

## THE MIGRATION-REFUGEE CRISIS AS AN 'ASYMMETRICAL THREAT' IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION: FIELD RESEARCH

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### **Abstract**

*This study focuses on the recent migration and refugee phenomenon in the Mediterranean, highlighting its multiple dimensions as a modern asymmetrical threat. In the first part, a short reference is made to the history of the migration crisis from 2015 to 2024, describing the different phases of the crisis, from the peak of the crisis in 2015 to the resurgence of the phenomenon in recent years. This is followed by an analysis of the concept of asymmetrical threats as a form of modern warfare, as well as the links between this concept and the migration phenomenon. The study then examines approaches to addressing these asymmetrical threats. European efforts are highlighted, followed by a focus on Greece's response. Next, the analysis of the questionnaire results are presented, with the final part consisting of the conclusions and the proposals that emerged from the completion of the study.*

**Key-words:** *Migration, Refugee, Asymmetrical Threats, Hybrid Warfare, Mediterranean.*

### **Introduction**

Migration, a phenomenon deeply rooted in human history, has reached an unprecedented scale and complexity in recent years, posing significant challenges to countries in the Mediterranean region, such as Greece, Italy, Spain, and Cyprus. These nations, located at the borders of Europe and the Mediterranean, find themselves at the forefront of what can be described as an asymmetrical threat, not only to their own stability and security but also to that of the broader European Union. Greece, with its strategic position at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, has become a primary entry point for migrants and refugees. Islands such as Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Kos, as well as the country's mainland, often serve as the first European territory reached by migrants and refugees traveling along the Eastern Mediterranean route (UNHCR, 2019). However, this situation is not limited to Greece. Italy, with its extensive Mediterranean coastline, has faced similar challenges. Its islands, such as Lampedusa, have become symbols of the migration crisis due to the continuous flow of migrants, often arriving under perilous conditions. Likewise, Spain encounters its own challenges, with territories such as Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa serving as key entry points, along with the Canary Islands, which have seen a rise in migrant arrivals. At the heart of this migration crisis lies the European Union's struggle to formulate a coherent and effective response. The EU's approach has largely focused on strengthening border control, enhancing asylum processing, and cooperating with third countries to manage migration flows. However, this strategy has faced criticism for prioritizing security over humanitarian values, often leading to contentious debates about balancing border protection with safeguarding the rights and dignity of migrants. The situation is further complicated by the uneven distribution

of responsibility among EU member states. Countries such as Greece, Italy and Cyprus bear a disproportionate share of the burden related to rescue operations, reception, and processing of asylum applications. This imbalance has fueled calls for a fairer redistribution of migrants across the EU and for more substantial support to frontline states. Local communities, particularly in areas with large numbers of arrivals, have had to adapt to rapidly changing demographics and the accompanying challenges. Moreover, the migration crisis in the Mediterranean, and by extension in Southern and Eastern Europe, constitutes an asymmetrical threat in multiple respects. It challenges traditional concepts of national security and border control, as countries must navigate the complex interplay between humanitarian obligations, international law, and domestic political pressures. Additionally, the influx of migrants has significant socio-political impacts, including the rise of nationalist and anti-immigration sentiments in various European countries, potentially destabilizing the political landscape. Addressing the root causes of migration is also of critical importance. The European Union seeks to go beyond immediate border control by tackling issues such as war, persecution, economic hardship, and climate change in migrants' countries of origin. Furthermore, the development of comprehensive integration programs for migrants granted asylum is essential to fostering social cohesion and preventing marginalization.

### **Purpose and objective**

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the extensive migratory and refugee flows and the disruption of the internal stability of the host countries, rendering them potential asymmetrical threats at both the national and European levels.

### **The Migration Influx during the last decade**

The period from 2015 to 2024 marks a critical time for Europe, as the unfolding migration crisis challenges its political structures, social fabric, and core values. Irregular migration underwent significant changes during this period, influenced by various global and regional factors. The years 2015–2016 were characterized by an unprecedented wave of irregular crossings (exceeding 2.3 million), primarily driven by conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The images of overcrowded boats reaching European shores and life jackets washed up on beaches became symbols of the hardships that compel people to embark on such perilous journeys (de Haas, H., 2016). The European Union (EU) was unprepared for such a large-scale human movement and influx within its territories, putting the existing asylum and migration frameworks to the test. The Dublin Regulation, which assigns responsibility for processing asylum applications to the first country of entry, placed disproportionate pressure on so-called frontline states, exposing the need for a more equitable system of burden-sharing among EU member states (Gattinara, P., 2016). In the subsequent years, the number of irregular crossings declined, a development attributed to the EU's strengthened border management and migration policies. One of the most significant measures was the EU-Turkey Agreement (Triandafyllidou, A., 2018). While this agreement reduced the number of arrivals, it raised concerns about compliance with international law, particularly regarding the principle of non-refoulement (Anastasopoulos, G., 2023). By 2023, the upward trend continued, with the first seven months showing a 25% increase in asylum applications compared to the same period in 2022 and a 52% increase compared to pre-COVID-19 levels. The Central Mediterranean route, primarily from North Africa to Italy, remained one of the most active and dangerous pathways. The Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans routes also recorded significant activity. The migration crisis from 2015 to 2024 has highlighted the complex interplay between migration, politics, and human rights in Europe. It prompted a

reassessment of migration policies, the development of new agreements and frameworks, and ongoing discussions on finding better ways to manage the migration crisis effectively and with respect for human rights.

### **The Concept of Asymmetrical Threat**

The concept of asymmetrical threat is understood as a specialized term within the broader framework of hybrid warfare. Asymmetrical threats extend beyond traditional military confrontations, encompassing a wide range of non-conventional warfare strategies. These threats have become particularly prominent in the post-Cold War era, where the nature of conflict has evolved significantly, compelling nations to adapt their defense mechanisms beyond conventional military capabilities (Chorafas, V., 2019). Asymmetrical warfare represents a method by which weaker adversaries employ unconventional strategies to exploit the vulnerabilities of stronger states, seeking to "level the playing field" in ways that conventional combat tactics cannot achieve (Brzica, N., 2018). The term "asymmetrical threat" first emerged in the 1990s. Weaker entities may resort to tactics such as guerrilla warfare, terrorism, or cyber warfare, all designed to undermine the military superiority of a stronger opponent. When a weaker entity faces a stronger one, especially in situations where their vital interests clash, the motivation to adopt asymmetrical tactics increases significantly (Ntokos, T., 2008). In the modern era, asymmetrical threats often exploit technological advancements and the interconnected nature of global societies. Cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic sabotage are prominent examples of how asymmetrical strategies can be used to create widespread disruption. These tactics are designed to leverage the vulnerabilities inherent in open societies, with the aim of influencing public perception and undermining the operational capabilities of the targeted entity. Such strategies emphasize the strategic use of limited resources to achieve disproportionately significant impacts—a core principle of asymmetrical warfare (Lampakis, S., 2004). Integrating military, technological, informational, and policy strategies at the state level is essential for effectively countering the dynamic nature of these threats. This comprehensive approach not only addresses immediate security concerns but also aids in the development of long-term strategies to maintain stability and prevent future conflicts (Miles, F., 1999). The concentration of populations in urban centers dramatically increases societal vulnerability to asymmetrical threats (Balomenos, K., 2023). Modern societies are increasingly dependent on the smooth functioning of state institutions and the services they provide, such as water supply, electricity, and healthcare systems. Therefore, if an adversary manages to strike a critical infrastructure, it could lead to the disorganization or even the collapse of the state apparatus (Chorafas, V., 2019).

### **Forms of Asymmetrical Threats**

Asymmetrical threats related to migration have emerged as significant challenges, encompassing economic, social, and political dimensions that critically affect national security in various ways. From an economic perspective, migration can disrupt labor markets by displacing native workers and driving down wages, potentially leading to increased unemployment and underemployment (Metelev, S., 2016). Such economic disturbances may result in social unrest and heighten nations' vulnerability to other forms of asymmetrical threats. From a social and cultural perspective, large-scale migration from diverse backgrounds can lead to social fragmentation, rising xenophobia, and heightened social tensions, which may escalate into conflicts and civil unrest (Szkurlat, I., 2019). This deterioration of social cohesion directly impacts national security by destabilizing societies from within.

Moreover, uncontrolled migration can serve as a conduit for terrorism, organized crime, and other illegal activities, exacerbating security risks. The complexity of adequately monitoring and registering new arrivals can overwhelm existing security protocols, making it difficult to distinguish between genuine asylum seekers and potential security threats. Politically, migration can challenge states' governance capacities, leading to political instability. Governments may face increased pressure from political opponents, who either oppose or advocate for stricter migration controls, resulting in political polarization and weakened governance structures (Böhmelt, T., et al., 2020).

Cross-border terrorism can be defined as terrorism involving individuals or groups conducting terrorist acts across national boundaries. This type of terrorism is particularly concerning due to its impact on international security and the complexities associated with preventing and countering such threats. A notable example of cross-border terrorism in Europe was the Madrid train bombings in 2004, which highlighted the vulnerabilities of open borders within the EU. These attacks were coordinated by a group that traversed multiple European borders, underscoring the challenges posed by free movement to security services (Boer, M., & van Tubergen, F. 2019). Further illustrating the need for enhanced cross-border cooperation, the 2015 Paris attacks demonstrated how terrorists exploited open borders under the Schengen Agreement to move across Europe undetected (Kot, E., 2022). The response to these attacks included increased focus on enhancing information-sharing and strengthening border controls, reflecting the ongoing evolution of European security policies aimed at mitigating such threats. The Schengen Information System (SIS) and the Visa Information System (VIS) were instrumental in facilitating the rapid exchange of information among European countries, which is vital for tracking and apprehending suspects who may seek to exploit Europe's open borders (Crockett, K.A., et al., 2017).

Organized crime refers to a structured group of individuals whose primary objective is profit through illegal activities, often with lasting and severe consequences for society and economies. This definition encompasses various criminal activities, including drug trafficking, money laundering, extortion, human trafficking, and others.

The Frontex Risk Analysis for 2023/2024 highlights a significant rise in organized crime in Europe, with a notable focus on illegal drug trafficking and human trafficking, which intensified after the COVID-19 pandemic. The easing of pandemic-related restrictions allowed organized crime groups to capitalize on increased cross-border movement and economic activities to expand their operations (Tolbaru, C., 2023). Particularly prominent is the strong network of drug trafficking operations channeling large quantities of cocaine and other narcotics into the EU (Shapovalov, V., & Samorodov, A., 2023). Human trafficking remains a persistent issue, with the report indicating that trafficking networks exploit migration routes to smuggle vulnerable populations into Europe (Murphy, M., 2023). These networks are often interconnected with other forms of smuggling, creating complex challenges for law enforcement agencies.

Islamic fundamentalism or extremism, as the term later evolved to justify acts of violence, is characterized by an expansionist ideology that is difficult to counter and is often seen in Europe as a force that clashes with Western values, contributing to cultural tensions (Kardis, K., et al., 2022).

Nationalism, as an ideology and overarching philosophy, aims to expand national boundaries at the expense of other peoples and states. It emphasizes strong allegiance to one's nation and culture, often to the detriment of others. It manifests in policies and sentiments that prioritize the interests of the native population over those of migrants, further deepening social and political divisions.

## **Linking Asymmetrical Threats with Migration**

The migration issue can be directly linked to asymmetrical threats, although this does not imply that migratory flows or migrants/refugees themselves constitute a threat per se. However, these flows and individuals can be exploited by other actors to achieve their objectives. In 2015, the European Union faced a significant number of terrorist attacks, with France being the hardest-hit country, suffering 148 deaths and more than 250 injuries in terrorist incidents. Both "lone wolves" and organized militant groups contributed to the growing threat of Islamist terrorism in Europe. This threat is exacerbated by the fact that some individuals, though born and raised in Europe, rapidly radicalize and assume roles as indirect or direct participants in terrorist actions (Europol, 2016). In 2015 alone, 211 attacks (completed or thwarted) were reported in Europe, resulting in 151 fatalities. Additionally, 1,077 individuals were arrested for terrorism-related offenses, a notable increase from 774 arrests in 2014. Most of these arrests were linked to jihadist terrorism, with 687 suspects detained, reflecting a sharp rise compared to previous years. The perpetrators' profiles in France varied significantly from those of terrorist groups operating outside Europe. Europol's 2016 reports identified the main threat as attacks carried out by Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) on European soil, such as the November 13 attacks in Paris. Moreover, "lone wolves," like the attackers involved in the Charlie Hebdo incident, who were European citizens of Algerian descent and trained by Al-Qaeda in Yemen, posed substantial threats (Moran, M., 2017). Another significant attack, orchestrated by the Islamic State (ISIS), was the massacre at the Bataclan theater on the evening of November 13, 2015 (Vargo, M. E., 2021). Religiously inspired terrorism, particularly jihadist terrorism, has been a critical and ongoing threat to European security over the past decade. Notable attacks in 2016 included the Brussels bombings in March, which resulted in 32 deaths and over 300 injuries. The perpetrators were linked to the same network responsible for the November 2015 Paris attacks (Karagiannis, K., 2016). In 2016, terrorist organizations also extensively used social media for radicalization and recruitment. ISIS and Al-Qaeda, in particular, effectively leveraged social media platforms alongside encrypted communication tools to spread their ideologies, recruit new members, and coordinate attacks (Europol, 2017). In 2020, the European Union continued to face the threat of terrorism amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 10 completed attacks were recorded, resulting in 21 deaths and numerous injuries (Europol, 2021). The social and economic impacts of the pandemic were considered potential aggravating factors for radicalization and recruitment efforts by terrorist groups. According to data from Europol and European Union reports, the majority of perpetrators responsible for attacks categorized as "religiously inspired terrorism" were individuals of Islamic faith, often described as "lone wolves." Some of them were first- or second-generation immigrants raised in European countries, where they later radicalized (Ranstorp, M., 2019). Religious fanaticism leaves little room for doubt about the righteousness of its cause, as it is perceived as "sacred," thereby justifying any means used in the struggle. This perspective links executed attacks to the concept of asymmetrical threats, given the extensive use of means such as vehicles, knives, explosive devices, and firearms against civilians, aiming to increase the number of victims compared to previous years, when attacks often had more symbolic purposes. The primary goal has become to instill fear and a sense of helplessness, depriving society and citizens of their sense of security, a fundamental human need. Nevertheless, a significant consequence of such attacks is the substantial reinforcement of state security measures to counteract such actions (Laskowski, J., & Laskowska, A., 2022). While there is no concrete evidence to prove that terrorists systematically exploit migratory flows to enter Europe, it has been observed that attacks followed the pattern of fluctuating migration flows. Many incidents occurred during the 2015–2017 period, coinciding with a surge in migration. Conversely, in subsequent years,

a notable decline in attacks correlated with reduced migration flows up to 2023. However, during this period, the number of arrests related to jihadist terrorism remained high, suggesting that organizations like ISIS and Al-Qaeda exploited asylum seekers and migrants from their areas of influence, recruiting them via the internet (Ranstorp, M., 2019). Europol reports indicate that European countries at higher risk of jihadist terrorist attacks include France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, as these nations have the greatest cultural diversity (Laskowski, J., & Laskowska, A., 2022). Greece, Italy, and Spain primarily serve as transit countries and are generally not direct targets, although the risk remains present.

Another asymmetric threat that a state may be required to address is the internal threat, coming from groups attempting to promote their own agenda by exploiting circumstances and events, such as the migration issue. The mass influx of migrants into Europe has been utilized by these groups to incite xenophobia and justify violent actions (Europol, 2016). Mudde, C. (2019) confirms this trend, highlighting how right-wing extremist groups capitalized on the migration crisis to spread fear and legitimize violent actions. The rise of populist political movements across Europe, which often used anti-immigrant rhetoric, was considered a contributing factor to this (Europol, 2016). The political climate, characterized by the incorporation of anti-immigrant rhetoric, has significantly contributed to the rise of right-wing extremism (Eatwell, R. & Goodwin, M., 2018). There has been extensive use of the internet and social media by right-wing extremists, who spread their ideologies and recruit new members through these platforms, leading to an increase in attacks on migrants (Europol, 2017). The role of the internet in radicalizing individuals and facilitating extremist activities has been extensively discussed by Conway, M. et al. (2019), emphasizing the importance of monitoring online spaces. The increasing complexity and coordination of right-wing extremist groups, facilitated by the internet and modern technologies, highlight the evolving nature of this threat (Ranstorp, M. 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 affected terrorist activities, including those of right-wing extremists. Nevertheless, many far-right groups exploited the pandemic to promote their interests, spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation through fake news (Europol, 2020). Socioeconomic distress caused by the integration of migrants and the rise of extremist activities have historically been linked, suggesting the need for comprehensive socioeconomic policies to mitigate these risks (Bhui, K., Everitt, B., & Jones, E., 2014). Throughout the period from 2015 to 2023, right-wing extremist groups consistently exploited migration crises to promote their agendas. Right-wing extremists presented migrants as a threat to national identity, security, and economic stability, often using “incendiary” and xenophobic rhetoric (Mudde, C. 2019). The migration issue played a significant role in the radicalization and recruitment strategies of right-wing extremist groups, which targeted individuals who felt disenfranchised or threatened by the influx of migrants. Online platforms and social media were crucial for spreading anti-migrant propaganda, recruiting new members, and coordinating activities (Conway, M. et al. 2019).

The migration issue in the Mediterranean and Europe, particularly from 2015 to 2024, significantly affects the demographic landscape, as well as the national and demographic identity of the region, while also creating asymmetric threats that impact social stability and security. The influx of migrants and refugees into Europe, and particularly Greece, has been a critical issue since the onset of the migration crisis in the Mediterranean in 2015. According to Daniiloudi E. and El Ghamari M. (2022), Greece has been one of the main entry points for these migrants due to its geographical proximity to Turkey and the Eastern Mediterranean route. The demographic impact of this migration wave is profound. The arrival of a large number of migrants has altered the population structure in several European countries. In Greece, the migrant population represents a significant demographic group, with statistical studies showing that legal migrants constitute about one-tenth of the population (Kasimis C.

et al., 2003), and specifically the percentage ranges from about 7% to 9% (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2023). This demographic change clearly impacts the age structure, as many migrants are younger than the native population, potentially offsetting some of the aging problems faced by European countries. Greece's national composition has been influenced by the presence of migrants from the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa (Rovolis, A., & Tragaki, A. 2006). This ethnic diversification has led to the coexistence of multiple cultural identities within the same national borders, challenging traditional notions of national identity and social cohesion. Many scholars have pointed out the challenges migrants face, including discrimination, limited access to healthcare, and difficulties in employment (Anagnostopoulos D. et al., 2016). The Greek experience, as explored by Vlachadi M., Koufioti G., and Kounio A. (2021) and Triantafyllidou A. (2020), shows a gradual evolution of migration and asylum policies aimed at better managing the integration of migrants. The portrayal of migrants in the media was often negative, presenting them as burdens or threats, which exacerbates social tensions and prejudices (Arcila-Calderón et al., 2023). Such representations have significant consequences on the public's perception of migrants and can hinder their integration by cultivating a climate of hostility and exclusion. The rise of xenophobia and nationalism is a notable consequence of the demographic changes caused by migration. The negative framing in the media and political discourse can fuel xenophobic sentiments, strengthening nationalist movements that view migrants as a threat to national identity and security (Amores J. et al., 2020). This rise in nationalist sentiments can lead to social polarization and increase the risk of hate crimes and violence against migrants. The creation of ghettos is a direct consequence of inadequate integration policies. They often appear in economically disadvantaged areas where migrants face high unemployment, inadequate housing, and limited access to healthcare and education (Kasimis C. et al., 2003). This separation exacerbates social isolation and marginalization, contributing to the erosion of social cohesion and fostering environments where ethnic and cultural conflicts are more likely to occur. For example, the increased presence of migrants in urban areas like Athens has been linked to increased tensions and the spread of xenophobic sentiments (Triantafyllidou, A., & Kouki, H. 2013). The challenges of integration are multifaceted. Language barriers, cultural differences, and legal obstacles prevent many migrants from fully participating in the economic and social life of their host countries. Research shows that migrants often remain in low-paying jobs with poor working conditions, further entrenching their socio-economic marginalization (Mavrommatis, G. 2017). The failure of integration also stems from systemic issues within host countries, such as inadequate policy frameworks and a lack of political will to implement inclusive integration measures (Triantafyllidou, A. 2014). The asymmetric threats arising from the failure to integrate migrants include increased crime rates, social unrest, and the potential for radicalization. The marginalization and alienation experienced by migrants can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction, which extremist groups can exploit. Studies have shown that inadequate integration can create environments where second-generation migrants, in particular, may become disillusioned with their host societies, increasing the risk of radicalization (Anagnostopoulos, D et al., 2016). Moreover, the formation of ethnic enclaves can facilitate the maintenance of transnational ties, which can be exploited by external actors to influence host countries, representing a strategic threat (Vlasova, K., 2021).

Radicalization is essentially the process through which individuals or groups adopt extreme belief systems inspired by religious, political, or other ideals (Giannaki D & Panos D, 2016). In the context of radicalization among migrants, it is essential to consider the socio-political and economic environments that may contribute to this process. Factors such as social exclusion, discrimination, poor living conditions, and negative public opinion can significantly increase the risk of radicalization (Bossis, M. & Lampas, N., 2018). These conditions create fertile ground for individuals to adopt radical ideologies as a form of

resistance or as a means of seeking a sense of belonging and purpose. The radicalization and militarization of migrants in Europe, particularly in hotspots, is a complex phenomenon influenced by various socio-political, economic, and psychological factors. The process involves migrants adopting extremist views or joining groups, often in response to perceived or actual injustices, marginalization, and denial of rights in their host countries. A primary cause of radicalization among migrants is the experience of social exclusion and discrimination. Migrants, especially those from predominantly Muslim countries, often face significant socio-economic disadvantages and political marginalization in Europe. This exclusion fosters a sense of alienation and can lead individuals to adopt radical ideologies that promise a sense of belonging and purpose (Murshed, S., & Pavan, S. 2009).

### **Addressing and Countering Asymmetrical Threats in the Mediterranean**

The security of borders, particularly European borders, increasingly relies on the use of armed forces and law enforcement agencies, alongside the technological resources at their disposal, to address the challenges posed by migration, always in relation to the aforementioned asymmetric threats. The involvement of armed forces in border security is part of a broader strategy to tackle uncontrolled migration, treating it as a "threat" whenever necessary, with the objective of ensuring the safety of societies and maintaining the territorial integrity of countries. Due to the absence of a European army, the Union depends on the military resources and capabilities of NATO and their cooperation, utilizing the latter's resources as many member states participate in it (EUR-Lex, 2023). Similarly, each Mediterranean state, aiming to address asymmetric threats, independently utilizes its available resources to ensure not only border security but also the safety of society and citizens within. The operational action of the European Union is described in the CSDP (Common Security and Defense Policy), according to the Maastricht Treaty. According to the CSDP, the utilization of national and/or Union resources, military or non-military, is authorized with the objective of achieving the goals set by the Council, with the ultimate aim of maintaining peace and preventing new conflicts.

The European Defense Agency (EDA), established in July 2004, plays a central role in promoting cooperation and integration in the European defense sector. Its primary goals include enhancing defense capabilities, promoting defense research and technology, encouraging cooperation in the area of armaments, and creating a competitive European defense equipment market. It seeks to strengthen the European Union's strategic autonomy by enabling member states to address defense shortages with indigenous European solutions, thereby reducing dependence on non-European resources (Calcara, A. 2017). It also plays a crucial role in unifying the defense procurement process. By coordinating pan-European projects and establishing common standards, it helps member states develop a cohesive and integrated defense strategy (Georgopoulos, A, 2014). This unification is necessary to create a unified defense market and promote technological innovation across Europe (European Defense Agency, 2024).

In 2004, with European Regulation 2007/2004, the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the EU (Frontex) was established, headquartered in Warsaw. According to its founding regulation, Frontex's mission includes coordinating operational cooperation for managing external borders, setting common training standards for national border guards, preparing annual risk analysis reports, identifying migration trends, border-related criminal activities, facilitating information exchange between border authorities, and coordinating joint return operations (Valinakis, I. & Strimpis, I. 2021). With Regulation 1168/2011, additional authority was granted to the Agency in matters related to training, risk analysis, and assistance during crisis

situations (EUR-Lex, 2021). It also plays a crucial role in cooperation with non-EU countries, particularly in the Western Balkans, assisting in tackling irregular migration and cross-border crime (Ranaldi, V. 2020). Over the years, Frontex has participated in many operations, including Nautilus, Hera, Poseidon, Triton, Sophia, Themis, and Indalo, all aimed at addressing irregular migration, combating cross-border crime, and enhancing maritime security. The Poseidon operation, launched in 2006, focused on managing migration flows in the Aegean, primarily between Turkey and Greece. This operation emphasized border surveillance, combating human trafficking, and supporting Greek authorities (Campesi, G. 2014). The Triton operation, which took place from 2014 to 2018, replaced Italy's Mare Nostrum and focused on border management in the Central Mediterranean, providing support to Italian authorities amid a significant migration influx. However, it faced criticism for lack of resources compared to its predecessor and for prioritizing border control over search and rescue (Mustătea, M. 2020).

Since 2015, the European Union has altered its approach to deal with the migration wave in the Mediterranean. Under the guidelines of the CSDP, it introduced emergency measures and tactics, including the naval military operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI. The objective of this operation is to support peace efforts in Libya and enforce the UN arms embargo by deploying aerial, maritime, and satellite resources from various countries. The mission begins by identifying migration routes and gathering intelligence, then proceeds to boarding and inspecting vessels, and in the final phase, the military force is authorized to destroy or neutralize vessels and assets linked to human trafficking, with the consent of the involved coastal state (Markozani, E. 2015).

NATO's decision to assist in addressing illegal human trafficking and migration in the Aegean through a naval force, specifically the Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2), marks a significant development in international efforts to manage the crisis. The SNMG2 operates both in Greek and Turkish territorial waters, playing a supportive role without direct involvement in policing or repelling illegal migration (Jacobs, A. 2016). Instead, its task is to facilitate the rapid and accurate exchange of information between Greek and Turkish authorities and coordinate with Frontex. While this cooperation has been pivotal in addressing migration challenges, it has sparked debates regarding the militarization of migration management, as explored by Garelli and Tazzioli (2018), who describe this approach as part of a broader military-humanitarian strategy in the Mediterranean.

## **Research part**

### **Purpose of the Research**

The aim of the research was to gather descriptive knowledge on specific aspects of the research topic. The data collected through the questionnaire provided a foundation for understanding the different perspectives of the participants regarding the migration crisis, as well as their perceptions of asymmetric threats.

### **Methodology-Sample**

The methodology adopted for data collection is based on the use of a questionnaire as the primary tool for primary research. The questionnaire was designed to investigate and descriptively analyze the views, attitudes, and experiences of the participants regarding the migration crisis and its association with the asymmetric threats that may arise from this phenomenon. For the distribution of the questionnaire, an electronic format via online platforms was used to ensure wider participation and facilitate access for a diverse and varied

sample of the population. This approach allowed for the collection of rich and varied data, reflecting a broad range of views and experiences related to the research topic. The sample of the research consisted of individuals of various genders, ages, professional training, and educational levels, all of whom were Greek citizens.

### **Research Limitations**

There is a possibility of sample bias as all participants were Greek citizens, and the topic of the study concerned not only Greece but also the broader Mediterranean and European region. Therefore, there is a possibility of bias since Greece is particularly affected by the migration-refugee phenomenon.

### **Results of the Survey**

The majority of the participants in the questionnaire belong to the age groups 26-35 and 18-25 (54.3% and 28.6% respectively), indicating that the issue primarily concerns younger adults. These individuals are at the beginning or in the middle of their careers and seem to be interested in the impact of the migration crisis on social, economic, and political stability. Younger generations have also been more exposed to globalized information and political discussions on the topic, which makes them more aware and participatory in such research.

The majority of the participants (60%) believe they know the difference between the terms "Refugee," "Migrant," "Asylum Seeker," and "Internally Displaced Person," while a significant percentage (40%) is either unsure or claims not to know the difference. This shows that, although most seem to have a basic understanding of the terms, there is a notable knowledge gap or uncertainty among a large portion of the population. There is a need for more education and awareness so that everyone can fully understand the important differences between these terms. Especially in matters related to political and humanitarian action, a clear understanding of these terms is crucial for properly addressing the migration and refugee crisis. The fact that 40% lack clear knowledge, suggests that information about the migration crisis may not be as widespread as we think.

Point of interest proved to be the distinction between the terms "Illegal" and "Irregular", with the participants being divided between the two terms, with a slight majority (49%) preferring the term "Illegal." This suggests that most people perceive illegal migration as a violation of laws, which is reinforced by the broader political and legal discourse that uses the term "illegal" to describe such situations. The term "Illegal" is often used in the media and politics to describe the unlawful entry of individuals into a country, implying a violation of laws. Those who selected this term (49%) likely view migration through a stricter legal lens, where non-compliance with laws and procedures is considered a clear violation. 43% of participants chose the term "Irregular," which indicates that there is also a portion of the public that considers this term less aggressive and perhaps more appropriate for describing a situation where legal procedures are not met, without implying criminal behavior. These participants view migration from a more liberal or inclusive perspective, where the use of the term "Illegal" is seen as stigmatizing migrants and associating them with criminal acts. In contrast, "Irregular" migration might be viewed simply as a deviation from the prescribed legal processes, without carrying the same weight or implying malicious intent from the migrants.

The fact that the majority of the participants (80%) report being either "Quite" or "Very" concerned about the migration phenomenon reveals that the migration and refugee crisis is directly related to challenges that seriously occupy public opinion. This may be linked to how the crisis affects issues such as national security, social stability, and the economy. The high

level of concern is indicative of the potential impacts people foresee, whether it be increased migration flows, social tensions, or humanitarian concerns. This finding may be connected to the perception of the migration crisis as an "asymmetric threat." The participants believe that this crisis involves unpredictable consequences, whether through socio-political impacts or security concerns. This sense of threat could result from how the crisis is portrayed in the media and public discourse, particularly when linked to issues like terrorism, crime, or social tensions. The fact that a small percentage (12%) expresses "Moderate" concern shows that while the issue concerns them, they do not consider it as urgent as others. Meanwhile, 8.6% of participants (with responses of "A little" and "Not at all") seem not to feel strong concern about the issue, likely because they either do not perceive it as an immediate threat or may not have been directly affected by the crisis's consequences.

Concerning Information, the largest percentage (43%) states they are moderately informed and a significant percentage (20%) claims to be poorly or not at all. This suggests that despite the frequent coverage in the media and public discourse, there is still a significant gap in knowledge or information. The fact that 12% consider themselves very well informed indicates that there is a more informed segment of the public, due to greater personal involvement or access to specialized sources of information. This finding highlights the need for better and more specialized information on the migration crisis.

The majority of participants (86%) stated that they get their information from the internet and social media, indicating the dominance of digital media in shaping public opinion. These media provide direct access to information, allowing users to stay informed quickly and easily, but they also present risks such as misinformation or lack of credibility (Fake News). A significant percentage (46%) still relies on newspapers and television, showing that traditional media still hold importance as sources of information. Although their influence has decreased compared to the internet, they remain key sources of information for a large portion of the population. This is connected to their role as more professional and institutional sources, which offer a sense of reliability. Interestingly, 40% of participants rely on observing events in their area and general discussions to form an opinion on the issue. This indicates that the refugee crisis is not only a theoretical concept for many people but also has direct impacts on their local communities, affecting how they perceive the phenomenon. At the same time, a much smaller percentage (12%) of participants relies on official European and national reports and studies. This suggests that official sources of information are not widely disseminated or accessible, or they may be seen as less engaging by the general public, likely due to their more specialized and technical nature. Furthermore, only 8.57% of participants rely on academic studies or papers, indicating that academic sources of information do not play a central role in shaping public opinion. This may be due to the perception that academic sources are difficult to access or understand.

83% of the participants believe that European countries are not managing the migration issue properly. This indicates a widespread perception of failure not only at a national level but also at a European level. This negative opinion may stem from insufficient cooperation among EU member states, the uneven distribution of responsibilities and burdens, as well as the general lack of a unified and effective migration policy. Participants may feel that European policies are not cohesive enough or have not provided solutions to the challenges faced by countries like Greece. Only 12% of participants believe that Europe is managing the issue properly, indicating little trust in European initiatives. A small percentage (5.7%) is uncertain, suggesting that some may not have enough knowledge or a clear opinion on European policies.

Concerning information about EU's and Greece's legislative frameworks regarding Migration-Refugee issues the following were observed. Regarding EU's legislative framework, the majority of participants indicate that they are either slightly or moderately informed. This

shows a lack of clear information and understanding about the European legal framework governing migration. Regarding Greece's legislative framework, the results are similar. Again, the majority state that they are either moderately or slightly informed. The responses to these two questions show a general lack of awareness about both the European and Greek legislative frameworks on migration. Despite the migration issue being frequently in the news, it seems that there is either a lack of access to clear and reliable information or people are not actively seeking sufficient knowledge. This may point to the need for better information and communication from the relevant authorities so that citizens have a more comprehensive understanding of the laws governing migration at both the national and European levels.

There is significant concern among citizens regarding the link between migration and religious terrorism. 45% believe there is a strong connection, while 28% believe the connection is small. The fact that these two categories make up the majority suggests that participants perceive the migration crisis as a potential security threat, possibly due to concerns about the radicalization of some migrants. However, a significant percentage, 14%, believes that there is no connection between migration and religious terrorism at all. This indicates that there is a group of people who reject the connection between the crisis and terrorism, viewing the phenomenon more from a humanitarian or social perspective.

The largest percentage of participants (51%) believes that the migration crisis is fairly linked to the rise of the far-right, while 28% believes the connection is very strong. These findings suggest that the majority of people directly associate the migration phenomenon with the strengthening of far-right movements. The rise of these movements in many European countries has been linked to concerns about security, loss of identity, and social unrest caused by migration. The fact that a large percentage of participants believes that the migration crisis has contributed to the rise of the far-right indicates that the political consequences of migration have been incorporated into public perception as an issue that affects not only economic and social structures but also the political sphere. On the other hand, a smaller percentage, 14%, believes the connection is weak. This suggests that, despite the general view that migration is linked to the political rise of the far-right, there is a smaller but existing group of participants who either do not share this concern or do not have enough information.

The fact that nearly half of the participants believes migration will cause "considerable" (42%) demographic change, suggests concern about the potential population increase, mainly due to migrants and refugees. This group may associate migration with a shift in the demographic structure, mainly because of the younger age and higher fertility rates of refugee populations. At the same time, this concern could be related to the lack of adequate integration and assimilation structures, which would exacerbate social inequalities and unemployment. Participants who believe the change will be "very severe" (17%) are likely fearing a more rapid change in the demographic balance, considering that migration flows could lead to problems such as overcrowding, strain on healthcare and social welfare systems, and political conflicts between native populations and new migrants. A strong percentage, 17%, expresses a more moderate stance, considering that the impact will be small. This group believe that, despite migration flows, issues related to demographics (such as population aging) will not be dramatically affected by migrants or that proper management of migration flows could be beneficial. 14% believe that the refugee issue will not worsen demographics at all. This is a perspective that migrants may be a potential solution to demographic problems (e.g., reduction in the workforce) or belief that the numbers of migrants are manageable and will not impact the overall population.

The largest percentage of participants believes that migrants and refugees pose a threat to national security to a "fairly" large extent. This view may reflect concerns about the instability that could arise from increased migration flows and the possibility of affecting public order, border security, or other internal dynamics. The second largest percentage though believed

that migrants pose a "small" threat. These participants recognize some risks but consider them limited and manageable through existing security measures and integration policies. The majority of participants, therefore, express moderate concerns about the likelihood that migrants and refugees pose a threat to national security, with a significant percentage believing the threat is fairly real. At the same time, there is a smaller percentage who believes the threat is "small" or "nonexistent," emphasizing that migrants can integrate into society without compromising security. The results reflect a society that is divided on the degree of threat associated with migration, with a significant portion expressing strong concerns.

Another question showed that the majority of participants (66%) believe that managing the migration-refugee issue requires cooperation between both European and National authorities. This suggests an acknowledgment of the need for a joint European approach and the utilization of the capacities of European organizations, as well as the experience and human resources of national authorities. It is clear that citizens expect a strong and coordinated approach from Europe, in cooperation with their Nation, to address such a complex and multifaceted issue. On the same question the second most popular opinion is involving Security Forces along with the Armed Forces. There are also suggestions for cooperation between these forces, but with clear and distinct roles. These choices show that, for some, the management of the migration crisis should also rely on security, but without disregarding the need for distinct roles to avoid overlapping responsibilities and conflicts. One of the most interesting suggestions is involving the Security Forces, supported by professionals from social services (e.g., social workers, psychologists, interpreters, etc.). This approach reflects the need for a humanitarian dimension in managing the issue, beyond purely military or police interventions. It acknowledges that migration and refugee flows are primarily a social and humanitarian issue, requiring specialized and multidimensional solutions. The suggestion of the exclusive involvement of European bodies, such as Frontex, or only Security Forces, received few votes, suggesting that participants do not believe in a unilateral approach by European or national organizations. The results show that the majority of respondents prefer a multidimensional approach involving both European and National authorities. The fact that the overwhelming majority supports cooperation rather than unilateral action confirms that the migration crisis requires coordinated and comprehensive solutions. Involvement of Security Forces and the Armed Forces is considered necessary but not sufficient on its own, as there is recognition of the need for a humanitarian approach, European solidarity, and specialized support.

### **Conclusions-Suggestions**

The migration and refugee crisis in the Mediterranean emerges as one of the greatest challenges Europe has faced in recent decades. This crisis involves not only the management of large flows of populations but also significant issues of security, political stability, and humanitarian values. At the same time, the migration crisis is often presented as an asymmetric threat, as it can be weaponized by external actors and affect the security of "host" countries.

From this study and the analysis of the questionnaires, conclusions arise that describe the reality of the crisis and the asymmetric threats that stem from it. Initially, it became apparent that the migration crisis is multi-dimensional and has affected the Mediterranean countries, particularly those on the "front line," such as Greece, Italy, and Spain. These countries have borne a disproportionately large burden in managing migration flows and refugees. Local communities, especially on the islands and borders of Greece, have faced abrupt changes in demographic data, creating concerns about social cohesion and economic stability. The increasing influx of populations tests the limits of the host countries' capabilities, while the

European Union is called upon to play a central role in managing the crisis. The lack of common and cohesive policies within the EU exacerbates the situation, as the management of migration flows primarily depends on frontline states.

The European Union has adopted a range of measures to manage the migration crisis, such as strengthening borders and reforming the asylum framework. However, these policies have not achieved the expected balance between security and humanitarian aid. The need to protect the external borders of the Union has prioritized security actions, resulting in the neglect of the humanitarian needs of refugees and migrants.

The participants in the research questionnaire expressed strong concerns about the EU's stance, arguing that too much emphasis is placed on border protection rather than supporting host countries. At the same time, the lack of a fair distribution of migration flows between member states has caused intense political and social tensions within the Union.

In the migration crisis, asymmetric threats manifest through terrorism, organized crime, the alteration of a state's social and cultural identity, and the radicalization of migrants and refugees. Within the context of these threats, the weaponization of migration is clearly evident, with countries or other actors exploiting the vulnerability of these people. The period from 2015 to 2017, when migration flows peaked, was accompanied by an increase in terrorist attacks in Europe, mainly through "lone wolves" who had been radicalized within host countries rather than through the direct exploitation of migration flows. However, it should be emphasized that most refugees and migrants have no connection to terrorist activities, as shown by Europol data, and are simply seeking safety and better living conditions. Therefore, any generalization that could lead to false impressions should be avoided. The participants in the survey expressed significant concern about these aforementioned threats, believing that European authorities have not yet developed the necessary tools to effectively address them. Additionally, they highlighted the need to strengthen integration and monitoring mechanisms in host countries to limit radicalization within these communities.

It is clear that the broader public views the migration crisis as one of the greatest challenges to national security. The participants expressed strong concern about the impact of the crisis on social cohesion, economic stability, and public safety. Greece, as a "transit" country, often functions as an intermediate station for migrants aiming to reach other European countries. This position has somewhat reduced the direct threat of terrorism; however, the pressure on the social system is significant. The increasing ethnic differences and the difficulties of integration have raised fears about social stability and cultural identity. The development of xenophobic and nationalist movements in Greece and Europe in response to migration flows is a worrying trend that intensifies social tensions. Social conflicts arising from the lack of integration of migrants and the rise of extremist movements from the native population similarly threaten internal security.

Considering the findings of this study and acknowledging that migration flows can be mitigated but not easily "eliminated", a collective approach to the issue is necessary. The migration and refugee phenomenon must be addressed at its inception. One of the first steps is enhanced international cooperation with third countries. This is a critical strategy for managing the migration crisis, especially regarding the swift return of irregular migrants and combating human trafficking networks. Such cooperation is vital to enhance security and create safe and legal migration pathways. The European Union must maintain close relationships with the countries of origin and transit of migrants to reduce illegal flows and stabilize crisis-hit regions. To achieve this, it is important for the EU to continue examining and strengthening readmission agreements with third countries, enabling faster and safer returns for migrants who do not meet the conditions for staying in the EU. This can be achieved through negotiations with third-country governments and offering incentives, such as economic and technical support. Furthermore, joint operations with countries of transit and

origin must continue to combat illegal human trafficking networks. This can be done through information exchange and coordinated operations between European authorities and third-country authorities, along with providing technical assistance to improve their capacity to counter illegal activities. Additionally, the European Union must focus on developing policies and programs for economic aid and development to address the root causes of migration, such as poverty, conflict, and unemployment. Funding development programs and promoting cooperation policies to improve local conditions will reduce the need for migration. A more ambitious step would be strengthening peace diplomacy in crisis areas, aiming to stabilize politically unstable regions and resolve conflicts that drive migration flows. Even if these efforts fail, it is important for the EU to collaborate with third countries to create legal migration programs that allow migrants to enter Europe through safe and controlled methods. This can be achieved through bilateral agreements (e.g., visas), which would offer alternative solutions to illegal migration.

Regardless of previous efforts, the development of an effective information system is crucial. This is a critical proposal for addressing asymmetric threats related to migration, such as terrorism and organized crime. An efficient information system can provide early warning, allowing authorities to detect threats at an early stage and respond promptly. Early detection of risks, such as terrorist actions or criminal activities, will improve the ability of state agencies to take immediate measures and limit the impact of crises. The upgrading of the Schengen Information System (SIS), for example, is essential for enhancing information management within the European Union. The SIS is the primary tool for cross-border security, and strengthening it will improve the ability to access information about individuals suspected of criminal activity or terrorism, as well as irregular migration flows. This can be achieved by upgrading technological infrastructure: The EU should invest in technologies to improve the management of large volumes of data, as well as faster processing and information exchange between member states. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) and big data analytics can increase the speed and accuracy of information. The human factor also plays a significant role. For this reason, border guards, police officers, and intelligence services must be continuously trained to acquire skills in using new information systems. Regular training programs will ensure that staff can effectively identify and manage potential threats.

The next important step is the acceleration of asylum system reforms for the effective management of migration flows within the European Union and to relieve frontline countries such as Greece and Italy, which bear the greatest burden. The acceleration of asylum procedures can be achieved through the digitization and automation of applications, allowing faster submission and tracking of applications across all member states. Additionally, recruiting more staff in national asylum services will reduce waiting times, speeding up the process and relieving countries that host the highest number of applicants.

Another proposal is the Multi-Level Cooperation of National Authorities. This is necessary for the effective handling of the migration crisis, as it affects various aspects of society and security. Coordinated cooperation between ministries, internal security services, armed forces, local government, and international organizations is required. The synergy of these entities ensures comprehensive crisis management at multiple levels, aimed at maintaining social stability and security. Information and Expertise Sharing is important. The regular exchange of information and data among agencies will allow for the timely identification of threats and the preparation of appropriate responses. The creation of joint information exchange systems will enhance cooperation and allow better coordination, avoiding overlaps and delays in response.

Another important step is to strengthen migrant and refugee social integration to ensure social cohesion and stability. The creation of comprehensive programs and actions promoting integration will help reduce social tensions and prevent the marginalization of migrants.

Integration is crucial, as the failure of this process can create conditions that favor increased crime and extremism. Language learning programs for the host country's language must be intensified to facilitate the smooth social and economic integration of migrants. The creation of special programs will help migrants communicate and interact with the local society. At the same time, access to formal education for migrant children will allow their integration into the educational system and the development of language and academic skills. For adults, the creation of vocational training and education programs, tailored to the needs of the labor market, will allow them to acquire skills that will help them integrate into the workforce.

Finally, it is important for societies themselves to be informed about addressing racism and xenophobia. Public awareness campaigns and the promotion of multiculturalism through the media and education will help shape positive attitudes toward migrants. Promoting intercultural dialogue and developing actions that enhance mutual understanding between communities will strengthen mutual respect. Programs that encourage understanding of different cultural and religious traditions, both from the host society and migrants, will help avoid tensions and conflicts.

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