pregnant woman is going to pee in the street, and I said, "What?!"

Those providing educational services were forced, through lockdown, to move their classes online through Facebook or WhatsApp. For those providing educational services in camps, activity provision proved ever more laborious, as NGO staff would have to physically drop off lesson packages with the families: "We were going container by container. We were giving the homework package. We were taking the previous one, we were giving guidelines. We [also] had small conversations to encourage the children. It was not a typical relation."

The impact on service provision is a violent consequence of the COVID-19 bureaucratic measures in Greece, particularly within a context where refugees and asylum seekers face difficulties when arriving in a new country and they tend to rely on civil society and NGO actors to help them navigate the new context: from helping them with basic information on how to access services such as health care, welfare benefits, and employment; attending to their basic needs through providing safe shelter and access to food; to helping them coordinate social gatherings to create social support networks and overall assisting them in levelling their

transition towards inclusion in the host society. Without NGOs' help, asylum seekers in Greece found themselves prey to bureaucratic processes that had the consequence of what some have called "internal bordering" (Alrob & Shields, 2022; Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021). Within the literature on bureaucratic violence, this involves going beyond controls at the border to rationing access to social services based on migration status; it necessitates a transfer of certain notions usually applied to the state–migrant relationship at the border, such as the role of street-level bureaucracy, to migrants' experiences vis-à-vis access to social services once in the country (Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021). Diminishment of NGO services for asylum seekers throughout COVID-19 is an example of the bureaucratic violence of the Greek state, which is directedly manifested through the difference-making between citizens and foreigners, and through different access to welfare state protections for groups of people endowed with differentiated rights based on their connection to the nation.

Creative Responses to Subverting Bureaucratic Violence

Despite its harmful impact, COVID-19 not only triggered experiences of despair but gave rise to creativity among civil society actors, who found avenues to defend the rights of people on the move. In creative response to lockdowns, service providers redesigned their projects. For instance, money initially allocated for activities involving face-to-face interaction was redirected to other needs, such as food provision or financial assistance for digital technology. However, shuffling these funds and deciding what to provide next created a great deal of stress for service providers. As one interviewee said: "We had to now prove that there was a need for our existence."

COVID-19 state responses also led service providers to be creatively proactive. Some hired Farsi- or Arabic-speaking medical staff to provide information and referrals for those infected with COVID-19. Others reported having to lie to or deceive public authorities when accompanying people to health services. One NGO worker explained the importance of their organization in accompanying pregnant women about to give birth. At the height of the pandemic, hospitals did not allow unrelated people to accompany the person with the appointment, so many NGO workers would lie and say their clients needed interpretation services so that they could join them. Lying was thus used as a creative way to subvert the bureaucratic violence imposed by the state on irregular migrants.

An unintended advantage of the lockdown was increased collaboration among various NGOs. Technology and the formation of digital online groups via Facebook and WhatsApp enabled service workers to coordinate referrals and form subgroups for harmonizing services. For others, the pandemic worked as a catalyst to opening shared spaces after the lockdowns, which served as social hubs where refugees could come together, share their life stories, and learn about opportunities to build their skills in their new society.

Larger and better-funded organizations provided their service users with laptops or smartphones, and thus appeared to be better equipped to transition to online service delivery. A representative of a large migrant network told us that her organization's data collection system facilitated the transition to online service delivery but that "nobody was prepared." Her organization created WhatsApp groups to allow for direct communication with the women served. Communication with other organizations also

increased during the lockdowns, and so NGO workers were able to better map the needs of the populations served and to better facilitate the use of funds for "digital data and devices [smartphones and laptops]."

It was in response to the state weaponization of the pandemic that service providers and refugee support groups found ways to defend the rights of people on the move and resist bureaucratic ways of inflicting violence. In a distorted way, the pandemic served as a catalyst for integrated service provision and for the mobilization of NGO workers towards increased communication and coordination of service provision.

DISCUSSION: HOW COVID-19 INCREASED BUREAUCRATIC VIOLENCE AGAINST REFUGEES IN GREECE

State bureaucracies operate through a complex system of institutional rules, practical considerations, and moral values that shape who they deem deserving of welfare provision (Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021). The Greek state used COVID-19 as a weapon to exclude asylum seekers from accessing welfare in society, using the pandemic as a pretext for implementing the extraordinary measure of suspending the asylum process. People entering the country during the pandemic remained in limbo for extended time periods; forced to wait undetermined lengths of time for an asylum appointment, they could not attain employment in the formal economy and were prevented from accessing health care, education, and other essential services. The state neglected to prioritize asylum when it should have addressed the special needs of this vulnerable population.

COVID-19 made travel unsafe for everyone. For a brief time, however, the pandemic prevented even the privileged classes from crossing borders, which is why some protested the restrictions on their freedom of movement. Asylum seekers, however, experienced the sealing of national borders more violently than before. Accessing refuge became more difficult for people on the move in Athens during the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, when asylum procedures were suspended for several weeks and appointments had to be booked online and required legal help to navigate. Asylum cards became unobtainable, and many claimants' cards expired, making it impossible for them to acquire the social security numbers needed to access state social services, including health care. Some also faced the danger of losing their housing, since they could not renew the needed documentation. Others with expired cards were forced to work illegally, hence without worker protections and for compensation below the Greek minimum wage. Pushing people who have the legal right to settle in a new country into a situation of illegality, forcing them to survive without documentation, thus stripping them of their minimum right to have rights, as in the cases of people having to work illegally for less than two euros per hour, are all examples that show that the refugee subject is never a fully rights-bearing subject in national bureaucracies; rather, the refugee is a subject whose agency is heavily conditioned by procedural decisions, whose entire livelihood can change as a result of administrative decisions. The fact that many claimants had to appeal to third-party entities, paying lawyers to secure their online appointments for asylum—appointments they had the legal right to reserve at no cost—also shows the multiple effects that state bureaucracies have on people's lives. At the same time, this bureaucratic web benefits an entire secondary industry of private legal aid, a sector that appears to capitalize on claimants' inability to navigate asylum processes.

The state inflicted violence on asylum claimants by imposing a one-size-fits-all approach that may have met the needs of the general population but created further harm to refugees. All participants observed that the refugee population in Athens was much more affected by the pandemic compared with the general population, who, as citizens, had the right to live in Greece, access to laptops and the internet, more networking capital, and access to medical personnel. For example, accessing services online is different for refugees than it is for national citizens, who are most likely participants in the national labour market, remunerated accordingly, and afforded regular and reliable access to the internet. The very same services are more difficult to access for those who have been institutionally relegated to the fringes of society, with little to no access to the labour market, and who are seen as invasive others, threats and pests in the national community of valued citizen subjects (B. Anderson, 2017). But accounting for such differences was never part of the Greek bureaucratic blueprint in applying COVID-19 regulations. It is this erasure in the bureaucratic design of state responses that metamorphosed into violent after-effects for refugees in Athens, Greece.

Instead of implementing special rules recognizing the unique realities of asylum seekers and ensuring their protection and safety, the Greek national bureaucracy made life more difficult for people on the move. Treated as vectors of disease, refugees in Athens had their movement restricted; they were prohibited from leaving their residence and as a result became targets for police fines when they did leave. The differential effects of the lockdowns on refugees versus the general population clearly exemplifies how bureaucracies function differently for various groups, bestowing more rights to citizens while restricting the rights of those the nation deems undesirable.

At face value, the state might appear to have protected its citizens from COVID-19 by closing public spaces and enforcing physical distancing. However, such public health directives had the bureaucratic effect of stripping groups of people with fewer rights of the sole vehicle that provided them with access to public health (e.g., renewal of their asylum cards). It is a matter of interpretation whether the state simply ignored the potential effects of such resultant complications when implementing COVID-19 regulations in asylum matters or whether it made use of the unintended consequences of COVID-19 regulations to further deter refugees from settling in Greece and push them out of the nation.

Bureaucratic decisions may not be designed with violence in mind, but ultimately, they produce violent outcomes. The fact that the lockdowns disrupted refugee children's education, which has both immediate and long-term effects, is an example of indirect state violence. Gaps in education consequently deny development and language acquisition to children while also affecting future rates of participation in society and the labour market (Tzoraki, 2019). The assumption that online classes would be equally accessible to refugee children and the general population also disregarded the fact that language acquisition is key in the success of any class conducted via WhatsApp or Facebook. Young refugees who were not yet fluent in Greek might not have found online classes as intelligible as they were for local children who were already fluent in the national language.

Bureaucratic violence was also manifested indirectly in the impact of pandemic restrictions on the work of refugee service providers. Our participants mentioned that at the be-

ginning of the pandemic, during the lock-downs, the termination of their services posed an existential threat to their operations and to their organizations as civil society entities. Suddenly, they could no longer fulfill their mandates, as they were unable to help people in need of protection. This forced many to find innovative ways for their organizations to survive by changing their programming and by shuffling money to needs that had newly arisen because of COVID-19. This creativity shows the commitment to refugee integration on the part of civil society, especially in areas where the Greek state fails to provide adequate services: from Greek- and English-language classes, to housing, to accompaniments for medical appointments or vaccination clinics, to assistance with asylum claims, and finally, to better integration of service provision across the civil society.

While COVID-19 intensified pre-existing social inequalities, it could have provided an opportunity to rewrite policies that promote the integration of refugees, including the democratization of health care by making it free and safe for irregular migrants who fear contact with authorities and deportation (Mallet-Garcia & Delvino, 2021). It is our hope that by exploring how civil society actors interacted with, mitigated, and ultimately subverted various forms of bureaucratic violence inflicted on refugees, we have shed light on the issue and informed migrant advocates on how to best support those claiming asylum and how to contest violent state policies that exclude people on the move from national belonging.

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