Attitudes Towards National Identity, Immigration, and Refugees in Greece

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Arisa Kimaram
ABOUT MORE IN COMMON

More in Common is an international initiative to counter the growing threats to open and democratic societies, and build communities that are stronger, more united and more resilient. The More in Common initiative took shape from work undertaken since 2015 to understand why advanced democracies failed to respond more effectively to the refugee crisis and its impact on domestic politics.

More in Common’s objective across its different streams of work is to build closer and more inclusive societies, which are resilient to the appeal of xenophobia and authoritarian populism. We aim to support the efforts of civil society and key influencers who share the values of open and inclusive societies, and help catalyse other new initiatives that advance these values.

More in Common is a non-profit organisation with teams in France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. The co-founders of More in Common are Tim Dixon, Mathieu Lefevre and Gemma Mortensen.

For more information, please visit www.moreincommon.com

AUTHORS

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Executive Summary
Introduction

This report provides insight into the attitudes of Greek people towards their country and its place in the world, their sense of national identity, and their views on immigration and refugees. It builds on other recent research into these issues, and provides a deeper understanding of the connections between Greeks’ perspectives on these and other matters. It does this through the lens of a segmentation study that identifies six main groupings of opinion among Greeks.

Perhaps more than any other country in Europe, Greece has been profoundly affected by the economic fallout from the financial crisis that began in 2008, the subsequent sovereign debt crisis and then by the large-scale arrival of refugees in the mid-2010s, in which Greece operated initially as a transitory country and then as a host country. Few Greeks have been left unaffected, and after a decade of crisis and austerity, progress still feels painfully slow. This contributes to a deep sense of disaffection among Greeks, but a key finding of this study is that for most Greeks, this disaffection has not been turned against those who have come to Greece seeking refuge.

This study demonstrates that Greeks do not divide neatly into two groups that are either ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ migrant. Public attitudes are more nuanced, and the majority of Greeks hold a mix of views: a combination of empathy and a commitment to hospitality for those in need on the one hand, and concerns about the impacts of the migrant population on overstretched public resources, and on the retention of Greek culture and traditions on the other hand. The way that some Greeks simultaneously hold these views can sometimes appear contradictory, however it reflects patterns that More in Common’s research has found in other countries. By understanding and addressing these concerns - and not misinterpreting those concerns merely as xenophobia - there is a pathway for Greece to navigate the challenges of hosting and integrating newcomers into their culture, as has happened in past episodes of Greek history. There is, in fact, a much greater level of consensus on key questions than what is often assumed.

This research forms part of a larger initiative to address the growing threats to open and inclusive societies. To understand these threats, since 2017, More in Common has undertaken detailed research into public attitudes in five countries: United States, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy. Greece is the sixth country in which More in Common has undertaken research, and as with each other country this study uncovers some distinctive elements in how Greeks think about issues of identity and ‘otherness’. More in Common’s work has examined perceptions of the forces that are driving social fracturing and division, with a particular focus on specific national issues such as political polarisation in the United States and the refugee crisis in European countries. The forces contributing to widening social fractures across all of these countries include economic insecurity, growing inequality, cultural and demographic change, disinformation, the effects of social media and the weakening of local communities. Political systems are being disrupted as insurgent parties engage with people’s sense of insecurity and frustration, and advance narratives that promise a stronger sense of national identity and belonging based on the exclusion of targeted minorities such as refugees and migrants. Social media is also elevating conflict in public debate and bringing extreme narratives into the mainstream. More in Common’s work aims to create a deeper understanding of public attitudes, with a view to identifying ways to strengthen resilience against the threats to democracy and inclusive societies.

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Methodology

This study employs a population clustering segmentation analysis method that draws on a range of attitudinal characteristics of the Greek public. This form of segmentation provides a rich composite picture of how a population is divided in its views and goes beyond basic demographic factors to show how networks of attitudes and opinions are connected.

The research was conducted by Ipsos in Greece and consisted of phone surveys with a representative sample of 2,000 adults aged 18 to 64. Respondents answered questions regarding: demographics, issues of greatest concern, political views and affiliations, familiarity with refugee and migration issues, understanding of different terminology related to refugees and migrants, personal experiences with refugees, and their responses to different policy approaches and messages. Following an evaluation of the quantitative data and the conclusion of the segmentation analysis, the research was concluded with a qualitative phase involving three focus group discussions with members of each of three segments (for reasons explained below): Moderate Humanitarians, Instinctive Pragmatists, and Detached Traditionalists.
Key Findings

1. Greeks are deeply dissatisfied, overwhelmingly feel that their country has lost out from globalisation and have little confidence in their government or institutions. The words that Greeks are most likely to use to describe their country are ‘angry’, ‘weak’ and ‘fearful.’ Only 15 per cent believe that globalisation has had a positive impact on the Greek economy. Frustration with the status quo is reflected in the 79 per cent of the population who say that traditional parties and politicians do not care about people like them. More believe that things are continuing to get worse than get better, and there is greater pessimism about Greek society than the Greek economy. Only one in three (35 per cent) report that it is ‘easy for someone like me to do well in Greece.’ By contrast, an overwhelming 82 per cent believe ‘the economy is rigged to benefit the rich and powerful.’

2. Despite pessimism about conditions in Greece, pride in Greek culture and history is integral to most Greeks’ sense of identity (although they feel that it is in decline). Feelings of pride in being Greek are held by 77 per cent, and pride in the country’s history by 78 per cent. However, today many worry about a loss of national identity. More than half of survey respondents (54 per cent) believe that Greek identity is disappearing nowadays, and a similar number say that they sometimes feel ‘like a stranger in my own country’ (56 per cent).

3. With the highest unemployment rate in Europe, Greece’s economic woes lead all other concerns. A majority of Greeks identify either the economic situation (31 per cent) or unemployment (22 per cent) as the top issue facing the country. Greece’s unemployment rate soared from 7 per cent to 28 per cent between 2008 and 2013, and was still high at 19 per cent by the end of 2018, with twice as much unemployment among younger Greeks. Although many Greeks express concerns about immigration, just 7 per cent see it as the top issue facing the country.

Greek perceptions of the economic outlook correlate to their political identity. The most positive views are held by those who align with the governing Syriza party, with 71 per cent believing that things will improve, and 66 per cent believing that things will get better for Greek society. The most negative views are held by supporters of the far-right Golden Dawn party, with only 11 per cent believing that the economy will improve, and just 14 per cent believing that things will get better for Greek society.

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4. In spite of the immense pressures that have borne down on Greek society in the past decade, the country is less polarised than many other European nations. Opinions are, for the most part, less sharply divided among different groups, and social interpersonal trust levels remain relatively high.³

5. Despite their own circumstances, there is substantial empathy for the recent newcomers to Greece, such as seeing them as hard working and well-intentioned. Fully 77 per cent believe that migrants are willing to work harder and for lower pay than Greeks, and more than half (56 per cent) believe that migrants make efforts to integrate into Greek society. Feelings towards migrants are warmer than in other European countries where More in Common has undertaken national studies.⁴

6. But most Greeks believe that the effects of immigration are negative, especially in the context of the country’s scarce resources. Few believe that the country can benefit from immigration; just 21 per cent believe that ‘immigration is good for the Greek economy.’ Suspicion about migrants getting priority in benefits and housing is common (41 per cent) as are concerns about migrants creating public health risks (42 per cent). Overall, 51 per cent determine that immigration is ultimately ‘bad for Greece, costing the welfare state and draining resources that could be spent on Greeks’.

7. While most endorse the principle of welcoming refugees and allowing them to maintain their own traditions, a majority of Greeks question whether recent arrivals are genuine refugees. A large majority (67 per cent) identify Greece’s tradition of ‘solidarity and compassion’ with welcoming refugees. A similar number (72 per cent) demonstrate a sense of respect for refugees’ different cultural backgrounds and believe that they should be able to ‘maintain their own traditions’. However, half the country (51 per cent) suspects that ‘most foreigners’ seeking refugee status ‘come here for economic reasons or to take advantage of welfare services.’

Most foreigners who want to get into my country as refugees aren’t really refugees and come here for economic reasons/take advantage of welfare services

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To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?  
Source: More in Common (2019)


⁴ This study examined the strength of in-group and out-group feelings through a series of questions including a ‘feelings thermometer.’ Respondents were asked to express their feelings about other individuals or groups in terms of ‘warm’ or ‘cold’ feelings.
8. **Anxieties about Islam and Muslims are common.** A majority (57 per cent) of Greeks believe that Islam and Greek society are ‘incompatible,’ in part reflecting historic concerns about Turkey and its relationship with Greece. Greeks are relatively evenly split as to whether Muslim women should wear headscarves or veils. These concerns coexist with a broad acknowledgment of discrimination against Muslims in Greece and a clear majority (68 per cent) expressing worries about increasing racism.

9. **Greeks feel able to openly discuss sensitive issues of identity and immigration.** Whereas people commonly cite a dynamic of obligatory politeness or self-censorship in countries such as France, Germany, and the United States on sensitive subjects such as Islam and immigration, Greeks generally do not express feeling encumbered in this way: 85 per cent state that ‘it is acceptable for me to express myself about subjects like immigration and refugees.’ Consequently, the political dynamics of the country show less evidence of people feeling judged by others for expressing their attitudes or resentful of being hushed by a liberal elite.

10. **There is wide distrust in civil society groups and the media.** Fully 62 per cent of Greeks believe that some NGOs are benefitting from the refugee and migration crisis by taking money, and are not in reality helping refugees. Only 19 per cent of Greeks believe that NGOs that should be taking more responsibility to help refugees. These dynamics of distrust are further complicated by low levels of trust in the media’s reporting on these subjects: just 18 per cent of Greeks trust the media’s reporting on immigration and refugees.

11. **There is deep frustration with how regional partners have treated Greece during the refugee and migration crisis.** A large majority of 77 per cent of Greeks believe that their country has been abused by its European partners during the refugee and migration crisis. A similar number (73 per cent) distrusts Turkey as a partner. These particular concerns may reflect a deeper scepticism of how Greece has fared in today’s integrated world: a mere 15 per cent believe that globalisation has been ‘very positive’ for Greece.
12. **Despite scepticism and support for some extreme measures, Greeks also show positive attitudes towards refugees rooted in a culture of solidarity and compassion.**

- At the personal level, a much larger number of Greeks feel ‘warm’ towards refugees (56 per cent) than ‘cold’ (17 per cent), with 27 per cent neutral. Feelings about migrants in general are slightly less ‘warm’ (50 per cent ‘warm’ to 20 per cent ‘cold’).

- Fifty per cent have made a donation of money, food, clothing, or other items in the past year to support refugees.

- Forty per cent report knowing a refugee personally, and 38 per cent know someone who does voluntary work for refugees.

- An overwhelming 94 per cent of the population agrees that when the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.

- Sixty-eight per cent are worried about increasing levels of racism and discrimination.

- Most reject the idea of sending minors back to their country of origin (only 15 per cent agree that refugees who are children arriving without any family should be sent back home.)
Refugees/Immigrants are similar to me

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

Source: More in Common (2019)
Greece’s Segments

This study groups people into different population segments according to their beliefs and values around issues of identity and belonging as well as their relationship to the outside world. These groups are placed on a spectrum between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ values:

- Those in the ‘closed’ groups (Nationalist Opponents and Alarmed Opponents) tend to have a narrower view of what it means to be Greek and are more hostile to migrants and refugees.
- Those in the ‘open’ group (Greek Multiculturals) hold a welcoming attitude towards migrants, and are especially empathetic towards refugees.
- The three middle segments (Moderate Humanitarians, Instinctive Pragmatists and Detached Traditionalists) are marked by mixed attitudes, with each group having distinctive views such as concerns about economic insecurity, the preservation of cultural and religious identity or the need for security from outside threats. Some are distinctive for not having strong views on any of these issues.

Each of Greece’s middle segments stand out as none are completely in the centre of opinion:

- Moderate Humanitarians lean towards ‘open’ views as they have a generally positive and welcoming disposition towards migrants and refugees, but their national pride and sympathies with more authoritarian measures distinguish them from the most ‘open’ Greeks. At 92 per cent, Moderate Humanitarians are more than twice as likely as Greek Multiculturals to be proud of being Greek. They are also twice as likely to be willing to ignore human rights to stop terrorism (28 per cent vs 14 per cent).
- Instinctive Pragmatists are unique in holding optimistic views about the economic consequences of globalisation and they are also the most likely to believe in the economic benefits of immigration. However, they hold colder than average feelings towards immigrants, refugees and Muslims, are very concerned about terrorism, and believe that allowing refugees into the country increases security risks.
- Detached Traditionalists also stand apart from the ‘open’ and ‘closed’ segments. Their religious beliefs have made them more protective of Greek heritage although they are less strident in their views. While they are the second most likely segment to want to protect Greece’s religious heritage from outside faiths and only 14 per cent believe that Muslims hold similar values to them, they are more hospitable than the ‘closed’ groups. Only 40 per cent believe that Islam and Greek society are incompatible, compared to 61 per cent of Alarmed Opponents and 81 percent of Nationalist Opponents.
THE ‘OPEN’ SEGMENT

Greek Multiculturals

Attributes
Younger, highest levels of education, highest earning, least religious (51%)

Key Words
Welcoming, distrustful of institutions

Key Concerns
The economy, high unemployment, poverty and social inequality

• Most likely to believe that it is difficult to succeed in Greece
• Feel least proud of their Greek identity
• Feel a much weaker sense of connection to the Greek Orthodox church than other Greeks
• Highly distrustful of the Greek system and the European Union
• Most likely to believe that immigration has been good for the country, both economically and culturally
• Welcoming towards migrants and particularly refugees
• Concerned about the compatibility of Islam with Greek society
THE ‘CLOSED’ SEGMENTS

Nationalist Opponents

- Pessimistic about the state of Greece’s economy and society, at both a national and personal level
- Feel immense pride in their Greek identity and fear that it is disappearing
- Feel a much stronger sense of connection to the Greek Orthodox church than any other group
- Suspicious and distrustful of the government, the European Union and Turkey, and support strong action to defend the nation from threats
- Consistently hold ‘cold’ feelings towards all migrants, refugees and Muslims and do not see any positive consequences of immigration
- Most likely to report living near a refugee camp

Attributes
Middle-aged and older, lowest levels of education and income, 46% in full or part-time employment, 85% identify as religious

Key Words
Older, proud, pessimistic, distrustful

Key Concerns
The economy, high unemployment, immigration

Alarmed Opponents

- Negative about the state of Greece and believe that the country has experienced both economic and social decline in the past year
- Strong authoritarian tendencies: believe a strong leader is needed and that if the migration crisis continues, everyday Greek citizens should start protecting their shores and borders themselves
- Do not believe immigration has had a positive impact on Greece and hold generally hostile views towards migrants

Attributes
Middle-aged, lower levels of education and income, most likely to be retired, 70% are religious

Key Words
Older, pessimistic, supportive of strong measures to fix the country

Key Concerns
The economy, high unemployment, racism and discrimination
THE MIDDLE SEGMENTS

**Moderate Humanitarians**

% of population: 28%
% Female / % Male: 53 / 47%

Attributes:
- Younger (20-40), higher levels of education, 58% in full time or part-time employment, 74% are religious,
  similar pattern of income levels to national average, with slightly more in lower range.

Key Words:
- Proud, positive, empathetic towards immigrants and refugees, tolerant but supportive of stronger measures.

Key Concerns:
- The most optimistic group about their own prospects and about Greece’s economy and society.
- More likely than any group to say that they are very proud of Greek identity.
- Believe it is easy to do well in Greece.
- Not convinced that immigration benefits Greece, but hold ‘warm’ feelings towards migrants, refugees, and Muslims.
- Most believe that Greece should accept refugees because of the country’s culture of compassion and solidarity.
- Empathise greatly with the plight of refugees but do not think that they enrich Greek culture.
- Above average support for extreme measures to fix Greece’s problems.

**Instinctive Pragmatists**

% of population: 19%
% Female / % Male: 47 / 53%

Attributes:
- Middle-aged, low levels of education, 52% in full time or part-time employment, 78% are religious,
  similar pattern of income levels to national average, with slightly more in lower range.

Key Words:
- Optimistic about state of Greek economy, with higher levels of faith in Greek institutions, security-concerned,
  calculating, opposed to newcomers, supportive of high measures.

Key Concerns:
- The economy, high unemployment, taxes.
- Hold above average levels of confidence in Greek institutions, the media etc.
- More likely than any other segment to see the economic consequences of globalisation as positive for Greece
  and are more positive about the economic benefits of immigration.
- Least likely to support Greece distancing itself from the European Union.
- Concerned about security and are more willing than even Nationalist Opponents to set aside human rights to
  stop the threat of terrorism.
- More likely than average to support sending back unaccompanied minors, instead of resettling.
- Close to the average in believing that a strong leader willing to break the rules is needed to fix Greece’s problems.
- Particularly concerned about the impact of Islam on Greece.
- Least likely of any group to feel like they can express their views on immigration and refugees freely.
Detached Traditionalists

- Feel strongly connected to other Greeks and Europeans
- Very religious and protective of Greece’s religious heritage
- On many issues, close to the average of public opinion
- Believe that traditional parties care about them and most likely to believe the media’s reporting
- Appear to be more detached than other groups, and are less likely to have a clear political identity
- View immigration negatively but tend to have warmer feelings towards migrants who are already in Greece
- More likely than average to strongly agree that immigrants have made it more difficult for Greek people to get jobs
- Most believe that refugees who are children arriving without any family should be resettled, not sent back home

Attributes
Older, lower levels of education, 48% full or part time employment, 79% religious, similar pattern of income levels to national average, with slightly more in lower range

Key Words
Trust in institutions, tradition, religious, older

Key Concerns
The economy, high unemployment, taxes

Attributes
% of population % Female / % Male
15 57 43

Moral Foundations
Fairness
Care
Authority
Purity
Loyalty

Detached Traditionalists

Older, lower levels of education, 48% full or part time employment, 79% religious, similar pattern of income levels to national average, with slightly more in lower range

Trust in institutions, tradition, religious, older

The economy, high unemployment, taxes

Detached Traditionalists

Older, lower levels of education, 48% full or part time employment, 79% religious, similar pattern of income levels to national average, with slightly more in lower range

Trust in institutions, tradition, religious, older

The economy, high unemployment, taxes
### Traditional parties and politicians care about people like me

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To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?  
Source: More in Common (2019)

### The economic consequences of globalisation are very positive

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To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?  
Source: More in Common (2019)

### To what extent are you proud to be Greek?

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To what extent are you proud to be Greek?  
Source: More in Common (2019)
Does immigration have a positive or negative impact on Greece?

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Does immigration have a positive or negative impact on Greece?  
Source: More in Common (2019)

Immigrants generally make efforts to integrate into Greek society

To fix Greece, we need a strong leader willing to break the rules

Greek identity is disappearing nowadays

I am worried about increasing levels of racism and discrimination

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?  
Source: More in Common (2019)
Recommendations

The key recommendations emerging from this report for those working to strengthen Greeks’ sense of unity and its values as an inclusive society are as follows:

1. **Building a positive and engaging story of Greece’s future should start with pride in Greek identity and in the character and efforts of ordinary Greek people at the grassroots of society.** Persistently weak economic conditions and poor prospects, combined with a distrust of institutions, creates a clear risk of divisive populist narratives resonating more strongly with Greeks than they have to date. On the other hand, Greeks’ instinctive sense of empathy and fellow-feeling creates an in-built resilience to efforts to divide the population into ‘us-versus-them’ narratives that target vulnerable minorities. Linking the deep sense of pride in national identity and Greek character to the values of inclusion and welcome can strengthen this resilience and is likely to be far more effective than top-down efforts, given the deep distrust of institutions, from government to business to civil society.

2. **After a period of great difficulty that is still ongoing, Greeks need to recover their sense of self-confidence and hope.** It is important that Greeks feel that they have the power to affect positive change, and the issue of migration and refugees can be presented as one which provides an opportunity to mobilise and succeed. By promoting a shift from feelings of powerlessness to agency, organisations can increase much-needed feelings of empowerment.

   The prolonged economic downturn in Greece has created a sense of disempowerment among Greeks. Efforts should be made to affirm welcoming and inclusive values as core elements of Greek civic identity. What Greece has achieved in the face of enormous difficulties should be emphasised as a source of pride for its people. Such a shift must be attached to a positive vision of engagement with the world and not a retreat that creates hostility to outside forces. It should be linked to national identity. A sense of belonging to the people and culture of their country, matters to Greeks more than to people in most other countries, and this has important implications for communications around political and social issues.

3. **Communications relating to Greece’s refugee and migrant population should underscore that helping migrants and refugees does not come at the expense of the needs of Greeks but rather that their interests are best advanced together.** This might be done through efforts that raise the standards of health care, education provisions and infrastructure for all parts of the Greek community. As most Greeks already feel a genuine sense of empathy towards refugees and migrants, advocating for more compassion is unlikely to change public opinion. Communications should, however, engage the deep wells of empathy in the general population by emphasising the many things that Greeks and migrants have in common, redefining the ingroup in a manner that is inclusive towards migrants. Opportunities for migrants to contribute to and strengthen local neighbourhoods and communities should be advanced.

4. **Specific efforts should be made to address the high levels of concern that migrants pose a risk to public health.** This is one area of public perception where a sustained effort by trusted voices in the medical community should be able to address those risks and counter perceptions that may otherwise be used to deepen social divisions and the othering of refugees and migrants.
5. The European Union should demonstrate its commitment to support Greece in managing its southern borders. Simultaneously, the EU should address the deep sense of disappointment Greeks feel around its stance on the migration crisis. Stronger support from Greece’s European partners will contribute to building greater resilience to the extreme voices within the country which endorse a more aggressive anti-migrant and anti-European approach. Future crises - manufactured or real - should be anticipated, and communications strategies should address Greeks’ concern that they will continue to bear a much greater load than other countries in Europe.

6. The priority of policy and communications should be the 62 per cent of Greeks who belong to one of the three middle segments. Greece is less polarised than many other countries, meaning that to a large extent similar communications strategies can resonate with several segments. However, Greek Multiculturals are already convinced of the importance of inclusive values, and it is likely that efforts designed to reach them will resonate less with other groups. Likewise, Nationalist Opponents and Alarmed Opponents are more resistant and less likely to be convinced of shifting well-established attitudes. Messages that target people in the middle groups should engage the values and perceptions common to those segments.

7. More work is required to understand how to positively address the financial hardships that Greeks have experienced in the past decade, and to find ways in which the migrant population can contribute to improving economic prospects within Greece. This would be especially valuable in engaging the Instinctive Pragmatist segments, who are more likely to be supportive if they see Greeks and migrants having a genuine shared interest in a stronger economy, rather than seeing newcomers as competitors in a zero-sum game who compete for jobs and suppress wages. Addressing these concerns more effectively may have more impact on public opinion than any other change in policy or communications.

8. Special attention should be paid to the concerns of Detached Traditionalists, whose concerns are motivated more by anxieties about threats to Greek culture and identity, which they cherish, than by innate hostility towards outsiders. While they tend towards more ‘closed’ views, Detached Traditionalists are considerably less extreme than those of the Nationalist Opponents. This group is a prime target for extremist parties that have already locked in support from the Nationalist Opponents. Efforts should be made to reach them in ways that speak to their genuine concerns.

9. In line with UNHCR’s out-of-camp policy, policies that promote co-habitation with host communities and refugees should be promoted, abandoning the present policy of isolation in some parts of the territory. There is evidence, especially from the qualitative research undertaken for this study, that the relative isolation of people who have arrived in Greece in recent years contributes to a sense of them as an ‘out-group’ that is not genuinely part of Greek society and that will not integrate. The way in which some focus group participants contrasted past waves of arrivals, who integrated into Greek society, with more recent arrivals who have integrated less due to their isolation, suggests that accommodating refugees in camps rather than within the wider community is not the most effective approach to achieving successful integration.

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10. **Civil society groups need to address proactively their low levels of trust.** This is especially true for those organisations working to assist refugees and migrants. These steps might involve measures to show how their operations work, what results they achieve and how they spend funds. Programmes need to be structured so that they benefit the host community as well as migrants in order to avoid one group being played off against the other and counter perceptions that refugees receive better care or more assistance than Greeks themselves.