

PEOPLE AND PLACES

Cities and Universities as Sanctuaries

Migration and Citizenship in “Athens of Crisis”

An Interview with Vice Mayor Lefteris Papagiannakis

Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou with Nina Papachristou

ABSTRACT: In this interview with UCL’s Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou, Lefteris Papagiannakis explains his role as Athens’ vice mayor for migrants and refugees. He discusses the city’s responses to the arrival of thousands of refugees and migrants in the last few years. He reflects on the complex relationship of the municipality of Athens with non-government support networks, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, as well as autonomous local activists, in providing support services to migrants. Papagiannakis also addresses how Athens negotiates its support for these groups in the current European anti-immigrant climate, and the relationship between the Greek economic crisis and the so-called “refugee crisis.”

KEYWORDS: Athens, citizenship rights, European Union, migration, nationalism, refugee crisis, solidarity

The following is an interview conducted in August 2017 in Athens, Greece, between Eleftherios (Lefteris) Papagiannakis, Vice Mayor of Athens for Migrants, Refugees and Municipal Decentralization, and Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou. The interview transcript was edited by Nina Papachristou.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: When was your current position—vice mayor on migrant and refugees—created and why did the Athens mayor decide to create such a position?

Papagiannakis: The mayor [Giorgos Kaminis] decided to create this position around March 2016, which was when the Greek borders were closed to refugees. We had been discussing it for about six months. Even though migrant and refugee issues do not typically fall under the remit of the municipality, the mayor had a specific view—political, social, ethical, and ideological—that Athens itself needed to respond to the so-called “crisis,” which I would much rather call a situation that needs to be managed. So we created a new, ad hoc position with me at the head of the department, and then the department was created. Usually it’s the other way around—you have the department before the person in charge. So it’s an interesting political evolution, but



it suits Greece because in many situations like this we do things differently—which is a sign of immaturity but sometimes also a sign of flexibility. After we created this position, we needed to create policy, strategy, and planning. Now over a year later we have a department, personnel, and lots of NGO [non-governmental organization] collaborations. Hopefully in the next two or three months we will offer services directly to migrants and refugees. In Athens there is no history of this. Our oldest migrant community is probably the Filipinos, but we have never actually offered services directly to migrants or developed an integration strategy. Historically most of the migrants who came to Greece integrated themselves through the labor market. But since the financial crisis and the migrant situation, we have decided to offer services to migrants and refugees.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: What services are currently available for migrants and refugees in Athens?

Papagiannakis: There are no municipal services that are specifically for migrants. But in general, people without documents can access municipal services, like healthcare and education, because we have an anti-discrimination policy. Now we are going to create a center for migrant integration, a “one-stop shop” for migrants to access the services they need from the city. There will be four people who will offer psychosocial support, a cultural mediator to help people negotiate access to social services, legal advice, and an accountant.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: What are the budgetary provisions for the migrant integration center?

Papagiannakis: It's a European-funded program, at least for the next three years. After three years we have to integrate it into the budget system on the national, regional, or local level. There's no budgetary line for these specific policies—it's European policy, implemented through the municipalities because the state cannot do it at the moment. Hopefully we will get this function officially delegated to us and receive funds from the municipality after the European grant expires.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: Can you give me a picture of the day-to-day functioning of the governmental and non-governmental support network for refugees in Athens, and where your activities fit into that?

Papagiannakis: For the first time, UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] has intervened in a European state as a state contractor providing services to refugees. The initial funding comes from ECHO, the EU's humanitarian agency. It actually wasn't legal until recently for ECHO to even operate within the EU's borders, but they changed the internal regulations in order to be able to fund projects and activities in the EU related to the refugee crisis. So money comes from ECHO through to UNHCR, and some of the NGOs have private funding. They try to coordinate so they don't duplicate services. The municipality's activities started with just being present in meetings, and now we are participating in some of UNHCR's projects like the housing scheme. There are now about one thousand apartments being rented to refugees through the development agency of the municipality—three hundred through the UNHCR project and seven hundred through other projects. The municipality's main achievement thus far has been to create a coordination center for all the NGOs that are operating within Athens. We have 45 or 50 members of this center, including a project manager and a coordination man-

ager. We are funded through a private Greek foundation. We offer work stations for the NGOs but also a place to meet and coordinate. There are five big working groups dealing with different issues—organization, health, education, et cetera. Our goal is to build an integration strategy for Athens, which is difficult because there are 324 other municipalities in Greece which are all doing different things. Piraeus is one of them, and they've been linked to our coordination center. In October or November 2018, we hope to present an integration strategy to the municipal council. There are some issues that arise from the municipal coordination—for example, schools in Greece are overseen by the state, so as a municipality we struggle to respond to issues with schools, like the school in Exarchia that was occupied by refugees.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: Speaking of the occupied school in Exarchia, there are numerous non-government actors that are providing support for refugees, such as local communities, activists, and organized squats in the city. What is your position on working alongside these structures to support refugees?

Papagiannakis: The general position is that we cannot work with squats. We are an institution, we are bound by law to operate in a specific framework. Sometimes it can be dangerous to work outside these lines. For me personally, there are a lot of concerns about having people living in squats for many months at a time, or even a year. The squats were a social necessity if you will, because previously we didn't have appropriate accommodation for everyone. We do have more places in apartments than we did before, so there is less need for people to live in squats. Some people of course prefer to live in squats, but also practically, you cannot keep people in a confined specific environment for too long. Because there is no privacy, there is no regularity if you will—people have needs, they need to regularize their situation, find work, get their kids to school. Kids go to school even from squats—which is a good thing.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: But perhaps such “informal structures” offer a different way of organizing life and integration to refugees?

Papagiannakis: There is space for these types of structures, but we have to be clear on the issue of who has responsibility for what in the construction of society. I'm being a bit populist here, allow me to do that for the sake of argument. If someone gets hurt in a squat, who is responsible? If something happens in an apartment that we know, there is a procedure, i.e. civil liability and all of that. I had a discussion years ago with squatters who were doing lovely things with kids and education in a squat. I said: okay, but if a kid hurts himself what will happen? They said no, we all know each other, it's fine. Okay so even if it's all fine among them now, let's imagine that the grandmother of the kids comes and says, you are neglecting the kid, I'm making a demand to take away custody. And then the discussion stopped, I don't know what they did. When I was a legal advisor for the Green Party, I gave this advice: don't do squatting with kids. Do it with adults over 18 who can take responsibility for themselves, but with kids it's very dangerous. You can imagine someone getting hurt in a squat and then someone making a civil suit against the owner and they would lose everything. There is space to do things differently, but there is also a need to have someone responsible because this is the way that society works in our times. But we see, and we acknowledge, the fear of institutionalization that many people have: people feel safe in the camp and integrated there, and they don't want to leave for more formal housing.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: So how do you, as a local authority, learn from refugees about their own needs, in order to better support those needs? I'm asking because perhaps the more “hor-

izontal” and open structures of grassroots support may allow refugees to express themselves more fully, and thus enable a real dialogue to take place.

Papagiannakis: When you have a single entity leading and giving instructions, and there is only information from one side, people who find themselves somewhere new will often just follow the person who seems to think they know best. The state is by definition paternalistic, but at the same time there is no structure that is run by the refugees themselves to replace the state. Let's broaden the conversation and look at how squatting is generally received in Greek society. Greece is a very conservative society and people tend to associate those who live in squats with lack of respect for the law and leftist political identification. It's not like Holland or Germany where there is a culture around squatting. In Germany I was talking to a Social Democrat about the situation with squatters there, and he was saying that they just go to the squatters and ask them if they want to take ownership of the building and thus responsibility—and then the squats end because people don't want the responsibility. The Greek reaction is that if we talk with squatters, we give them legitimacy and we don't want to do that. It's a more defensive perspective; it is a fearful reaction. If we had the time to discuss in meetings it might be different, but we are responding to a crisis that concerns people who are on the move. We don't have patience as a society, we always discuss issues in the football stadium or at the coffee shop, yelling and taking extreme positions. For Greeks you are always either with us or against us. In that context, and representing an institution, we have to navigate through the concerns of citizens. And on the other hand, you may want to serve people's right to participate in a certain way of living. It's easy as a municipality for us to take a step back and say, the government has to deal with the issue. But we as a municipality are trying to take more responsibility.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: So how do you understand this responsibility? What are the methods available for you to “listen to” what the refugees are saying?

Papagiannakis: This is a complicated issue for me, because of my background and experience. I studied Public and European Law and then worked in the public sector in other areas. I ask around, I try to have discussions with people who are more experienced than me about listening and finding out what refugees want. When you represent an authority there's a mistrust, which is understandable and I can relate to that. When you are new to a country and you don't know how things work, it can get a bit messy. There are lots of people talking to refugees and making demands from them—NGOs and others. As an institution it's difficult, because you always want to have a counterpart who is at least at the same level and recognizes you as an institutional player. It was complicated to collaborate with NGOs in the beginning, when I first started attending meetings for refugee need coordination and I was the only representative of the municipality of Athens. There are NGOs who are a bit skeptical towards authority. But when they saw that we repeatedly participated, and we didn't want to just impose our views on others and were open for negotiation, we created a space of trust between us and then we moved on from there. It would be good to do the same thing directly with refugees, but it's difficult because there are so many different needs. You can't ask them to create one official unit to represent all of their needs.

However, there is an institution called Greek Forum of Refugees, which can sometimes act as a voice for refugees at the council on migrant integration, of which I'm the president. We also have the Greek Forum of Migrants, which represents migrant communities in general. So those groups can help you figure out what the problems are and transmit the information back to the municipality. This type of organizational scheme actually existed in Germany 35 years ago, so we are way behind in the pyramid of possibilities of how to engage migrants and refugees.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: And of course there is the question of the status of refugees as “non-citizens.” What is the future for refugees in Athens in terms of citizen rights?

Papagiannakis: Access to citizenship in Greece is very difficult, especially for first-generation foreigners. The new 2016 law on citizenship makes it easier for second-generation migrants to gain citizenship. There was a law on citizenship in 2010 that was deemed unconstitutional in 2012. Now the 2016 law is in force. Among European countries, 2010 was very late to be passing a law on citizenship. Especially when Greece has more than 100,000 second-generation migrants, most of whom don’t have citizenship. But this relates to the European way of seeing citizenship. Europe has a very nationalistic view based on nation states, guided by the law of the blood, not the law of the land (i.e. birthright citizenship). The old citizenship law actually had a provision for third-generation migrants to gain citizenship automatically if they have one parent who has legal status. So if a woman is born here and gives birth to a child here, and is here legally, that child automatically has access to citizenship. But it’s harder for migrants who came earlier.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: Do you feel under pressure to prioritize representing the constituency of “voting” citizens of Athens, and does this make the task of serving migrants and refugees challenging?

Papagiannakis: Of course there are different interests. It’s always easier to deal with money and buildings rather than people. But personally, I feel like this is something that we need to do. For me, refugees and migrants are my fellow citizens—not future fellow citizens, but actual fellow citizens. I would like to represent them, and I would like the municipality to do the same. I believe the municipality of Athens is doing the best it can. We could do even more, probably, but without a legal framework we still manage to do quite a lot. Especially compared to what we were doing before, which was nothing. I believe that we should represent every single person that lives in the municipality of Athens, because in the long run we will gain from this—even politically, although that is a bit cynical. I believe you have to be fair and right and just towards people, and this is the mayor’s position as well. But it’s not a question of taste, it’s a question of legal, moral, and international obligation as well.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: We’ve talked about Greek society’s broadly conservative stance towards forms of grassroots activism such as squatting. How easy or difficult will the process of integration be for Greek society at large, particularly when we think about general attitudes towards refugees?

Papagiannakis: There are surveys that give us some answers. In January [2016], 54% of Athenians had a positive view of refugees. But 74% of them thought that it was a good idea to have refugee kids attend schools; and 72% did not think that refugees constituted a danger to society. My view is that the discrepancy in numbers reflects the immaturity of society, because you would expect to have similar figures to these types of questions. Fifty-four percent is much lower than 72%. It doesn’t make any sense to approve of kids going to school, but not approve of them overall because kids come with a family. Greeks are used to living with foreigners to an extent, but maybe we are not used to seeing them as equal, in terms of having the same rights and obligations and being called “Greek.” If you ask a Greek person, “What is a Greek?” they would tell you it’s someone who is born in Greece. And if you ask them, “Well what about the foreigners who are born here?” you will start to see their real views. Is someone a Greek because they have Greek blood, or because they were born in Greece? Is it someone who participates in

Greek life, or attends Greek schools, as the ancient Greeks used to say? Personally, I believe that we are a very conservative and immature society on those issues. And I would say that we are racist. Not “hard core” racist but racist in that we are not used to discussing these types of issues and we take the approach of: we’re Greek and all others are barbarians. We often say things like: when we were talking about philosophy the other Europeans were climbing trees to find nuts to eat. But things have moved on since then. And we are often immature in that we always find someone to blame for our problems—Europe, the Germans, et cetera. For me it stems from the fact that we in Greece have never heard a public discussion about our national wounds from the Second World War and the military dictatorship.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: What about in Athens in particular—what are the figures for refugees and migrants living in Athens?

Papagiannakis: According to the latest poll, 23% of people living in Athens have a migrant background. Almost one-fourth of citizens—that’s a lot. Not many people are aware that the figure is so high—although in Berlin the figure is 45% and might reach 50% soon. This is a big change, and it’s related to how more and more people are living in urban environments. In 2015, 65% of people were living in cities, including mega cities like Tokyo and São Paulo (20 million), and London to a lesser extent. This means more need for housing. Whether or not someone comes from a migrant background will be less important in times of crisis—we will need huge amounts of resources, food, and services for people. And in the future many jobs that we have now will be gone—because seven out of ten jobs of the future haven’t been discovered yet. These are the real issues—not where someone was born, that’s already not really relevant anymore, especially in the long term.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: Can you talk a bit more about the link between the economic crisis and the so-called “refugee crisis”?

Papagiannakis: The economic crisis has certainly had an impact, because for example in Greece our political system has completely changed from what it was 10 years ago. One of the two big parties has almost completely disappeared. The second one has taken a hit and is only just starting to recover. The conservative parties are gaining strength, but that’s not only a Greek trend, that’s a European trend. For me, the financial crisis is the underlining factor for everything in a sense, because through that you can blame someone and find a scapegoat. We are used to having a scapegoat. Before now it was Turkey—or actually still is Turkey for a lot of things—but then we also have the Germans, who are thinking of re-enacting the Second World War but through the economy instead of Nazism. The refugee situation is not a crisis, because managing 250,000 people is not a problem, or it shouldn’t be a problem. Europe wasn’t prepared because we didn’t think it would be *our* problem—all these people are just moving around the Middle East. Then suddenly 1.2 million came to Europe, we said “oh. . .” and almost destroyed Europe from a political perspective because of this. We escaped the shift towards right-wing populism in some elections—Holland, France, Italy, Austria, et cetera—so it could be much worse.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: Yes, and that relates to the specific link with austerity measures coming into force across Europe.

Papagiannakis: The austerity approach is a much more Protestant or German way of seeing things: let’s punish the bad and reward the good. That model could work in some cases, but not

for all countries. Maybe you can take that approach for two or three years, but now we are in year nine in Greece. I’m pro-European but this is enough—we have to find another way. Maybe that way worked for Cyprus, Portugal, and Ireland, but it’s not working for Greece. It also creates an opening for more conservative views to take hold, which we are seeing everywhere. In terms of the link with refugees, former communist countries who are less economically developed are the ones saying they don’t want to participate in the relocation scheme. The racist part is that they say they don’t want to participate because they only want Christians and won’t accept Muslims. Their approach makes more sense to me when they explain that they need a higher level of economic development in order to be in solidarity with the rest of Europe. European solidarity is a fundamental element of the European Union and as a pro-European I don’t think we defend it enough. I think right now we’re recreating the wrong model . . . I’m not saying the solution is open borders for everyone to come in, but we need to be more open and find other solutions because the ones that we have now are clearly not working. Creating a fortress in Europe or hoping that Europe will become an island will not work. There have been many bad decisions made at EU level—for example, the expansion of the European Union was probably a bad idea. But we cannot cry over spilt milk, we have to find a solution here. It’s unacceptable that some countries will only take Christian refugees.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: With the rise of the far right and the strengthening of the nation state’s borders, what can a large city like Athens do in terms of refugee policies within its municipal borders? And do you think that some of the European cities might be moving in a more progressive direction than their respective nation states?

Papagiannakis: First of all, European cities in different European contexts have different powers and competencies. As a centralized state, Greece gives cities less power than in other European countries, like Holland or Spain. Some cities in Europe have already said that if the national government is going in a direction that we don’t like, we are going to do things our own way. Amsterdam, Barcelona, and Madrid said that, for example. In Greece we don’t have that possibility to the same degree. We can shout, but we don’t have as much power to act separately from the national government. Instead we will use the networks and collaborations that we have, like the European Solidarity Cities Network. Big European cities are moving in a progressive direction. Paris’s mayor Anne Hidalgo had a huge fight with the socialist prime minister before the French election. And I think she will continue to do the same with the new French government because she has a different view of refugees and migrants than they do. The mayor of Amsterdam also said that national elections would not affect his position, and the city of Athens has recently honored him with a “Key to the City.” Now his term is over, but the heart and soul of Amsterdam is progressive and there’s no way there will be a conservative right-wing racist as the next mayor of Amsterdam. Cities have a more progressive view because they actually deal with the issues every day. It’s different in every context—obviously Athens is tiny, it’s actually smaller than Bologna which is considered a small town in Italy. But Athens is a symbol now: the mayor of Athens was awarded the third best prize for best mayor in the world for his action with refugees. The current mayor of Athens has strong political will and a certain degree of stature.

Komporozos-Athanasiou: So far, we’ve talked about various levels of solidarity at the extra-national level—the European level. Athens saw a huge development of solidarity networks in the years of the economic crisis, including community support structures for the most vulnerable, some of which were also supported by the municipality. Do you think that these structures can form the basis for more sustained and meaningful refugee solidarity today?

Papagiannakis: Of course, but the municipality is also doing a lot. We are feeding twenty thousand people a day through our soup kitchen, we have a pharmacy and a grocery shop. There are solidarity movements that have been created officially and unofficially. There is a general welcoming attitude that people take care of each other. This is what we've gained, even though solidarity as an issue wasn't in the political debate or linked to a specific political position. Solidarity has come out of this toxic context where the front page of a newspaper in Greece can print the headline, "Stalinists are in power." It does come up in political debate, especially used by the left like in the slogan "We are with them" to talk about refugees, but in general it's used in a more mainstream way. The president, prime minister, and leader of the opposition have all used it. The word "solidarity" has a specific connotation: that people come together, they help each other. Even if someone thinks that we need to help only Greeks or if we need to help all the others, the use of the word contains all of these differences... .

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