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NAVIGATING THROUGH RESTRICTIONS

The evolution of Civil Society in the Aegean Sea Migration Governance

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Abstract

Since 2015, the European Union and the Greek state have undergone a significant change regarding the maritime migration governance towards an increasingly securitised approach. This shift has had a crucial impact on migrants and refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean. However, civil society organisations do not remain untouched. Restrictive migration policies affect them in a variety of ways. While scholarship has mostly focused on the externalisation policies of the EU, the criminalisation of solidarity and securitisation of irregular migration itself, this thesis investigates the adaptive strategies developed by non-governmental organisation, engaged in migration in response to this evolving trend of restriction of migration.

This research examines how restrictive migration policies have reshaped the operational space of NGOs, through the lens of humanitarian securitisation and the Paris school theoretical framework of security. Employing a qualitative research design, this studies' empirical data derives from nine interviews with NGO personnel, in order to shed light to their experience navigating through a securitised environment. This thesis argues that securitisation's consequences extend to administrative and bureaucratic restrictions, funding trends, shrinking of humanitarian space and the emergence of insecurity and uncertainty for the organisations. According to this thesis, organisations do not remain static in this shift. On the contrary, this thesis conceptualises organisations as active migration actors with agency, which have developed response mechanisms to combat the restrictions. By delving into the empirical evidence from Greece, this study aims to contribute to the literature on migration governance and civil society, while highlighting how humanitarian space has been gradually reshaped.

Keywords: migration governance, securitisation, non-governmental organisations, Greece, adaptation, civil society.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
ERCI	Emergency Response Centre
EU	European Union
EUROPOL	European Police Office
FRONTEX	European Border and Coast Agency
GCG	Greek Coast Guard
IOM	International Organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SAR	Search and Rescue operations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Introduction

Migration governance has been at the centre of Europe's political agenda since 2015, drawing the attention of policymakers and academics. Scholarship has enriched our understanding of how European Union's migration management has been reshaped towards security-oriented approaches of border management that link human mobility to existential threats for the national sovereignty. Countries such as Italy, Turkey and Greece were at the frontline of the so-called "migration crisis of 2015"¹, referring to the large influx of migrant populations to Europe, through the Mediterranean, due to the political instability and conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (Goldmeier, 2025. European Commission, Press Release, 20/4/2015). Within this context, this thesis focuses on the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as part of civil society, operating in the field of maritime migration in the Mediterranean Sea. More specifically, this study examines the adaptation of their strategic response to the evolution of the policy landscape within the European Union (EU) and particularly within the Greek state.

In response to limitations faced by governmental actors regarding search and rescue operations and gaps in migration governance, non-governmental actors have emerged as crucial players in border management and supporting people on the move (Panebianco, 2019, p. 389). However, their role has not remained static. As EU and national migration policies have become more restrictive, since 2015, NGOs have had to adapt their strategies, navigating through a space marked by both cooperation and opposition to state authorities (Franko, 2025, p. 380). In this thesis, "adaptation" refers to changes in NGO operational practices, advocacy strategies, and organisational priorities in response to external political, legal, and financial pressures.

The European Union and the Greek state have implemented a series of increasingly restrictive migration policies, combining border surveillance, cooperation with third countries,

¹ In scholarship the term "migration crisis" or "refugee crisis" refers to the large-scale movement of displaced people who are forced to flee their countries of origin due to war, conflict, persecution, or natural disasters, often travelling under dangerous and extremely difficult conditions. It regards an umbrella term, which may relate to the situation in refugees' countries of origin, the difficulties encountered during their journey, or the challenges experienced by the countries receiving them. Thus, the term can reflect the perspective of refugees, host countries, or both. In the context of this paper, however, "migration crisis" is used specifically from the viewpoint of host countries that face considerable difficulties in managing the large influx of forcibly displaced individuals crossing their borders. It refers to the challenges the EU's reception system faced and their inability to effectively manage the influx of people. (Kousis et al., 2022: 91-92).

externalisation of migration policy and the expansion of EU agencies such as the European Border and Coast Agency (Frontex), to discourage people from crossing EU borders (Migration Policy Institute, 2020, p. 1), which has undeniably impacted humanitarian space. The policy shift has notably transitioned from a search and rescue-oriented approach to one focused predominantly on border securitisation, therefore creating significant challenges for humanitarian operations at sea (Franko, 2025, p. 383). Adaptation to these policies is not considered to be a voluntary choice, but rather a response to a changing governance environment. NGOs are no longer operating only as humanitarian actors responding to humanitarian needs but have been challenged by an increasingly strict governmental framework, where administrative requirements, funding limitations and political and public narratives shape the conditions under which humanitarian actors can operate.

Existing scholarship has focused on the consequences of migration for civil society, delving into the criminalisation of solidarity, anti-civil society regulations, pushbacks, border control, the expansion of new technologies in border governance and externalisation of migration (Panebianco 2019, Kinacioglu 2023, Dupuy et al 2021, Muller and Smolinski 2022). Indicatively, Stefania Panebianco (2019) argues that non-EU actors operated as migration crisis managers, while there was tension between humanitarian obligations and security-oriented border control policies. The role of NGOs as central actors in the maritime humanitarian operations is evident in the studies of Eugenio Cusumano (2020) and Marta Esperti (2019), who highlight the emergence of civil society search and rescue (SAR) initiatives in the Mediterranean following the reduction of state-led rescue missions. Lastly, a great number of NGO reports investigates direct anti-civil society policies globally and advocate for better treatment of civil society (Amnesty International: ACT 30/9647/2019).

However, despite the important contributions of the literature, less attention has been placed on NGOs' experiences themselves, as well as how they have adapted organisationally to changing governance. Restrictive migration governance extends beyond the regulations of the constraint of movement of migrants and refugees themselves, while also impacting the governance of humanitarian organisations providing humanitarian assistance or integration services. This research, thus, poses the following research question:

“How have securitisation policies influenced the operational environment of humanitarian actors in the Aegean Sea and what strategies have they developed in response to the increasingly restrictive maritime migration policies implemented by the EU and the Greek state from 2015 to the present?”.

This research aims to contribute to this body of literature by specifically analysing the evolution of the adaptive strategies of NGOs operating within the complex and often contradictory policy frameworks governing maritime migration in the Aegean. Not only will it add to the existing literature, providing a further analysis of the years from 2015 until the present, but it will also analyse the effect of policy on humanitarian organisations at a more international level. Moreover, the study will contribute to the combat of the marginalisation of migrants and refugees. By analysing how the effects of anti-migration strategies impact civil society actors, this research aims to highlight the critical role NGOs play in advocating for the rights of migrants and refugees, often in direct opposition to state policies. Lastly, this thesis contributes to the literature by connecting the securitisation framework with humanitarian governance.

Taking into consideration that the current literature addresses NGOs' role in the migration policy during the migration crisis, this analysis provides a further understanding of the evolving strategies and challenges faced by these organisations in a continuously securitised and externalised border environment. Through interviews with NGOs, this study provides empirical data to support the argument that the humanitarian space has been increasingly constrained and reshaped by the convergent forces of securitisation and humanitarianism. Conducting interviews allows this research to give voice and shed light on the experiences of the organisations, acknowledging them as key actors of migration, through which we enrich our understanding of how everyday governance operates. Instead of solely analysing legislation and policy changes, interviews reveal how everyday governance mechanisms shape the organisations' decision-making process.

Finally, regarding the structure of the thesis, this paper is divided into three sections. The initial section introduces the theoretical framework of the research, grounding the analysis of established concepts such as humanitarian governance and the securitisation of migration through the lens of the Paris School framework. Additionally, a conceptualisation of how anti-migration policies affect humanitarian space is provided, as well as a brief description of the

securitised policies of the Greek state. In the next section, I introduce my methodology. This section focuses on the qualitative research methods employed. Through semi-structured interviews with NGO personnel involved in fundraising or organisational strategy, I investigate the adaptive character of NGOs. Moreover, I present the ethical considerations concerning research involving marginalised populations and sensitive political contexts. Lastly, the third section presents the findings of my research, which are then analysed and discussed. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main findings in relation to the theoretical framework and concludes with a reflection on the limitations of the research.

Theoretical Framework

Restriction of the NGOs' operational space has been at the centre of migration studies, highlighting increasing pressure from political and institutional actors, ultimately targeting their capacity and function (Dario and Cerase, 2022, p. 42). This research claims that the "migration crisis" of 2015 and the adoption of exceptional and increasingly restrictive measures in migration have significantly affected civil society and shrunken humanitarian space. In this context, humanitarian space refers to the operating environment where human rights activists and civil society provide assistance and advocacy, while attempting to function without restrictions and according to their core principles (Care Emergency Toolkit, n.d.).

The shift in migration governance towards security-oriented policies is described as securitisation. Securitisation theory is central to this thesis because it provides a framework for understanding how migration has increasingly been governed through logics of security, control and humanitarian protection. States and governmental actors justify restrictive border policies and hyperbolised control measures by portraying migration-related issues as a security problem, that needs to be controlled. These developments significantly affect the operational environment of NGOs involved in maritime migration, shaping their strategies and relationships with the states. Therefore, securitisation is not treated merely as political discourse, but as a broader governance process that restructures civil society in the Mediterranean.

In this chapter, I delve into the discourse of securitisation and present the theoretical framework of the research study. Based on the literature, securitisation is a complex process that emerges

through routine practices such as border checks, surveillance systems, restrictions on migration documents, border control technologies, and monitoring (Bigo, 2002, p. 65). These daily practices, often being done outside direct public scrutiny, define who is perceived as a threat to the functioning of the state, meaning who can attack or influence national sovereignty (Lucchesi and Cerase, 2023, p. 42). Lastly, building on existing literature, this thesis demonstrates how anti-civil society policies function as mechanisms of securitised governance of migration. These practices are understood as legislative, administrative and financial restrictions contributing to the shrinking humanitarian space and to the criminalisation of solidarity, leading to the marginalisation of human rights defenders (see further: Amnesty International, 2019, ACT 30/9647/2019).

This thesis argues that in the migration governance of the Mediterranean, humanitarian practices coexist with restrictive border control policies. These policies reshape humanitarian space and restrict civil society through legal and extra-legal measures (Dupuy et al., 2021, p. 5). This paper will use the Paris School of securitisation, highlighting the everyday institutional practices that lead to that. In order to fully respond to the research question, I also employ the humanitarian securitisation theory, which focuses on the speech acts of politicians and media representations of civil society. This theory builds on the Copenhagen School of securitisation, as it adopts its core theoretical structure and then applies it to humanitarian issues. In the context of the thesis, migration governance is directly linked to civil society actors. Therefore, securitisation theory extends beyond its traditional focus on migrants to examine its consequences on civil society. Since securitisation is reproduced by administrative and institutional practices, they not only regulate the migrants' movement but also the operational space of the organisations related to migration.

2.1. Securitisation Theory: An Introduction

Discussions on security and its conceptualisation became more intense at the end of the Cold War, in the 1980s, with the debate between the “narrowers” or “traditionalists” and the “wideners” (Buzan, Waever, Wilde, 1998, p. 2). The narrow view, which consisted of military and state-centred views on security, argued for the primacy of military security. They opposed the debate on expanding the term “security” due to their concerns that it ultimately become too vague, risking intellectual incoherence. On the contrary, wideners moved away from the idea that security matters only in terms of war and included non-military factors as well: political,

social, environmental and economic reasons (Dimari, 2020, p. 3). Currently, in securitisation theory, there are two main approaches; the Copenhagen School and Paris School.

2.1.1. Copenhagen School of Securitisation

The Copenhagen school is one of the strongest and most popular theoretical frameworks of security studies. Buzan, Waever and Wilde, the fathers of this school, define securitisation as the process of framing an issue as an existential threat. Something urgent and dangerous, which requires extraordinary measures to protect it (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 21). This framing happens significantly through the use of specific language and figures of speech (Ibid, p. 26). In securitisation theory, this means that when political actors successfully frame an issue as an existential threat through speech, they justify extraordinary measures that would otherwise be unacceptable. In essence, this means that securitisation is not objective, but issues become a “security” issue through political and social construction.

However, not everything can be an issue of securitisation (Dimari, 2020, p. 3). For security measures to be effective, three interconnected elements are required. In theory analysis, the first unit is the referent object; a unit that can be threatened, has a legitimate claim for survival and needs protection. This unit may change depending on the sector, but traditionally, a referent object is considered the state (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 36). The state needs to protect its national sovereignty from any existential threat, such as migration. Secondly, this threat has to be established by a securitising actor attempting to influence the audience (Ibid, p. 36). These actors are usually involved or related to the securitisation process but are not the ones implementing the measures. They declare what the threat is against the referent object. Following the example of the state as the referent object above, then such actors can be political leaders, bureaucracies, governments, lobbyists, and pressure groups. These are the actors performing the speech act in order to protect a different unit, for instance the state, and seldom their own security (Ibid, p. 40).

Lastly, there is a third actor influencing securitisation: the functional actors. This group affects the process and shape of its outcome, even if they are not securitising themselves. In the example of the state being threatened by migration, such actors could be the media, border coast guards or civil society (Ibid, p. 36).

Securitisation of migration is seen as the ultimate form of politicisation, within this framework (Ibid, p. 24). When migration is no longer considered and treated as a routine administrative issue but as a subject of political conflict, then it becomes politicised. This process through which migration becomes a prominent and contested political issue can take many forms, such as increased political attention, public debate and media narratives on migration.

Despite the importance of this theory in security studies, it is also subject to critique. Critics focus on this approach's attention on official political discourse, while neglecting other actors and practices involved in securitisation. More specifically, they criticise the lack of attention to the role of media, institutions and everyday practices in shaping security perceptions (McDonald, 2008, p. 14).

2.1.2. Humanitarian Securitisation

Humanitarian securitisation applies the logic of the Copenhagen School to humanitarian matters. Introduced by Vaughan-Williams, it suggests that migration governance consists of the double goal of protecting national sovereignty and saving lives within borders (Chioularaki and Zaborowski, 2017, p. 614). Scholarship claims that by emphasising migration as a political emergency, militarisation of border control and surveillance increases, in the name of saving the people at sea (Little and Vaughan-Williams, 2017, pp. 544-545).

Humanitarian principles, for instance, the protection of human lives and saving people at sea, have traditionally been used to criticise harsh border policies. Humanitarianism, therefore, once functioned as a moral and political challenge to violent bordering practices. However, this critical role has become weakened because the same state authorities responsible for restrictive and often violent border controls now also use humanitarian language and practices themselves. In essence, governments and border agencies increasingly justify surveillance, interceptions, and border enforcement in the name of "saving lives" or protecting migrants (Vaughan-Williams, 2015, p. 4). As a result, humanitarian ideals are absorbed into migration governance and used to legitimise security measures, making the distinction between humanitarian protection and border control blurred (Ibid, p. 4).

Migrants are treated as lives that need to be protected when in danger and at the same time as threats. They are caught in the contradictory concept of victimhood, as victims of war with no access to resources for survival and a threat to the community coherence (Chioularakis and Zaborowski, 2017, p. 616). In this context it is unclear if securitised measures in border control aim to save migrants in distress or be used to intercept and forcibly return migrants through illegal pushbacks to restrict their mobility. Additionally, this contradiction is not only evident in policies and political discourse but also in the interactions between border authorities and migrants (Vaughan-Williams, 2015, p. 3).

Drawing from the above, humanitarian securitisation builds on the Copenhagen School as it inherits the understanding of security as something constructed that legitimises exceptional measures. Human mobility is conceptualised as a humanitarian emergency. However, these measures often have a preventive role around mobility, through control and militarised borders. While this theory is especially useful for analysing media and political discourses, security in this thesis is viewed as a continuous process that is being produced through administrative procedures and legal institutions that gradually normalise exceptional measures.

2.1.3. Paris School

Didier Bigo, the pioneer of the Paris school, on the other hand, views securitisation as something that not only exists in political discourse but as a process that is being done in practice through institutional changes, technologies and professional routines (Bigo, 2002, p. 65). In this theory, migration is treated as a security problem by different security actors, governments, companies, and border control professionals in order to protect their own immediate interests, such as budgeting or transformation of technologies (Ibid, p. 64). Consequently, securitisation is produced through everyday practices and professional routines rather than primarily through political speech.

Bigo suggests that securitisation, as the ultimate form of this practice, is not a result only by racist feelings and propaganda towards newcomers but a broader social and structural process (Ibid, page 64). Firstly, modern states maintain sovereignty through controlling their territorial space and regulating mobility. Thus, migration is viewed as dangerous since it challenges the state's control over its territory, and politicians are seemingly losing control and legitimacy in

the eyes of the citizens. Professionals of security, police, border control guards, and security agencies have developed a security mindset which considers migrants not just as foreigners, but as potential risks and objects of monitoring (Ibid, p. 64). In this sense, even with the absence of political speeches, migration is still treated as a security matter.

Another factor that influences and enables securitisation is the globalisation of technologies being more advanced. Technological evolution introduces new means of surveillance and makes border control more extensive. In this logic, technology does not simply react to threats; it shapes a mentality towards security by providing the professionals with even further means to monitor mobility more intensely (Ibid, p. 64).

Lastly, restraining migration seems like a solution which pleases uneased citizens. Migrants often become “scapegoats” for broader structural everyday challenges. These fears and anxieties are a product of social and political neo-liberal views, often disproportionate to empirical evidence (Ibid, p. 64).

Withdrawing from all the above, securitisation of migration operates as a broader governmental tactic to sustain or reinforce perceptions of insecurity. This process may reinforce the authority of governmental actors and legitimise them as security providers, drawing attention away from structural political and socio-economic failures. Migration is not a natural security issue, but it is constructed as one by linking it to structural social and political issues (Ibid, p. 78). Instead of addressing those problems directly, they are conceptualised as “immigration issues”, concentrating fear and blame on migrants as a single category (Ibid).

Consequently, security institutions themselves compete and collaborate to define human mobility as dangerous in order to maintain or expand their influence. The role of the immigrant in this process is not just being a “target” of restricted policies, but an organised reference point, which brings different security actors together (Olteanu, 2019, p. 77). This is not only being done within the national sphere but is also a transnational process. The immigrant links actors of domestic and international security professionals, who cooperate to manage migration as a risk (Ibid, p. 77).

The Paris school has also attracted criticism from scholars. By giving excessive emphasis on the interaction among security professionals as the primary drivers of securitisation, it risks being portrayed as giving much attention to intentionality, contributing to a general feeling of conspiracy (Ibid, p. 47).

2.1.4. Securitisation Theories: An Overview

In this paper, the Paris School theory and humanitarian securitisation are viewed as complementary theoretical approaches. The first explores how securitisation is normalised in institutions through daily practices, surveillance technologies and collaboration between security actors. In contrast, humanitarian securitisation conceptualises migration governance as combining the protection of human life with the protection of national sovereignty, enabling the legitimisation of militarised border control and surveillance in the name of saving lives at sea through narratives of protection and humanitarian urgency.

Combining both approaches allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the research question. Given the multi-structured of the research question, implementing only one of the frameworks would be a unilateral approach.

These theoretical frameworks guide the analysis of the interviews and the findings of the analysis to explore how civil society experiences and adapts to a securitised environment.

2.2. Impact on Civil Society

Since the beginning of the century, scholarship has been concerned about the increasing tendencies by governments around the world to restrict and shrink civil society (Cusumano, 2018, p. 390; Dupuy et al., 2021, p. 5). In this section, I proceed to analyse the impact of the securitisation process and anti-civil society policies on civil actors globally at a theoretical level.

At this point, I find it crucial to proceed with some definitions. In the context of this thesis, a clarification should be made regarding the distinction between civil society as a broader

collective act and non-governmental organisations. Civil society or civil actors, according to Amnesty International, is an umbrella term which refers to individuals, groups, organisations or institutions that have active participation in social discourse in support of various interests. The actors are not homogeneous, but the term includes professionals from different fields, such as academics, journalists, community-based actors, trade unions, charities, human rights organisations, collectives, think-tanks, religious groups and political parties, known as the “third sector”. Additionally, the actors may have or support heterogeneous or conflicting interests (Amnesty International: ACT 30/9647/2019, p. 4). In this paper, the focus remains on civil actors involved in providing services, aid, advocacy or support to migrant and refugee populations or promoting human rights in the Mediterranean. On the other hand, I define NGOs as formal, non-profit, and non-governmental organisations, operating in providing a variety of services to migrant and refugee populations or conducting search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean (Dupuy et al., 2021, p. 5).

Even though this research is a product of interviews and empirical data drawn from NGOs, these organisations represent the most institutionalised aspect of civil society engaged with migration-related services. As they provide a wide range of activities and services in humanitarian assistance, advocacy, litigation, and legal support, while they also interact with security authorities, their insights provide evidence on how securitised migration governance impacts the broader sphere of civil society. Consequently, they contribute to a broader understanding of the consequences of securitisation.

2.2.1. Shrinking of Civil Society

As seen in the previous section, when migration is governed primarily as a security issue, it not only affects migrants and refugees but also reshapes civil society. While NGOs are trying to adapt their policies in an increasingly securitised framework, they become subject to surveillance, restrictions and criminalisation. In this study, I mention the shrinking of civil society in order to refer to the use of legal, extra-legal, administrative and financial measures by state actors to constrain civil society (Ibid, p. 5).

Research on NGOs and civil society has been focusing on the “alarming trend” of governmental implications on interference through either legal interference or measures not regulated by law in restricting their operations (Ibid, p. 5). Interference can take many forms.

According to Amnesty International, at least fifty states globally are implementing either legal, bureaucratic and administrative constraints on civil society, restricting funding opportunities and targeting human rights defenders (Ibid, p. 6). The Paris School views the intervention of state actors as a form of institutional change that subsequently affects how civil society functions.

Some countries prohibit civil society from engaging in topics which are considered as “politically sensitive” (Ibid, p. 7). These issues are perceived to be politically contentious and, therefore, inappropriate or sensitive to public discussion by ruling regimes or governments. Usually, such topics include advocacy on human rights, gender, equality, sexuality and anti-corruption (Ibid, p. 6).

The shrinking of civil society space also undermines the principles set out in the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which recognises the role of independent actors in promoting social change, supporting marginalised communities, providing services and education, and challenging abuse of power (Amnesty International: ACT 30/9647/2019, page 4). In many contexts, NGOs and other civil society actors also compensate for gaps in the state. Consequently, restrictions imposed on civil society not only limit civic participation but also indirectly constrain solidarity networks and the advocacy of human rights.

Legal constraints ultimately affect the funding opportunities of NGOs. Many countries have imposed restrictions on accessing international or independent funding and tighter controls, driving many of them to terminate their operations (Ibid, p. 19). On the other hand, national and governmental funding sources are often tied with the governments’ interest and political agenda, consequently available for organisations, which align or do not criticise governmental policies (Ibid). Restrictions on funding by different donors hinder the smooth operation and growth of these organisations.

Furthermore, civil actors encounter challenging in an administrative and bureaucratic levels. According to Amnesty International, the registration stage represents a significant obstacle for many organisations. Particularly due to extensive state oversight in the planning, implementation, and reporting of their activities, which enables governmental interference and monitoring. Governments often introduce new laws or complementary soft laws and legal requirements to prevent NGOs from pursuing their interests, such as new procedural

requirements, mandatory governmental approval or reporting procedures (Muller and Slominski, 2022, p. 4479).

In the case of Italy, for instance, Paolo Gnetiloni issued a Code of Conduct on maritime rescue after having negotiated an agreement with the Libyan Coast Guard. Search and rescue organisations which refused to sign were threatened that they would not be allowed to disembark migrants in Italian ports, as their authorisation would be denied. Despite the fact that NGOs reacted and criticised the Code of Conduct as “redundant” or “incompatible with the humanitarian principles of neutrality”, they were forced to sign it for fear of their activities being restricted (Cusumano και Villa, 2021, pp. 29-30).

Human rights defenders and independent civil actors are often faced with criminal charges or prosecution when speaking against governmental practices or challenging those in power. In many countries, they are being harassed, stigmatised, threatened, judicially prosecuted or in extreme cases killed or tortured during detention (Amnesty International: ACT 30/9647/2019, p. 2). Cases like these discourage people from continuing their work or joining civil society organisations. Legal cases against NGOs create further implications for their operation. In order to support their legal claims, they spend a large part of their funding, especially if we take into consideration that these cases last for years. Additionally, legal cases serve to delegitimise NGOs to the general public and impact their reputation (Muller and Slominski, 2022, p. 4479).

Lastly, human rights defenders and civil actors are often portrayed by security actors and media as facilitators of irregular migration, rather than humanitarian actors. In the Mediterranean, search and rescue NGOs have been accused by national politicians in Greece and Italy, as well as FRONTEX as “pull factors” of irregular migration (Cusumano και Villa, 2021, p. 34 and Baker, 2023). The expansion of the operations of security actors in the sea is exactly the reason that legitimates and normalises their speech acts against civil society. In the following subsection I proceed to provide a brief description of the Greek state has enacted securitisation policies.

2.3. Securitisation in Greece

In order to connect the theoretical framework to the research study case, I will proceed to provide a brief description of how securitisation of migration was established in Greece during the so-called “migration crisis” of 2015.

In the Mediterranean, different security actors contributed to the militarisation of its maritime borders. FRONTEX expanded its activities beyond the Mediterranean Sea into West Africa and conducted military operations. Member states of the European Union had provided FRONTEX with military equipment, which was used to conduct military surveillance operations at sea and on land. FRONTEX has allegedly been involved in illegal pushbacks in the context of the militarisation of border control. Additionally, advanced surveillance technologies were widespread, with the use of satellites, Global Positioning System (GPS) and virtual communication to contribute to surveillance and real-time information systems (Little and Vaughan-Williams, 2017, p. 539).

In this context, the unprecedented influx of refugees and migrants in the country marked the beginning of a humanitarian crisis, which allowed for further militarisation and expansion of securitisation. Border policing, FRONTEX operations in the Mediterranean, the EU and Turkey’s common statement, technological means of surveillance, hot spots and refugee camps were part of the measures Greece adopted in order to balance the protection of national borders and the functioning of the state, while using the narrative of humanitarian crisis to their advantage (Dimari, 2020, p. 7). These practices reflect what the Paris School describes as daily habits of securitisation. In that period, security actors had the means, the technology and the knowledge to expand their restrictive practices.

This abundance of security means and institutional measures allowed the weaponisation of the phenomenon. Attention was turned to “smugglers” and “irregular” migrants, despite the fact that identifying the distinction between the aforementioned groups and refugees has proven to be problematic (Little and Vaughan-Williams, 2017, p. 546). Such an approach was not a new phenomenon for Europe. In the aftermath of 2011, as the political developments and the fall of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, Europe built a narrative of “crisis” in order to justify political actions as “exceptional measures” (Blasetti, 2021, p. 43). Europe reacted to the developments by taking securitisation measures in migration policies by externalising its

maritime border control (Ibid, p. 43-44). Migrants and refugees were portrayed by the media on the duality of their “vulnerability” and “accountability” (Nikos Mergelis, 2017). On the one hand, they were framed as populations who lacked agency, in need of protection, rescue and medical care (Chioularaki and Zaborowski, 2017, p. 617). On the other hand, focus was given to the risks of migration for the smooth functioning of the state. Similarly, humanitarian activists were framed at first as “angels”, a narrative which quickly changed into “smugglers” (Cusumano and Villa, 2021, p. 28). Media have been balancing their narratives between “care”, “solidarity” and “security”. Such feelings towards these marginalised populations and humanitarian activists, who offered support and services, were also enhanced by racist motives. Golden Dawn, a neo-Nazi political party, was later convicted as a criminal organisation and led assaults against foreigners. These assaults were depicted by the media following the same pattern. It triggered a feeling of sympathy and solidarity toward the victims, who at the same time were accountable for holding an irregular status (Nikos Mergelis, 2017).

Lastly, the Greek state has been convicted by the European Court of Human Rights for illegal pushbacks (European Centre for Constitutional Human Rights, n.d.). Both at sea and land borders, Greek border control officers have been involved in illegal practices, in order to reduce arrivals (Amnesty International: EUR 25/4307/2021, p. 10). Such practices violate fundamental human rights of migrants and refugees, as the various means by which they are being conducted utilise a range of means from physical force to arbitrary arrest and inhumane treatment (Ibid). An evident example of this practice is the deadly shipwreck in Pylos in 2023. Survivors and human rights defenders accused the Greek Coast Guard of contributing to the shipwreck resulting in more than four hundred dead migrants. Survivors and human rights defenders have called for an investigation into the national coast guard for allegedly pushing back the ship and the systemic criminalisation of survivors as “traffickers” (The Press Project, 6/7/2023).

To sum up, in this section, I have provided a deep analysis of my theoretical framework. A combination of the Paris school theory on security and humanitarian securitisation contributes to the analysis, by acting as guides throughout my interview analysis. On the one hand by focusing on institutions and policies and on the other hand, on public and political discourse. As shown in the second subsection, securitisation of migration directly affects civil society. This is being done through legal and extra-legal measures, through governmental policies.

However, a crucial point for the survival and growth of civil society is the acceptance and support of the public, which is being damaged through political and media narratives. After discussing the methodology of this research in the following chapter, I will provide the findings of the discussions. According to my research, NGOs and civil actors have developed important skills in order to survive this kind of migration governance, highlighting flexibility and solidarity networks.

Methodology

This section provides a detailed analysis of the methodology used in this research. First, I describe the research design, followed by the research approach and an explanation of the case study. Moreover, I provide an overview of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews and the data analysis. Lastly, I present the ethical considerations and limitations of this study.

3.1. Research Design

For this study, I followed a qualitative research design in order to examine how civil society has adapted its strategies in a highly securitised context in Greece from 2015 to the present. I consider the qualitative research method appropriate, as I aim to explore perceptions, experiences and institutional practices regarding migration governance and humanitarian action. Instead of solely focusing on measuring numerical data quantitatively, I seek to conceptualise how securitisation has affected civil actors and how they experience it within a restrictive environment (Lim 2025, p. 199).

Qualitative research is paramount to social studies. It allows researchers to delve into social phenomena and analyse the experiences of their subjects. Social phenomena are complex and require a flexible approach to be studied adequately, without risking oversimplification or misinterpretation of the data. Through interviews, this method allows the researcher to connect theory to real-world issues and give voice to the lived experiences of the participants. While this method comes with risks, such as researchers always having to be mindful of their own bias, it provides a holistic perspective which allows them to understand the phenomena in their entirety (Ibid, p. 202).

In this research, conducting interviews allowed me to fully study the experiences of the civil society and its reaction and responses to the institutional changes of the securitisation process.

Examining only quantitative data would not provide an understanding of the multifaceted effects policies have on civil society or the various ways NGOs adapted to new realities and demonstrated flexibility. Since I explore concepts such as perceptions, narratives and institutional practices, these would not be easy to quantify. Instead, civil actors' adaptation strategies require a deeper understanding of words, concepts and information. This method allowed us to shed light on the voices of civil society and analyse how policies and theoretical frameworks come to life.

3.2. Case selection: Greece and the Mediterranean

By examining Greece as a case study, this research seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of the relationship between securitised migration governance and civil society within a specific political and geographical context. Greece has been chosen as a case study for this research for various reasons. Firstly, the country deploys a relevant example of how a large influx of migration flows was framed and treated as a crisis. In 2015, Greece was one of the main entry points for refugees into Europe, acting as a transit and destination country. This unprecedented arrival of refugees was framed as a crisis primarily on the perspective of the host countries, as they were facing major challenges to effectively manage migration flows. In this context, migration was portrayed as something extraordinary rather than normal (Kousis et al., 2022, p. 92).

Civil society had a central role in welcoming migrants and refugees, filling governmental gaps and providing services and search and rescue missions. However, while these efforts were initially met with broad public acceptance and humanitarian actors were widely regarded as "heroes," public discourse later became increasingly hostile. Over time, many of these same actors came to be portrayed as "criminals" and facilitators of irregular migration. (Cusumano και Villa, 2020; 28). At the same time, Greece had adopted a stricter approach towards migration, while being placed at the centre of EU's efforts to support border and migration management (European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2024). Therefore, Greece serves as relevant example to study how civil society manages to survive and grow in such a restrictive framework.

Additionally, this research focuses on the time period from 2015 to the present. The year 2015 was chosen as it marked the beginning of the so-called "migration crisis", a turning point for

the EU's approach to migration. As reflected in the introduction, literature widely accepts that this year established the EU's shift in the perception of migration to a security issue. Adopting a ten-year timeframe allows this research to evaluate the evolution of securitisation policies and their impact on civil society. Across the interviews, participants discussed the operational changes they had experienced throughout this period. The fact that all the interviews were conducted in 2026 is acknowledged as a limitation of this study, as the participants' memories regarding the organisational changes may be influenced since 2015. Consequently, the empirical data should be understood as a depiction of how the NGO professionals understand and accept the impact of changes in migration governance. To strengthen my analysis, I deploy existing academic literature.

By exploring Greece as a case study, this research attempts to contribute to an in-depth analysis of the relationship between securitised migration governance and civil society within a specific political and geographical context.

3.3. Data Collection

In this sub-section, I proceed to analyse the primary research method of this thesis: semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews include structured and unstructured formats. While the researcher indeed has predetermined open-ended questions, they have the flexibility to go deeper and expand those questions for clarification when required. Additionally, the researcher may follow up on relevant topics (Taherdoost, 2022, p. 41 and Adams, 2015, p. 3). Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to reflect on how securitised migration governance affected organisational practices, funding strategies, and operational decision-making. Moreover, it allows participants' experiences to be given a voice (S.K. Ahmed et al. 2025, p. 5). By combining both primary and secondary sources, the study successfully responded to the research question. It is worth noting that the interviews were conducted in both English and Greek and were transcribed for analysis.

Regarding the participants' selection, they were chosen following the process of purposive sampling. Researchers use this method to intentionally select specific individuals or cases based on predefined characteristics, expertise, or relevance to the study (Tajik, Golzar, & Noo, 2024, p.1). In this research, the selection criteria were based on their strategic involvement in

organisations engaged in migration support in Greece. NGOs were found appropriate participants since they directly experienced the effects of securitised governance in their operations. They are engaged with migrant or refugee populations, providing a variety of services and as organised actors, they are able to collectively respond and adapt to restrictive policies in ways individual actors may not. The pool of NGOs related to refugee or migrant populations is adequate in Greece. From these NGOs, I invited those who either have a presence on a border island or were involved in Search and Rescue missions or were involved in the integration process of the migrant population. My research consists of nine interviews with eight Greek and international organisations and one interview with a legal expert on migration policies and refugee asylum process, who provided a broader context of the EU's policymaking. I followed the selection criteria listed below regarding the NGOs I approached:

1. Must be an NGO/non-profit organisation
2. Must operate in Greece
3. Must be active in migration or refugee support
4. Must operate during/post-2015

Special attention was given to organisations which are:

5. active in reception islands (for instance, Samos),
6. involved in search and rescue,
7. or involved in migrant integration.

The criteria mentioned above are in line with the research's theoretical framework. The first criterion is justified as NGOs are part of civil society. Criteria two, three and four ensure this research's aim and geographical focus. The remaining three criteria are additional criteria which support academic transparency.

The study focused on participants who occupy administrative or fundraising roles, as they provided insight on organisation and institutional challenges and strategic adaptation. They are part of larger and relatively smaller NGOs in order to ensure a comprehensive approach in research. Different types of NGOs may respond in different ways. Smaller NGOs may experience securitisation differently than larger organisations.

In order to conduct the interviews, I used three different interview guides, which will be added in the Appendix. This method was chosen as it allows a detailed exploration of institutional challenges and adaptation strategies, while it considers the interview guide as a work in progress and allows for rearrangement or enrichment of the questions (Adams, 2015, p. 7). The guide is an outcome of document analysis and secondary literature, which provides open-ended questions to explore the topic. The interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 30-40 minutes. All participants were informed of the confidentiality and anonymity policy I followed, as well as how their data would be processed and analysed. During the interview, they were informed when I started recording and were reminded of the confidentiality policy.

Across the interviews with the Greek NGOs (See Appendix I), the discussions included an introduction of the role of the organisation and the role of the participant. I proceeded to question them regarding their strategy evolution, what their strategy plans are, how these plans have altered and why and what they would highlight as the greatest challenges they are facing currently. Additionally, we discussed how EU and national policy changes have influenced their operation and their day-to-day activities, and lastly, how the process of decision-making has changed. The interviews continued by delving into different restrictions, legal, administrative or operational have influenced them and how funding trends have shifted during the past decade. I concluded the interviews by asking to reflect on what they consider to be the greatest change they have experienced.

While conducting interviews with the international organisations (See Appendix II), the interview guide was slightly altered. The structure remained similar regarding the introduction and the ending. However, I focused on how European policies have affected their operation and how their cooperation with the Greek authorities or with other Greek NGOs have been. The international organisations were focused on advocacy; therefore, we discussed how the space for advocacy has decreased. Lastly, funding remained a crucial part of the interviews.

Finally, a third interview guide (See Appendix III) was formulated for my interview with the legal representative. The discussion was focused on EU securitisation policies, the expansion of EU agencies such as Frontex and the trend of the shrinking of humanitarian space in Europe.

It is worth noting that the aforementioned guides acted only as advisory tools, which allowed me to better structure my interviews. The questions were often grouped, skipped when they seemed repetitive or new questions were born during the interviews, derived from the participants' input.

3.3.1. Research Sample

In this section, I present the typology of the NGOs included in my sample. In the next table, I demonstrate the different types of NGOs that participated in my study. The identified types are based on the following dimensions:

1) Funding Source

The first type concerns the primary funding source of each organisation and distinguishes between state/ institutional funds and private funds. Institutional funding refers to any recourses by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum and secondary by the Ministry of Health or funding from EU member and EU funding opportunities. Private funding refers to small donations by private individuals, larger donations by companies, in the context of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), donations by charitable and non-charitable Foundations and international organisations. Funding is not absolute. Mainly institutional-funded organisations may receive funding from private entities, as well. However, in this category I refer to the primary source of funding. Across my interviews, it was reported that institutional funding is less flexible than private funding. Additionally, it requires larger reporting and bureaucratic procedure.

2) Geographical scope

The second dimension relates to the geographical sphere of the organisations' activities. National organisations are operating only in Greece and are founded by Greek individuals. On the contrary, international organisations maintain a presence cross-nationally.

3) Advocacy

The third dimension concerns the extent to which organisations publicly engage in advocacy and challenge migration governance. Organisations vary depending on their mandate and capacity to criticise national and European policies, participate in public debates, publish press releases or publicly oppose restrictive measures affecting migrants and civil society. Some

organisations adopt a more confrontational advocacy approach, openly criticising governmental practices, border policies and limitations on the humanitarian sphere. Others maintain a more cooperative relationship with public authorities, expressing criticism less frequently. Examining variation in the approach of the organisations to public advocacy allows this research to explore whether organisations that are more vocal challenge securitisation differently from NGOs that primarily focus on operational activities and service delivery.

4) Administrative structure

Although most of the organisations run a volunteer programme. NGO4 relies solely on volunteer labour. This characteristic distinguishes it from other organisations with permanent employees.

5) Operation

The last dimension refers to the kind of services the organisations provide. All of the organisations work directly with beneficiaries. Primary-service NGOs deliver direct support to refugees and migrants, including reception, welcoming service, camp-based assistance and legal representation. Secondary-service NGOs focus primarily on integration-related activities, such as education, social inclusion and support in navigating everyday life in Greek society.

It should be noted that NGO1, NGO2, and NGO4 previously served as primary providers of education services within refugee camps. However, following the institutionalisation of the educational support for refugees and migrant by the Greek State, the organisations significantly reduced their presence. Consequently, for the purposes of this typology, NGO1 and NGO2 are classified solely as providers of secondary services. NGO4 provides services inside the camps until today, therefore is classified in the first category.

Table 1. Research Sample

NGO	Funding	Geographical Scope	Advocacy	Operation
NGO1	State	National	No	Secondary services
NGO2	State + limited private	National	No	Secondary services

NGO3	Private	International	Yes	Primary services
NGO4	Private	National	No	Primary services
NGO5	State	National	Yes	Secondary services
NGO6	State/ Private	International	Yes	Secondary services
NGO7	State/ Private	International	Yes	Secondary services
NGO8	Private	National	Yes	Primary services

Table 1 presents a comparison of the eight NGOs that participated in my research, according to the aforementioned criteria. NGO1, NGO2 and NGO5 are mainly funded by the state, while NGO3, NGO4 and NGO8 rely primarily on private funding. NGO6 and NGO7 receive both institutional and private funding. Regarding their geographical scope, NGO1, NGO2, NGO4, NGO5 and NGO8 are national organisations, whereas the rest are international. Lastly, regarding their organisational characteristics, NGO3, NGO5, NGO6, NGO7 and NGO8 are engaged in advocacy, while NGO4 is the only one described as volunteer based. Regarding the type of activities, they carry out, NGO3, NGO5 and NGO8 provide primary services. In contrast the rest provide secondary.

3.3.2. Data Processing

This section presents the coding analysis conducted on the interview transcripts. The aim was to identify recurring patterns and themes regarding participants' experiences with anti-migration policies and their response to a security-oriented environment. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using the software "noScribe". The transcripts were processed using inductive thematic analysis to identify and categorise patterns. Coding was assisted by Atlas.ti software, in order to facilitate organisation. This analysis employed inductive coding, meaning that themes emerged from the interviews, while staying focused on the Paris School theoretical framework and humanitarian securitisation (Braun και Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Regarding the interviews which were conducted in Greek, following the transcription, they were translated into English, for the purpose of the research, using DeepL. Later they were reviewed by the researcher to ensure accuracy.

In order to generate themes, I followed an inductive approach, where codes emerged directly from the raw interview transcripts and had no preconceived categories. Instead, this approach allowed participants' perspectives to shape the analytical framework (Ibid). This paper uses thematic analysis, a flexible framework, according to which the researcher can identify, analyse data and create themes, based on a 6-step framework: (1) familiarisation with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report (See further: *ibid*).

In order to respect the participants' privacy their personal information was anonymised prior to analysis, while the interview transcripts are stored in the software, accessible only by the researcher and the supervisor. Additionally, to confirm confidentiality, I removed any information could indicate the organisations, which took part in my research. In order to finalise my data, I conducted two rounds of coding.

In the initial coding, codes emerged inductively from the data, without focusing on the structure of the research question. The first cycle revealed eleven codes and three major themes: "Organisational Adaptation", "Funding and sustainability" and lastly, "Securitisation and shrinking of humanitarian space". The second cycle, allowed me to redefine codes, merge any overlapping codes, split too vague codes and lastly, reorganise my codes into themes according to the research question.

At first, many codes were part of more than one theme. For instance, the theme "Funding and sustainability" had only two codes: "Funding" and "Impact on NGOs", later renamed "Operational consequences of securitisation". This code was part of both the first and the second theme. The distinction is evident on the inclusion and exclusion criteria (See Appendix V). In regard to organisation, it refers to practical consequences of securitisation in NGO operation and references of insecurity/ uncertainty in operations. On the other hand, when used in "Funding", it referred to consequences of funding changes, including effects on staffing, service provision, programme continuity, organisational capacity, or sustainability.

Moreover, "Funding" was a very broad category which did not adequately capture the priorities participants made regarding funding. Therefore, in the second round it was divided to the following subcategories. Firstly, the subcode "Funding Priorities" referred to any descriptions to the criteria, strategic or organisational considerations guiding fundraising decisions and the

allocation of financial resources. The subcode “Funding Trends” included any references to changes in funding availability, donor behaviour, or resource flows affecting the organisation over time. Moreover, I added the code “Private funding” when participants referred to private donors, corporate partnerships, or independently sourced funding and “State funding” when participants discussed funding provided by national authorities, ministries, governmental agencies, or publicly funded programmes.

Regarding the “Organisational Adaptation”, the first coding identified six codes, which were later merged into five. The initial code “Emergency Response” was merged with the code “Strategic Flexibility”, which reveals organisational changes, practices or decisions adopted in response to external challenges, migration policy changes or operational constraints. I deemed it necessary, as both codes described the organisations’ responses to external pressures. Indeed, the code was renamed from “Adaptive Strategies” to “Strategic Flexibility”, due to the first title being too vague.

Lastly, the third theme initially had four codes, which became five at the end. The code “Human Rights Concerns” was added to describe participants discussing alleged or documented human rights violations in the Greek maritime space, by national or European authorities.

In the second round of coding, there were two clear themes according to the research question: “Effects and Practices of Securitisation” and “NGO Responses”. The first theme contains ten codes and comes from the merge of “Funding and Sustainability” and “Securitisation and shrinking of humanitarian space”. The second theme reflects five codes and was previously named “Organisational Adaptation”. The first theme reflects participants' accounts of funding changes, operational constraints, and the broader impact of securitisation on humanitarian work. The second theme captures the strategies organisations employed to adapt to an increasingly restrictive policy environment. Together, these themes provide the analytical framework for the findings presented in the following chapter.

<i>Table 2. Coding</i>		
<i>Themes</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>Quotes</i>
Effects and Practices of Securitisation	Bureaucratical Challenges	9
	Human Rights Concerns	7

	Media and Public Opinion	25
	Securitisation Practice	45
	Shrinking of Humanitarian Space	32
	Funding Trends	29
	• Funding Priorities	9
	• State Funding	8
	• Private Donors	11
	Operational Consequences	32
NGO Responses	Collaboration with the Government	11
	Expanding services	5
	Operational Consequences	32
	Setting Priorities	15
	Strategic Flexibility	18

3.3.3. Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure that my research was conducted properly and according to academic standards, I took into account a range of ethical considerations: anonymity, privacy and confidentiality, voluntary participation, option to opt out and lastly the principle of non-maleficence (Laryeafio and Ogbewe, 2023, pp. 102-103). This was crucial to ensure that the collected data relied heavily on the participants' honest opinion. While conducting the interviews, it was of high importance that the participants felt safe and comfortable expressing their honest opinions and experiences and were not pressured to respond in any particular way. Creating such an environment was essential to collect reliable data and minimise potential bias of the researcher on participants' responses (Ibid, 2023, p. 96).

With respect to the aforementioned considerations, responders were requested to provide me with a consent form before the beginning of the interview. In this document, I provided the description, the aim of the research, and the purpose of the interviews. Additionally, I provided transparent information on how the data would be collected, utilised, stored safely and that they will be deleted after the completion of the thesis. In addition, I highlighted who would have access to assure confidentiality. Participants names were deleted to ensure anonymity. Lastly, I explicitly mentioned that the participation is entirely voluntary and participants may withdraw from the interview at any point.

By taking these measures, I bound to protect the privacy of the participants, to ensure confidentiality, to respect their rights as interviewees and to create a safe space during the interview.

3.4. Limitations

In this section, I find it necessary to address some limitations and challenges I faced while conducting the study. First of all, this research was carried out at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic, therefore, the interviews were conducted online. In addition, due to the limited time I had to deliver this thesis, I conducted a limited number of interviews. Taking into consideration the type of research, the limited number of interviews does not aim to statistical representation but to in depth insights. Another factor influencing the number of interviews was that not all NGOs were responsive. I acknowledge that this research is focused mostly on NGO perspectives. Even though NGOs definitely belong to civil society and play a crucial role in maritime border control, this thesis could be benefitted by the perspectives of humanitarian activists. Given the type of research method, the goal was not to provide a statistical approach but to generate rich context regarding their experiences. Lastly, I wish to address that reflexivity is a crucial part of qualitative research in all steps of the analysis (S.K. Ahmed et al., 2025, pp. 1-5). In order to ensure transparency and minimise personal bias, I purposely used open-ended interview questions and remained reflexive throughout the analysis.

Analysis

In this section, I present the results of my research and proceed to discuss them. This part is organised into two sections according to the research question. The first part focuses on how NGOs experience the effects of securitisation policies and the shrinking of humanitarian space. The analysis is structured in four subsections depending on their content: bureaucracy, media and political narratives about NGOs, funding trends and lastly the shrinking of humanitarian space. Each subcategory explores a different dimension of how security-oriented approaches shape NGOs' work. The second part delves into how NGOs respond to these policies and how they reclaim their operational space. The first subsection examines how the organisational structure of the organisation influences their capacity to challenge securitisation, while the last subsection analyses the organisations' reaction to an increasingly securitised environment.

4.1. Securitisation Impact and Practices on Civil Society

The analysis of interview data revealed that securitised policies affect civil society in various ways, extending beyond direct attacks on organisations and legal restrictions. Securitisation studies focus mostly on criminalisation, anti-NGO laws, restrictive migration policies, pushbacks and new technologies in border control (Panebianco, 2022. Cusumano και Villa, 2020. Kinacioglu, 2023.). The aforementioned practices are the most explicit manifestations of securitisation. However, the empirical data revealed that organisations often experience restrictions indirectly, mainly through administrative and bureaucratic mechanisms, funding restrictions and constraints on the organisations' capacity to perform their services.

Considering the theoretical framework of this thesis, the Paris School conceptualises migration as a security issue that is governed through routine administrative practices. In this context, restrictions emerge through everyday activities from security professionals in order to protect their own interests, such as budgeting or transformation of technology (Bigo, 2002, p. 64). The findings support extending this logic to the study of civil society. Similarly to migration governance, NGOs experience securitisation through everyday bureaucratic and financial mechanisms and through political narratives, that reshape their capacity to operate.

Participants situated the shrinking of humanitarian space within a broader shift of EU migration governance since 2015, towards a more conservative approach. According to the interviewees, this shift is characterised by the extension of powers of Frontex and Europol, their cooperation with third countries such as Libya and Turkey and lastly, the use of new technologies to prevent refugees and migrants from entering EU soil. Additionally, the allocation of resources on border control policies, reflects EU's prioritisation on border management rather than access to protection (Interview Law expert, 9/6/2026).

Across the interviews, participants linked EU's approach to migration with an increase of the far right and anti-migration sentiments. One participant explained that EU's narrative in 2015 was that restrictive measures are conceptualised as an effort to respond to conservative political discourses. However, the more restrictive the measures are getting, the greater resemblance they have with the positions associated with the aforementioned conservative sentiments. The participants referred to the European Parliament members shouting, "Send them back", during

the vote for the Returns regulation, which is an evident of anti-migration feelings from European officials (NGO8, 24/6).

Reflecting on the above, the law expert on human rights reports that: *“In other words, the primary objective is to secure the borders, and only secondarily to protect people, or perhaps not even to protect lives at all, but simply to ensure that people do not reach the European Union.”* (Interview Law expert, 9/6/2026).

The quote illustrates EU’s prioritisation in border control, rather than the protection of people at sea. Control of national borders is prioritised to humanitarian protection. This is happening the same time participants report the restriction of their access to refugee facilities and the shrinking of their capacity to operate freely (NGO7, 22/6/2026).

Turning to the Greek context, participants connected the introduction of new legislations and policies, which prevent migration with the restriction of civil society. According to one of the interviewees:

“This gradually shifted as public discourse, policies, and legislation moved in a more restrictive direction regarding refugees themselves. This obviously also limited the space for civil society organisations.” (NGO8, 24/6/2026).

Participants reported that as restrictions on the migrants and refugees increased, organisations became subjects of securitisation since they provided support to migration services. The following sections present the mechanisms through which participants experienced securitisation.

4.1.1. Bureaucratical regulations and inconsistencies of national mechanism

Across my interviews, bureaucracy was highlighted as an emerging issue for organisations in migration. Bureaucratic requirements are considered to be central mechanisms of securitisation, rather than a mere consequence of it, as they shape the NGOs’ operational space and functioning. Such requirements allow state authorities to interfere with NGO’s everyday operational space, through registrations, monitoring and administrative workload. Participants repeatedly introduced administrative delays on behalf of governmental actors, strict registration requirements to the National Registry (Εθνικό Μητρώο Μη Κυβερνητικών Οργανώσεων) and bureaucratic obstacles as factors that restrain their operations. These

measures are not necessarily introduced with the objective of restricting civil society. Nevertheless, they produce restrictive effects, as they allow state oversight into NGOs' everyday operations and increasing the administrative costs. Therefore, bureaucracy is considered to restrain humanitarian space by increasing the administrative burden associated with humanitarian actions and limiting organisational flexibility.

Indicative of this policy is the registration to the National Registry for non-governmental organisations. According to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum all organisations engaged in migration related fields, international support and protection and social integration have to be registered at the Ministry, along with all their employers and volunteers, in the name of transparency (Press release, Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 14/5/2020). In case the organisations do not fill the criteria to register or any violation is found, their access to refugee camps is revoked, they cannot claim funding opportunities by governmental actors, potentially threatening their organisational survival. It is important to note that apart from the consequences stated in the legislation, consequences extend far beyond that, since even bank institutions require the organisation to be registered in order to open an account. Lastly, the responsibility to report any changes and keeping up with the legislation falls to the organisations alone, creating an extra administrative burden.

The Ministry introduced the above practice in 2020, as a response to the increasing frustration and anger from local communities of the Greek islands. Local communities reported the lack of cooperation of NGOs with local authorities, and the absence of an organised and coherent strategy plan (Kathimerini, 2/1/2017). In response, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum promises that this measure will only armour the NGOs' reputation and will allow their work to continue without any obstacles. Additionally, they imply that the distribution of EU funds through state mechanisms, instead of direct allocation of the funds to NGOs would align with the principle of transparency (Ibid). However, the Greek state does not require personal information and constant updating of the organisation's information from any other organisation in Greece, non-related to migration issues. Registration is evidence that NGOs related to migration issues receive different treatment in comparison to other organisations. Migration related issues are considered to need state interference to be controlled. In contrast with direct legal constraints, this practice is a covert effort to control migration-related actors.

Registration of non-governmental organisations and their staff is important as it allows the state to have further access and influence on civil society. In states where registration is mandatory, high fees, burdensome requirement of information-provision and periodic re-registration are only some of the examples that create obstacles on their operational space. In particular, without formal registration, the organisation cannot legally undertake activities. (Buyse, 2018, p. 970). The registration of all the individuals working or volunteering in NGOs and the provision of their personal information to the Ministry is also concerning, since this information can be used to personally attack the individuals.

My research has shown that this measure itself affected the organisations differently. One of the representatives of a relatively large Greek NGO, reported that registration is not a severe organisational issue for them, as they already have the mechanism to respond. However, they do acknowledge that this procedure is time and resource consuming: *“In order to receive funding from bodies such as the Region of Attica, you must be registered in the National Registry.*

It does create additional administrative work. Last year, for example, we nearly missed a deadline for updating our registration. We were told that if we did not complete the process immediately, we would lose access to funding. Therefore, organisations must constantly monitor compliance requirements, maintain records, coordinate with accountants, and submit documentation. It is not especially difficult, but if you fail to do it, you cannot continue programmes or receive public funding. There is also an annual registration fee.” (NGO5, 26/5/2026).

By requiring organisations to register, comply with extensive reporting obligations, and submit ongoing oversight, the Registry contributes to the management and regulation of actors involved in migration governance. The effects it has on the organisations depends on their operational staff and their size. The Refugee Support Aegean highlights that this procedure is a struggle for small and medium-size NGOs. In order to complete the registration, it requires a lot of bureaucracy, certified public accountants, and specialised accounting systems. Requirements that need funds and time (The Press Project, 29/1/2022).

The registry also creates obstacles to organisations who work with short-term staff, volunteers or international staff. The representative of NGO4 highlights the difficulties when working

with

volunteers:

“We are registered in the Ministry of Migration and Asylum’s Registry of NGOs. However, there are bureaucratic issues. Every volunteer has to be formally registered. Until recently this was difficult because volunteers often come for only a month or even a few weeks. Registering each individual volunteer is time-consuming.” (NGO4, 22/5/2026)

He proceeds to explain how unclear the legal framework for volunteers in general is vague, allowing the authorities to intervene:

“At the same time, we operate in an environment where the concept of a volunteer is not fully recognised or structured within Greece. Although the legislation of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum explicitly refers to volunteering, the position of the Ministry of Labour is less clear regarding what constitutes a volunteer.

At one point we were fined for undeclared work by the Labour Inspectorate. The case is currently before the courts. I believe we will ultimately be vindicated, but obviously the entire process is time-consuming and costly.” (NGO4, 22/5/2026).

Bureaucracy often acts as an obstacle for the smooth operation of civil society, rather than a boost. This also extends to the communication platform between the organisations and the state. It is worth noting that when funding trends shifted and the main funding source of organisation was institutionalised, they often had trouble collaborating with state authorities. Across my interviews, participants consistently referred to state funding as being characterised by lengthy bureaucratic and administrative procedures, which result in payment delays. Moreover, unlike the communication with international donors which was considered to be more flexible, communication with state authorities was described as rigid and fragmented.

Three state-funded organisations reported great delays due to long bureaucracy procedures:

“Essentially, what I would say is that working with state bodies makes the entire process far more cumbersome. There are stricter operational frameworks and, at the same time, a great deal of bureaucracy. Payments are often delayed. You face very serious liquidity problem” (NGO1, 30/4/2026)

As NGO1 explains bureaucratic obstacles create cash flow problems, which indicates that organisations often do not receive the corresponding funding for the services they provide. This

brings the organisation in a state of insecurity, as they need to find and rely on different funding sources.

“The issue was that International Organisation of Migration (IOM) itself could not receive the money from the Greek state. It could receive funds as a partner but not as an authority distributing funds to others. As a result, the process had to go through the Ministry, then the Ministry of Finance, then audits and approvals. That process took months, from the summer until now. Only recently did IOM finally receive the money from the Ministry. It was never a matter of IOM withholding funds; the Ministry simply could not transfer them earlier.” (NGO5, 26/5/2026)

The representative of the NGO5 further suggests that the delays come from a multi-layered governmental process to get approved. Funds have to pass through several ministries before reaching the organisation creating a significant delay in their payment and liquidity issues. This example illustrates that the delays derive from long institutional procedures.

“That said, another difficulty associated with state funding is delays in payments. I think that is a very significant and very specific issue. Everyone experiences it. There is a huge amount of paperwork and administrative procedure involved before payments are processed and before projects can move forward.” (NGO5, 5/5/2026)

Participants reported long delays and unclear answers from the authorities as a crucial organisational issue. The aforementioned findings suggest that despite the fact that state funding is considered to offer stability to the organisations in principle, the prolonged bureaucratic procedures impose significant delays in its allocation.

Interviewees perceived international private donors as operating through more flexible communication patterns allowing for more adaptability. In contrast, they reported that collaboration with state authorities lacks coherence and consistency, contributing to an environment of uncertainty and insecurity:

“One moment there is a national mechanism, a dedicated programme, and a General Secretariat specifically responsible for these issues; then suddenly programmes stop and later restart again.” (Ibid)

Lastly, beyond administrative issues participants described a relationship with state actors, in which they often feel unappreciated and reported a perceived lack of recognition of their work. In this context of problematic relationship with state authorities, despite the fact that they fill governmental gaps, state authorities do not acknowledge their contributions in public discourse:

“More often, difficulties arise with the Ministry’s services. On the hand, there is this rhetoric about ‘bad NGOs.’ On the other hand, whenever there is a problem, they use us as the easy solution. For example, ‘We need some items transported.’ Fine. (.) ‘Cover the cost.’ ‘We need repairs.’ ‘Can you handle them?’ So, there is this kind of dual attitude.” (NGO4, 22/5/2026)

The above quote illustrates that NGOs are expected to provide state authorities with assistance whenever they encounter organisational difficulties. However, their contribution is often accompanied with suspicion rather than recognition.

“It reminds me of how policies often come from the European Union, and then the Greek government presents them as its own initiative. Something similar happens with civil society. Whenever things go well, it is never civil society that receives the credit. Everything is always described as being done in cooperation with the Ministry.” (NGO1, 30/4/2026)

As the representative of NGO4 points out, while NGOs play a significant role in supporting the state authorities, credit is often attributed to state authorities themselves. This practice leaves NGOs without proper recognition of their work and acknowledgment of their contribution to the implementation of many programmes, which acts as an aggravating factor to their legitimacy.

Bureaucracy provides evidence that civil society can be restricted through administrative obstacles and allows the state to extend its monitoring and jurisdiction to the organisations’ operational space. In this sense, securitisation operates not only through exceptional or dramatic measures, but also through routine practices that regulate who can provide assistance, under what conditions, and with what resources. Lastly, this is particularly effective as it does not appear directly coercive. Contrary to direct criminalisation, bureaucracy is presented as a neutral means of reassuring transparency.

The empirical findings of this section suggest that bureaucratic procedures are tools through which state actors control and regulate the operational space of civil society organisations.

From the securitisation perspective of the Paris School, the findings illustrate how control is exercised through everyday procedures rather than exceptional measures. In this sense, bureaucratic practices normalise state oversight while limiting the autonomy of organisations involved in refugee assistance. In the following subsection, I provide the analysis of how NGOs are being represented in media and public discourse.

4.1.2. Conflicting narratives: “Good” and “Bad” organisations of solidarity

Media representation and public perception of NGOs related to migration ranges between the contradiction of positive and negative narratives regarding refugees themselves and the people who assist them. Firstly, media discourse contributes to the marginalisation of refugees and migrants by using dehumanising language and refusing them agency and jumping from the narrative of them being “victims” to them being a “threat” to national cohesion (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017, p. 616). They were denied a voice through practices of silencing, collectivisation, and dehumanisation, thereby reinforcing their exclusion from European political and social communities (See further: Ibid). Negative narratives regarding migration, are directly linked to negative narratives and reputational risks for civil society. These narratives may lead to reputational risks, which function as delegitimising mechanisms and reduce the NGOs capacity to advocate. Similarly, scholarship has already shed light on this very interesting shift of the depiction of NGOs, from “heroes” to “criminals” (Read further: Cusumano και Villa, 2020). While at the beginning of the so-called “migration crisis” NGOs were publicly welcomed, and activists were portrayed by the media as “heroes”, but this perception shifted as the public “fatigue” grew (Ibid, p.28).

Simultaneously, these sentiments were reinforced by direct attacks by institutional authorities connecting solidarity act with human trafficking and smuggling in public sphere. In the European context, Frontex linked NGO rescue teams with irregular migration, claiming they acted as “pull factors” that enabled dangerous crossings and ultimately contributed to more deaths at sea (Ibid., p. 24; Floris & Bagnoli, 2017, p.2). The argument is simple: NGOs by rescuing refugees and migrants at sea encourage more people to attempt the crossing, thereby contributing to further deaths in the Mediterranean (Eline Waerp, 2024). In this narrative, humanitarian action is undermined as harmful to people on the move, while EU agencies and securitisation actors reinforce their legitimacy to intervene.

The aforementioned discourses create reputational risks, a great challenge for NGOs. As such, for the purpose of this thesis, I refer to the negative public perception, or publicity damages the NGO's public image. They are often connected with liability and lack of credibility, which may lead to the decrease of people's trust. Reputational risks may lead to negative public and media attention and investors' scarcity (Australian Red Cross, n.d.).

The representative of NGO3, which provides healthcare services to newcomers to the Greek islands, reported systematic attack to their organisation:

"I mean, the targeting of NGOs, ours as well as others, is systematic. It has escalated to the point where we are now in a very troubling situation. It is much more intense than it was in previous years"

and

"If you look back at the press releases issued by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, and at statements made by various ministers, you see comments such as: 'There are good NGOs and bad NGOs', 'The Church is the most reliable partner', 'We know these organisations and what they do' and even earlier, another Minister of Migration stated: 'We are going to bring order to the organisations because they want to impose their own ideas and views.' (NGO3, 6/5/2026)

By the quote above, a systemic effort to undermine the NGOs' authorities is revealed. Public attacks towards civil society are not confined only to media discourse. One of the representatives referred to a former Minister of Migration and Asylum, Mitarakis, who connected the provision of legal assistance to refugees with the "modus operandi" of the traffickers, at the European Parliament (NGO8, 24/6/2026)

Additionally, the interviewees stressed out public perception of NGOs as highly problematic, and they attributed it to wrong media representation:

"Civil society organisations are not represented very often in the media anyway. It is also about the broader narratives that circulate about civil society. And unfortunately, what is usually said tends to be negative and often bears little relation to reality. Instead, it is usually based on political viewpoints." (NGO2, 5/5/2026)

While they continue to show the real impact in their work:
“For example, if at some point we wanted to build a broader public support base, something similar to what other organisations have, such as Médecins Sans Frontières or other field based humanitarian organisations, then those perceptions become relevant. More broadly, it also affects the level of public support for the work that organisations like ours carry out.”
(Ibid)

Lastly, the representative of NGO4 (22/5/2026), which provides various services in support of refugee population inside the camps in the Greek islands, narrated implications in their work due to reputation issues:

“At the same time, after 2015 there was initially a great deal of support from local people. But eventually fatigue set in. There was fatigue, economic hardship, concerns about crime, and messages from various media outlets that began saying: ‘The NGOs are helping refugees, therefore they are the ones bringing them here.’ This narrative started to spread. Even major media outlets suggested and sometimes openly claimed that NGOs were making money from refugees.

I remember someone telling me on the phone, ‘No, I know for certain—it was on Antenna TV.’ They claimed that for every refugee who arrived, NGOs received money from the state, and that even after those people left, the NGOs continued receiving money on their behalf. Completely absurd stories, of course, but people believed them. So, this led to fatigue and suspicion. At one point, when I had first arrived on Lesbos, I took one of our company vehicles to have a tire repaired and asked for an invoice. The mechanic asked me which organization I worked for. I told him, and he replied, “Oh, money laundering.”

I said, ‘Tell me, how exactly does that work?’ I pointed out that I was the one asking for an invoice, while he was offering to do the job without one. ‘So, who is actually laundering money here?’ (...) But that was the atmosphere. There was widespread suspicion.

Eventually, this led to violence. In 2020, from the 1st of March onward roadblocks started appearing on the roads. The roads were closed. Access to the Moria camp was blocked. People began smashing our vehicles and those of other organisations. Volunteers and staff were attacked. Some people were injured physically and psychologically.” (NGO4, 22/5/2026)

The framing of the large influx of refugees in Greece as a “crisis” contributed To this negative sentiment towards migration. Across my interviews, participants highly criticised this term, reporting that it creates a feeling of terror for the general public. By portraying migration, the natural movement of people, as something urgent that no state can fully control, this creates stress and insecurity to the general public:

“In other words, a crisis is not long-lasting. A crisis is something that emerges unexpectedly, something we could not have anticipated, and which requires us to change the way we operate in order to respond to an emergency situation. When we are talking about people who were arriving before, continued arriving afterwards, and will continue to arrive in the future, then this is not a crisis. It is migration. At this point, it is simply part of the normal state of affairs. It is the way people move around the world and something that is now entirely expected in the modern era. I think this is also something that is discussed extensively internationally. People constantly refer to it as a crisis. But it is not a crisis.

It is something that we expect to happen and something that does happen, and we simply need to be properly prepared with the appropriate systems and procedures in place to respond to it. When we describe it as a crisis, we also create a sense of panic, even though there is no reason for panic to be created.” (NGO2, 5/5/2026)

The construction of the influx of people as a crisis was helped by the media in Europe, portraying it as something new, something that cannot be controlled and ultimately threatens national sovereignty and security (Panebianco, 2022).

Reputational risks are part of the securitisation process under the humanitarian securitisation framework. According to this framework, migration governance derives from a combination of the protection of human life and at the same time the protection of the sovereign state. What securitisation actors do, through the mainstream media is construct the idea to the public that by enforcing restrictive measures to restrict migration, they are actually protecting the migrants taking a risky route. Consequently, NGOs that challenge their narrative, that do not comply with their border policies and practices, are portrayed as obstructing migration management and facilitating irregular migration. Humanitarian actors then become subject to suspicion and delegitimation. In this sense, reputational risks contribute to the shrinking of humanitarian space by making advocacy and public criticism more costly for civil society organisations.

The emergence of reputational risks should also be understood within the broader political and institutional context of Greece. Despite the fact that NGOs interviewed for this research primarily discussed the consequences of negative narratives in the media for their own operations, these narratives should be studied in a broader context.

Reporters without Borders have questioned the freedom and independence of press in Greece since 2021. The media environment is characterised by low public trust, high political polarisation, and significant concentration of ownership among a small group of powerful business figures, many of whom have close ties to political elites. Although press freedom is constitutionally protected, recent laws have been criticised for failing to meet European standards, increasing risks for journalists through defamation of penalties and prosecutions for allegedly spreading false information. Due to the aforementioned reasons, the RSF has ranked the country at 86th place regarding freedom of press and last among the EU member states since 2021 (Reporters Without Borders {RSF} n.d.).

In February 2026, a few days after the shipwreck off the Greek island of Chios, which cost the life of fifteen refugees and migrants, the governmental representative, Pavlos Marinakis, personally attacked a journalist in a press conference by threatening him with a lawsuit. Mr. Marinakis highlighted that the Coast Guard's obligation is to prevent irregular migrants from entering the Greek sea. When the journalist asked him if they are following a policy of prevention, instead of the international law's principles to rescue people at sea, he was threatened and called a "coward" (The Press Project, 9/2/2026).

On a different occasion, a Dutch journalist who had an intense dialogue with the current Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, in a press conference regarding the alleged pushbacks from the Greek state, was later accused of human smuggling of an Afghan refugee. The accusation was based on the fact that she hosted the refugee in her house on a Greek island. In 2025, she was finally acquitted by the Greek courts after years of battle (NL Times, 14/11/2025).

Considering the examples above, they illustrate a broader restrictive environment in which criticism of migration policies by members of civil society is highly discouraged. This contributes to a more general sentiment of delegitimisation of critiques towards state authorities.

4.1.3. Anti-civil society legislations and hostile environment for civil society

The delegitimisation of civil society discussed in the previous section has been accompanied by the introduction of legal restrictions on NGOs. Participants report that their freedom to act according to their mandate without restrictions is getting harder in Europe. Approaching the authorities and having a constructive discussion is becoming more difficult:

“So I think that says something. And when at national level cooperation with authorities becomes so difficult, when there are no open doors to speak, for example, with a ministry or with a local authority. I’m not saying it does not happen at all, on the contrary, we in some countries have good cooperation. But over the years this has changed.” (NGO7, 22/6/2026)

“There is a more restrictive environment. For example, we have certainly less access to decision makers, that are avoiding having a dialogue with civil society as much as possible. Especially those obviously from, uh, you know, centre far right. But, you know, even the centre right in the past, it was much more approachable and now it's not anymore.” (NGO6, 19/6/2026)

“That is, the space that we as civil society have in order to act and carry out our work, which is very specific, is shrinking, closing. This means first of all that in many places our access is no longer so easy. Our access, our physical presence. At the same time there is also, of course there is also, we provide psychological, social support, we provide legal assistance. So, we have seen over the years this space closing in states. Where we used to have access, this access has somehow stopped being granted to us or is granted under very difficult conditions. That is, you constantly have to fill in forms to enter.” (NGO7, 22/6/2026)

The findings above suggest that delegitimation of civil society is not being done through prohibition of their activities, but rather through decreasing the opportunities they have to discuss with state authorities. Access to policymaking is gradually decreasing as the authorities appear less willing to engage in dialogue with civil society actors. This indicated a change in their cooperation with state authorities, which is currently characterised as distant.

Turning to the Greek context, legal restrictions that further constrain organisations were firstly introduced in 2021 with the legislation 4825/2021. According to this law, NGOs operating under the responsibility of the Greek Coast Guard could continue their operation only if they

followed the instructions of the GCG. The following quote highlights how this law affected independent search and rescue actors, by reducing their presence in the Greek borders. The participant further links the decline in the presence of such actors with the increased allegations against the Greek state and FRONTEX for illegal pushbacks. According to this correlation, limited presence of independent actors at the borders may also reduce their capacity to identify illegal practices and report them:

“This led all rescue organisations to leave the Greek islands. In our view, this was an attempt to reduce the presence of independent actors at the maritime borders with Turkey. (.) This comes alongside an increasing number of allegations of pushbacks at the Greek-Turkish borders, both maritime and land.” (NGO8, 24/6/2026)

In February 2026, the new legislation 5275/2026 was introduced in order to combat irregular migration. This law identifies members of NGOs, registered in the national Registry, as an aggravating factor to be considered human traffickers and smugglers.² This legislation is crucial to understand how humanitarian space is being shrunk, as it directly links NGO members to criminal liability.

The legislation fosters a hostile environment for NGOs by implicitly associating NGO membership with profit-making and deceptive activity. Moreover, it imposes collective punishment: if a single member is accused of an offence, the entire organisation is automatically removed from the Registry, irrespective of the outcome of the legal proceedings. Given that registration is essential for securing funding and operating a bank account, such removal can effectively jeopardise an organisation's ability to function and survive (The Press Project, 29/1/2026).

This legislation was considered harmful for civil society by many of my participants: *“And the last one is really something that risks even more criminalising humanitarian action*

² According to legislation 5275/2026, article 15, paragraph 4:

“Anyone who facilitates the entry into or exit from Greek territory of a third-country national, without undergoing the control provided for in article 5, shall be punished by imprisonment and a fine of at least twenty thousand (20,000) euros. If the above person acted for profit or by profession or is a member of a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) registered in the Register of Greek and Foreign NGOs of article 78 of the Code of Legislation for the reception, international protection of third-country nationals and stateless persons and temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced foreigners (Law 4939/2022, A’ 111), or the crime is committed by two (2) or more persons jointly, a prison sentence of at least ten (10) years and a fine of at least fifty thousand (50,000) euros shall be imposed.”

because it introduced aggravated, I think you could say that felony, uh, sentences. Really high fines as well for NGO members in cases that can be linked to facilitation of entry, uh, or stay. For example, if one member of the NGO is found to have inside bracket facilitated the stay or the entry, uh, the NGO will be deregistered from the ministry NGO registry. (.) Um, so it means they have no, they cannot deliver any more service. They have no access to any reception centre, etc.” (NGO6, 19/6/2026)

This legislation did not introduce a new felony. The restriction for NGOs is only an addition to an already existing law. However, the problem with this legislation is that the Greek state has a history in *“misusing of criminal law in cases involving civil society.”* (NGO8, 24/6/2026). This indicates a broader feeling of institutional distrust towards governmental authorities.

Participants also stressed the implications criminalisation attempts for the individual, due to the introduction of pre-trial restrictions. Considering that these court procedures usually last years until completion and the costs they incur lead to consequences for the individual's personal life which may be detrimental, even if they are declared innocent:

“However, once such a prosecution is brought against you, it drags on for years. It creates very serious problems in your personal life. You may not have access to your bank accounts, or you may not be able to leave the country. You might even go to prison, or be held in pre-trial detention” (Ibid)

Attempts of criminalisation of solidarity in Greece, as the most explicit manifestation of legal restrictions, can be traced back already in 2018, members of the Emergency Response Centre International (ERCI) were charged of enabling irregular migration, human smuggling, espionage, money laundering and membership of a criminal organisation. This case gained popularity, as among the members was Sara Mardini, a Syrian refugee who reached the shores of Greece and who along with her sister guided a damaged refugee boat to safety in Lesbos. She spent more than 100 days in prison and was finally released on bail. (Duarte, 2020). In 2026, Mardini and 23 other volunteers who were accused by the Greek state as human traffickers were cleared by the Greek court (Rowlands and News Agencies 16/1/2026. Nektaria Psaraki, 16/1/2026).

This regards one of the largest cases of criminalisation of solidarity in Europe. After 8 years 24 volunteers were acquitted of the accusations, something that is being described as “victory

for humanity” (Iasonas Apostolopoulos, Instagram post, 18/1/2026). It is worth noting that in 2018 this was not a widespread phenomenon, rather than individual cases. Since 2020, criminalisation efforts are becoming more and more institutionalised.

While discussing how things have changed for civil society in Greece over the past decade, the tone of the participants pointed out the importance of the general norm.

“The difference is that at that time this was not something generalised; it was not part of the mainstream public discourse. Generally, there was a perception that civil society organisations were something that had come here to help. That we couldn’t really manage without them. (.) There was also all that atmosphere of 2015, for example in Lesbos—the “grandmothers of Lesbos,” all that. (.) This gradually shifted as public discourse, policies, and legislation moved in a more restrictive direction regarding refugees themselves. This obviously also limited the space for civil society organisations.” (NGO8, 24/6/2026)

The findings suggest that restrictions on migration pushed for restrictions on civil society. Civil society is not independent from political development. The introduction of restrictive policies may also be accompanied with restrictions to organisations that challenge them.

Lastly, restrictive legislations and a hostile environment for civil society have been reported to lead to a chilling effect, as human right experts and NGOs are hesitant to exercise their rights and their work due to fear or punitive measures:

“Not all of our national offices can do this. And I know this, and they have told us. Sometimes even jokingly, if we said what you say, we would have... we would face consequences.” (NGO7, 22/6/2026)

This refrains people from speaking up and challenging anti-migration policies, which may lead to less advocacy and documentation of human rights violations.

The reduced capacity of civil society to operate independently has started to appear in EU member states, while it is considered to be an indicator of the degradation of democratic values and the increase of illiberal ideologies. By creating legal restrictions towards civil society, security actors refrain them from performing their key tasks, while encouraging them to avoid legitimate advocacy for fear of legal consequences, since legal changes are often long-lasting and directly attacks the person’s life standard (Bolleyer, 2021, p. 989).

This rings the bell for an alarming trend in the EU, where civil society by 2030 reports the shrinking of their independency as one of the greater challenges of their operation (Ibid).

4.1.4. Funding as a governmental tool

Funding trends were explicitly discussed across my interviews, which featured one of the most compelling arguments. This thesis claims that funding should be conceptualised as a mechanism of securitised governance by determining organisations' autonomy. Additionally, funding should be understood as interconnected with political development. Recently, light has been shed on the migration governance through funding, providing an alternative approach to the theory and going beyond policy choices, institutional behaviour, law and border controls.

Scholarship has shown that in established democracies, direct attack on organisations is a rare phenomenon. In contrast, governments influence civil society by financial dependence and more direct forms of pressure, such as withdrawal of public funding or financial restrictions (Ibid, p. 941).

According to Tsourdi and Zardo (2025), funding mechanisms have become increasingly important as states attempt to manage migration flows, while avoiding some of the political and legal constraints with direct intervention. Prioritising the allocation of available funding turns resources into a non-regulatory policy instrument. In this paper, funding is considered a governance tool, that influences not only the capacity of NGOs to operate but also the activities they prioritise, the programmes they keep and the degree of organisational independence they possess.

During the past decade Europe redirected towards a security-oriented approach, by allocating funding to securitising practices. According to the representative of NGO7, funding used to be more for programmes regarding long-term and short-term integration and welcoming activities. However, the EU has been recently allocating a big part of their budget to new technologies, equipment, maps, digitalisation of border control, as well as in European institutions such as Europol and Frontex. Reinforcing the idea that migration is primarily a security issue and that borders must be protected.

International organisations connect funding with the political environment. Political developments and donors' priorities determine budget allocation. Migration is a very dynamic field, while aspects of it are interconnected. Funding, as well, cannot be seen separately than

other aspects of migration, such as advocacy for refugees and migrants' rights. Civil society has been experiencing challenges communicating with authorities and institutions, while at the same time they are losing a large part of their funding. Since migration in Europe is no longer considered a crisis, EU's commitment to policies that discourage migration seem part of a broader anti-migration policy. If the environment was more favourable towards migration, funding would be more (NGO6, 19/6/2026).

The promotion of anti-liberal, conservative ideas in Europe and the weaponisation of migrants and refugees as the scapegoats of Europe's crisis of institutions and financial strength limits the available funding for the professionals of solidarity and support of human rights. In contrast, it promotes policies of restrictions of movement and undermines human life. The slogan "Never again" that led to the creation of the Council of Europe after the WWII, along with the need to promote WWII refugees' allocation in the continent, that also contributed to the promotion of human rights, now seems to be forgotten. Instead, funding trends indicate that Europe has passed into a new era of border control, new technologies and agencies that want to keep migrants and refugees away.

Indicative of funding being a crucial mechanism in migration policy and externalisation of migration is the agreement between the European Union and Turkey in February 2016. By externalisation of migration, I refer to the direct involvement of third countries to management of EU borders to protect Europe from irregular migration, such as Turkey and Libya. According to this "Joint Action Plan", the EU provided Turkey with different allowance, among them the provision of six billion euro and visa liberation (Panebianco, 2022)

In the Greek context, funding trends are following Europe's example. All participants agreed that funding opportunities were easier to be found at the beginning of 2015 until 2019-2020, pro-Covid era and in their vast majority, they were coming by international organisations and funds. Many participants reported that they managed to expand their activities and establish their organisations in the field, as government institutions were characterised by governance gaps, that NGOs came to fill. Funding trends shifted during COVID and after, when political developments in Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan became urgent and needs were greater. Funding was institutionalised leading to many of the Greek NGOs to be state dependent in regard to resources:

“The years of urgency were roughly from 2015 - 2016 until around 2019. Those were the years when funding levels were at their highest. There were enormous needs. After that point, however, we began to see a gradual reduction in resources. At the same time, we saw a major shift in the nature of funding. Previously, funding came primarily from international organisations - from UNHCR, for example, and even directly from the European Union. Then, gradually, state funding increased to around 60–70% of X’s overall resources, while the remaining 30% came from elsewhere.” (NGO1, 30/4/2026)

This shift in trends marked the beginning of funding instability for civil society. It is important to note, that funding trends did not affect all organisations equally, despite the fact that they all reported a decrease in their funding opportunities. The NGOs that supported the vast majority of their funding in the Ministry of Migration and Asylum experienced systematic delays in payments, cash flow difficulties, downsizing and sudden cut of their programmes.

The representative of the first NGO reported difficulties sustaining their employees:

“There have been occasions where liquidity problems led to interruptions in operations, particularly in relation to interpretation services, which are covered by large framework agreements lasting several years.”

This quote highlights the consequences liquidity problems and payments delays have on the operation of the organisation. Delays in compensation disrupts services for their beneficiaries and puts pressure on organisational resources.

They continued by reporting the risks of shifting funding trends between international donors and state funding. The organisation supported the gradual institutionalisation of guardianship services. However, this transition was not smooth, since this shift created gaps and brought uncertainty.

“We wanted the Ministry to take over responsibility for guardianship, but to do so in a structured and organised manner. Suddenly, however, our guardianship activities were stopped. At the time we were funded by international organisations - I cannot remember exactly which ones - and as soon as it was announced that the Ministry would take over, the funding stopped.”

In order to survive this reduction on funding they had to downsize their activities:

“We used to operate from different premises, but because of this crisis we moved into much cheaper offices. At one point we had around 120 members of staff in the office. Now we are closer to fifty or sixty. It was a very serious crisis.”

Similar problems faced the NGO5, which is now trying to diversify their funding sources through company donations and fundraising:

“Corporate Social Responsibility was not traditionally part of our fundraising strategy. It has become much more important now because European funding is stagnating and foundations often provide only small grants tied to very specific projects.”

However, companies and foundations often allocate funding according to their priorities, therefore organisations need to adapt. That means that if a foundation focuses on mental health, they will have to create a new programme to claim funding. Even though this might seem like an expansion of their activities, it should be taken into consideration that new programmes require knowledge and resources. The staff should be trained accordingly, and new staff might be needed. (NGO5, 26/5/2026)

They also experienced severe financial problems this year, when the funding from the Ministry of Migration and Asylum was reduced significantly, reporting that they had to let go of their staff. However, since the Ministry delayed their payments, they couldn't even compensate for their personnel. Funding dependency indirectly constrains organisational autonomy.

In contrast organisations with diversified funding or extensive fan base and international reputation. Therefore, they have the liberty to set criteria regarding their funding sources, maintain advocacy, and challenge state narratives and policies. NGO3 has a series of funding criteria a donor should comply with in order to accept funding. Additionally, they have chosen to not accept any institutional funding as a symbolic protest against their anti-migration policies:

“It was certainly not an easy decision. But it was also a statement on the part of Doctors Without Borders. Our position was that if you choose to hold people hostage, and if you choose to cooperate with countries where independent bodies, the United Nations, reports, and investigations all demonstrate that human rights are not being respected, then for us this becomes a clear statement that your policies ultimately kill people - or contribute to their

deaths. And therefore, we will not participate in that. So, yes, to this day we do not receive European funding, and we do not receive government funding.”

NGO4 reported dependence on private funding, which enables them to have larger independence on the allocation of funding. However, they also reported dependence on volunteer work, which created different problems for their operation (see section 4.1.1).

Lang and Badenhop (2025), examine how funding shapes the ability of civil society actors to influence local migration policymaking. In accordance with this thesis, funding is considered to be a political structure that determines which organisations gain access to policymaking and which have the capacity to advocate. Funding can empower them by giving them recognition or depoliticise them by making them dependent on state resources and trapped in competitive, short-term projects. Public funding affects access to policymaking and capacity for advocacy.

Indeed, my interviews with international and advocacy organisations revealed the hesitation of some organisations to involve in public discourse:

“So, what it impacts the way funding is done and particularly channels through the Greek government is the capacity of certain organisations that are being quite a lot funded through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the national AMIF to sign a joint statement or to be very vocal about this. So, between us, what they will do is like they will provide us with information, for example, through the child right advocacy network. They will provide the information, but they will not sign the joint statement, the joint letter, the press release, whatever you want.” (NGO6, 19/6/2025)

As the representative of NGO6 suggests that the organisations contribute to advocacy by providing information but refrain to publicly sign joint statements or press releases. This quote illustrates that these organisations limit their criticism to the government policy in order to not to interfere with the smooth allocation of the state funds.

“There are organisations that are contractors of the Ministry - meaning they implement programs directly funded by the Ministry. And we know unofficially that many of these organisations have not wanted to sign statements or speak out because they are waiting for the next funding instalment. Which is completely understandable and normal; I’m not criticising it, just explaining why it happens.” (NGO8, 24/6/2026)

NGO8 similarly describes dependence on state funding prevents organisations from publicly challenging governmental policies, since they remain tied to future payments. The participant normalises this decision rather than framing it as a lack of commitment to advocacy. Consequently, the findings suggest that dependency on state or European funded initiatives equals with less organisational independence and publicly challenge anti-migration policies. This contributes to the shrinking of humanitarian space, as the humanitarian space is losing agency and refrains organisations from influence policies. Occasionally, this funding scarcity may create conflicts among organisations, however, their communication remains stable and solidaristic.

In conclusion, funding structures influence NGO autonomy by shaping which activities are sustainable and which priorities receive attention. Dependency on public resources contributes to the development of more bureaucratic structures and increases competition among NGOs (Čada, Numerato, Hoření, 2022, p. 911). The empirical data suggest that funding shape the degree of the organisations' autonomy and shapes the capacity of humanitarian action. Therefore, funding emerges as a central mechanism of security-oriented governance.

4.2. Civil society navigating through security

This section examines how civil society organisations have responded and adapted to an increasingly securitised environment. The first subsection analyses the differences in organisational structure, and how they have influenced their responses. The second subsection analyses the strategies and mechanisms these organisations have adopted to continue their operation.

4.2.1. Organisation structure determines capacity to challenge securitisation

After examining how securitisation has affected civil society in Greece, it is important to mention that the outcomes of it are not unanimous or inevitable, but organisational characteristics shape the capacity of organisations to challenge securitisation. To a great extent, the response of NGOs to the imposed restriction depends on two factors, the characteristics of the individual organisations and their connection, and the type of collaboration with state authorities (Bolleyer, 2021, p. 941). In the context of a highly restricted environment, participants reported that members of civil society appear hesitant to directly and publicly challenge and advocate against strict anti-migration policies. At this point I have to note that

there are organisations that advocacy is not part of their mandate. Therefore, in this part, research is focused on organisations that according to their mandate are engaged in advocacy.

Securitisation may not silence civil society directly; however, it creates unequal capacity to act independently. International organisation's involved in advocacy appeared freer to criticise migration policies, while also pointing out that their Greek colleagues may be insecure and timid to proceed in any criticism:

“And, like, even my counterpart in Greece now was heard in the parliament, um, because of the secondary legislation of the Pact. And so, they were bringing, so, it was him and, like, different other organisations and bringing the thing. And it's, like he told me: ‘I feel exposed’. And (this organisation) is one of the most vocal, is one of, you know, like, they're not scared. And they kind of, I mean, they're known for that, they have been threatened many times, but, yeah, you know, he feels exposed because this is always them and a few other organisations.”
(NGO6, 19/6/2025)

This quote reveals a systemic effort to undermine NGOs' legitimacy and freedom of expression, by creating an unsafe environment that acts as an obstacle for organisations to do their jobs. Civil society in Greece has found itself in the dilemma of them trying to do their job and on the other hand feeling insecure and fighting to keep their organisation running (NGO6, 19/6/2025).

This constant undermining and attack on NGOs create a feeling of chilling effect, when professionals of human rights are scared to act independently and according to their ethics.

“How is our work affected? I think I already told you how it affects the work. You know, somehow, we cannot do our work. (.) At the same time there is also a very strong phenomenon of what I don't know if there is a term in Greek, but in English we say chilling effect. That is, by having this narrative, you know, the ‘bad NGOs’ that do all this, and all this climate of criminalisation of humanitarian aid (..) criminalisation. Not only of humanitarian aid, but also of the people themselves, as I said before, for example migrants, refugees, etc.

A climate is created around civil society which again is not at all helpful for us to do our work. You know, we constantly have to explain or be in a defensive position regarding what we do,

why we do it, who we are to do it. While at the same time there is a very specific role that the rule of law gives and provides, and let's say transparency to civil society, NGOs, international organisations, etc.” (NGO7, 22/6/2026).

Restricting freedom of expression and advocacy through legal measures is not common in democratic states. However, securitisation creates an environment of insecurity for the individuals and constrain them from publicly criticising anti-migration policies due to anticipated legal and financial restrictions.

Funding and relationship with the state play a crucial role in this situation. According to my findings, private funded organisations report greater independence on their activities and the capacity to impose stricter criteria for their collaborations. In contrast, institutionally funded organisations prioritise organisational survival and service provision over direct political debate with authorities. This derives from the fear of sudden restrictions on institutional funding or any direct attacks on their work, for instance bureaucratic restrictions and limited access in camps. In general, the trend is that organisations dependent on state funding are less autonomous.

NGO5 reported that they had to let a big part of their stuff go, since the Ministry cut their programme, leading them to an organisational trouble:

“Consequently, we proceeded with the dismissal of thirty members of staff from the team that, since 2016, had built this entire mechanism and subsequently transferred it to the Ministry. The discussion has now shifted back to the Ministry, which is asking whether we would like to continue the programme from July onwards for two months, and then see what happens afterwards.” (NGO5, 26/5/2026)

In order to study their public stance, I proceeded in an examination of their press releases. NGO3 has proceeded in press releases and taken public stance against governmental and European policies. They have repeatedly criticised the 2016 agreement between Greece and Turkey and expressed their concerns about the detrimental humanitarian consequences in the Greek islands. They are standing against the shift of the EU migration policy, highlighting that it focuses on the prevention of migration instead of protecting people in distress. In the climax

of their critique, they decided not to receive any funding from national or European resources as a protest against the anti-migration policy:

“It was certainly not an easy decision. But it was also a statement. Our position was that if you choose to hold people hostage, and if you choose to cooperate with countries where independent bodies, the United Nations, reports, and investigations all demonstrate that human rights are not being respected, then for us this becomes a clear statement that your policies ultimately kill people - or contribute to their deaths. And therefore, we will not participate in that. So, yes, to this day we do not receive European funding, and we do not receive government funding. (..)

It was also a declaration that we would remain outside these facilities (refugee camps). We would not participate in the system that was being created because we fundamentally oppose both the policy itself and the underlying logic behind it.” (NGO3, 6/5/2026)

Greek state funded organisations used a more cautious language when discussing state policies, even though they have criticised anti-migration policies of the Greek state and occasionally have signed joint sentiments. International organisations have also reported that despite the fact that they notice a more cautious approach to advocacy from their Greek colleagues, they still provide them with all the necessary information to contest public policies. Out of the Greek NGOs I interviewed only two were focused on advocacy and were vocal in institutional services too, such as the Greek Parliament or the European Parliament, one of which is dependent on state-funding. Lastly, international organisations seem more confident to challenge migration policies. This derives from their established reputation and international and advocacy networks.

To sum up, findings suggest that restrictive governance produces differentiated consequences to NGOs according to their organisational characteristics. Financial independence, institutional capacity and advocacy are pivotal factors for the organisations’ experience. Therefore, securitisation consequences vary according to the resources available to civil society.

4.2.2. NGOs Constrained but not Passive

Across my interviews, it became evident that civil society does not simply accept political developments but rather finds its agency and responds to securitisation policies. NGOs are

described as active actors who are flexible regarding their organisational operation, their prioritisation of activities and collaborative networks.

This is evident through many ways, but mostly through flexibility in their organisational operation, the ability to set priorities, the existence of collaboration and solidarity among them, creating their strategy plans.

Existing scholarship highlights that civic space typically adopts two types of strategies to combat restrictions, resistance strategies and resilience strategies. By resistance, I refer to strategies that directly challenge or prevent restrictive measures through advocacy, litigation etc. While resilience refers to strategies that help organisations to continue their activities despite restrictions, for instance find alternative funding (Bolleyer, 2021, p. 944). By limiting civil society's space to act does not mean that they accept this passively, rather they find ways to surpass it.

The interview data show that civil society in Greece employs both strategies of direct confrontation and resilience, which follows the pattern analysed in the previous section. Dependent on state funding organisations without emphasis in advocacy follow a more subtle approach, which allows them to survive. On the other hand, independent organisations with international networking and advocacy-focused activities directly challenge anti-migration policies.

According to my interviews, NGO staff reported flexibility in downsizing, adaptation of their activities accordingly. Flexibility emerged as one of the most important characteristics, as instead of civil society remaining rigid, participants reported constant redesigning:

“The most important change, or perhaps the most important characteristic and capability we have developed, is flexibility. The ability to adapt to any circumstances. I have seen that happen continuously throughout these ten years. When the organisation needed to grow, it adapted and expanded in order to respond. When it needed to shrink, it managed to readjust and reduce its operations. I am not saying it was easy, far from it. I know how difficult and painful that process can be. There is also a considerable emotional burden throughout.” (NGO1, 30/4/2026)

The representative of the second organisation highlighted that organisations have developed mechanisms in order to adapt in dynamic shifts by learning how to grow or downsize their activities:

“These are operational issues, although we no longer consider them major challenges. We have learned how to deal with them, and we have developed a model that is more flexible. So, I think flexibility is one of the ways we work. There are also challenges when an organisation grows significantly. That requires very careful planning and organisation. There is also a major challenge in downsizing. In fact, I think that is the more difficult challenge. Growing is one thing; becoming smaller is something entirely different. So that is another area where we continue to learn and adapt. But, of course, it is never easy.”

The quotes above reveal show that organisations have built strong coping mechanisms to developments and have learned how to surpass them.

Furthermore, NGOs are hesitant in cutting programmes and they are trying to keep them running by employing different strategies. This shows that they are dedicated to their work and they will try to proceed in any way they can. For instance, NGO1:

“Another challenge might be something like what happened with the programme for unaccompanied minors. Previously, there was a programme for children, and suddenly that programme was cut. For the last two years there has been no non-formal education for unaccompanied minors, and you find yourself saying: ‘My mandate as X is to respond to needs. I cannot simply do nothing.’ So, you start bringing in volunteers and creating programmes where volunteer teachers take on that role. Then new challenges emerge: how do you ensure that volunteers are reliable and attend classes consistently when they have a responsibility towards the children?”

Lastly, civil society appears to develop emergency responses to political developments. This could take many forms. For instance, the organisations managed to deal with the fire at Moria camp, when they immediately adapted their activities and according to their capacity contributed to the distribution of food. The representative of NGO4 states that when the fire happened:

“At first, we observed what was happening and tried to think about how we could respond. The very first thing that happened was that our volunteers started preparing sandwiches and distributing them to people on the roads. There was a remarkable level of initiative. People kept asking, ‘What can we do?’ There was coordination. Of course, some things were potentially risky, but there was a genuine willingness to help and to find ways of doing so.

Volunteers started making sandwiches and distributing them. Then, because crowds would gather whenever aid was distributed and everyone wanted to receive something, our volunteers began operating during the night. At four o’clock in the morning, volunteers would go out and identify people who did not have blankets and quietly leave them a blanket. If there were babies, they would leave diapers. In this way assistance was provided during the night so that panic and overcrowding could be avoided” (NGO4, 22/5/2026)

Additionally, NGOs throughout the interviews reported great capacity of setting priorities regarding their work. Either this means that they will not accept a project because they do not have the knowledge or that in their activities, they reflect also their values. The representative of the first NGO reported that:

“Certainly (...) in general, you always try to use your mission as a compass - your objectives, the identity you have built, and the way you present yourselves as an organisation. Ultimately, that is what you are working for. So, your first filter is always that you should not stop activities if there is still a need for them. If there is no longer a need, then naturally you move towards ending those activities. Your guiding principle is therefore to fight to maintain activities that remain meaningful. If they no longer serve a purpose, it is better for them to stop. (.) So that is definitely one compass.” (NGO1, 30/4/2026)

Finally, collaboration among civil society is a big part of their survival. The majority of the participants reported that civil society has good relationships. Despite the fact that their collaborations among the NGOs and they do run programmes together, a participants reported that civil society is still fragmented:

“There is clearly communication between organisations. Everyone talks to one another. There are forums where organisations meet, discuss issues, and make certain decisions together. These structures do exist.

In many cases, donors create them. (...) The idea is to coordinate and say, 'You take responsibility for this area, and I will cover that one.' So yes, those mechanisms exist. Personally, however, I believe that civil society in Greece is quite fragmented. There is no central coordination among organisations. There is no association or umbrella body through which NGOs communicate independently of donors." (NGO1, 30/4/2026)

As the representative of NGO1 explains many collaboration mechanisms are often coordinated by donors, rather than deriving from the civil society. In this sense, this type of coordination facilitates operational matters, for instance the allocation of services based on the capacity of each organisation. However, it does not pave the way for the emergence of a strong collective civil society voice.

On the other hand, a different participant was interestingly positive regarding their collaboration with other organisations:

"Not always with everyone. But we collaborate with a great many organisations across different fields. We work together in partnerships, we implement programmes jointly, and we engage in discussions about initiatives we would like to pursue together. So, yes. Of course, not everyone is equally cooperative, and levels of collaboration vary. But cooperation is absolutely essential. Otherwise, there is little point. The sector cannot move forward without partnerships." (NGO2, 5/5/2026)

While the participants of the eight-organisation reported that NGOs are very solidary among them:

"But overall, I would say that organisations in Greece have very good communication with each other (...). This continues until today. Of course, from time to time there are small rivalries over program funding, but overall, I would say cooperation is very good. It is also a very solidarity-based cooperation: whenever something happens to one organisation, the others speak out, sign statements, do advocacy." (NGO8, 24/6/2026)

Scarcity of funding opportunities were identified as a reason of conflict among them. However, most of the participants felt that the term "competition" is very strong to describe their relationship:

"I would, so maybe that's it. I wouldn't say that there is competition. I would say that it's

crowded. That's it. So, we're not competing against each other. We're simply all applying for the same funds. And so, it's more difficult to get them. And we're all proposing, uh, a lot to very few donors because there is a little. But I wouldn't say that it's even perceived as a competition, you know, among us. It's just that we're all aware that we're struggling and we try to do our best and we hope we get it.” (NGO6, 19/6/2026)

In addition to that, the representative of NGO7 reported that: *“I will tell you. The competition spreads. I meant competition in a practical sense. That is, for a call for proposals, for example at European level, instead of there being 100 applications, there might now be 500 applications. (..) Also, 500 applications for 500 different and in some cases similar projects. (.) So, competition increases. That is, 100 people or 100... And, ok, in the past we would have had 100 applications for projects, while we know that... I'm speaking in very small numbers, while we know that funds will fund 10 projects, 20 projects. So that is how I meant competition. Practically.*

At the same time, I believe that, willingly or unwillingly, this can also lead to a reduction in openness, let's say, and cooperation. However, I cannot say that I have seen this in a tangible way. On the contrary, there is still... somehow there is a consolidation (.) but, you know, there is always a theoretical, ideal level. And there is always also the practical one. What I told you before.”

The existence of a solidarity network is important for the survival of civil society in Greece as it provides support and acts as an obstacle to the chilling effect. Networks of collaboration allow organisations to exchange information and coordinate advocacy, rather than getting fragmented due to funding scarcity.

Conclusion

Migration policies in Greece have undergone a transformation in recent years towards a more securitised approach in governance. This current research has identified and provided a comprehensive analysis of the consequences of a security-oriented approach to migration in civil society in Greece and the coping mechanisms it has adopted since 2015, while addressing the research question: “How have securitisation policies influenced the operational environment of humanitarian

actors in the Aegean Sea and what strategies have they developed in response to the increasingly restrictive maritime migration policies implemented by the EU and the Greek state from 2015 to the present?”.

NGOs were selected for this research because they constitute the most institutionalised and legally recognised component of civil society. While civil society extends beyond NGOs, examining these organisations provides valuable insight into how formal humanitarian actors experience and respond to securitised migration governance. By analysing this relationship between state authorities and civil society in one of Europe’s most important maritime borders, this thesis provides a comprehensive framework of how humanitarian space is threatened. However, this paper views NGOs as responsive mechanisms, with agency trying to cope with an increasingly restrictive environment which undermines human rights and solidarity.

In this endeavour, I chose to proceed with an inductive thematic analysis, as I believe that this approach in methodology would allow me to extract patterns and themes based on the participants’ testimonies (S.K. Ahmed et al. 2025, p. 5). In order to draw conclusions about their experiences I wished to give emphasis to their voice and raise visibility on what they have been meaning to show to the academic community (Lim, 2025, p. 202). My goal was not to provide a description of their experience but rather allow the academic community to delve deeper into their experiences and promote them as primary actor of migration.

According to the analysis on the nine interviews I conducted, three arguments emerged. Firstly, securitisation policies affect civil society in ways beyond criminalisation and direct anti-civil society measures. In contrast, it acts through everyday practices, such as bureaucracy, public discourse, funding and shrinking of humanitarian space. Furthermore, organisations do not experience restrictive practices the same way. The level that securitisation affects them depends on their financial status and networks. Lastly, NGOs do not passively accept restrictions against them. On the contrary, they have employed flexible mechanisms which allow them to adapt to this new environment.

Most importantly, what was interesting about securitisation of migration is its dynamics. It refers a multifaced field that controls migration actors in a variety of ways. It should not only be conceptualised as the introduction of exceptional measures, such as criminalisation of

solidarity, but also through routine administrative and financial practices that reshape NGOs' organisational space.

Funding was featured as a one of the most influential practices for civil society. Scholarship has highlighted how funding impacts the capacity of civil society to react, respond and challenge governmental policies and has highlighted that dependence on state or institutionalised funding sources, severely impacts the capacity for advocacy (see further: Tsourdi, Zardo, 2025. Bolleyer, 2021. Lang and Badenhoop, 2025). However, the interviews I conducted, extend this theory, by claiming that funding is directly connected to political developments. Lastly, securitisation policies contribute to the shrinking of humanitarian space and the decrease of organisations' presence in the field.

In addition to that, securitisation does not affect all NGOs to the same degree. In contrast, NGOs are dynamic places which cannot be easily categorised in the same typology, they are not homogenous. Therefore, they cannot all experience the consequences of restrictive policies in the same way. Despite the fact that evidently, they were all influenced and affected, the degree in which they were affected differs based on administrative status, public support, international networks.

Finally, this thesis delves into the response practices NGOs related to migration have adopted. Organisations have learned to adapt constantly to new developments, by altering their activities, adapting to demographic changes of beneficiaries and promoting strategy planning as an important tool. Throughout the past decade they have been through a process of expanding their capacities and later having to minimise them, they appear devoted to their mandates. Moreover, humanitarian space in Greece is still characterised by a strong feeling of solidarity and community. Repeatedly in my interviews the perseverance of human right defenders in supporting their organisations and staying devoted to their ideals was highlighted. At the beginning of the research, I expected that this constant attack on organisations and the lack of funding opportunities would affect their collaboration network much more. However, to my surprise organisations in Greece seem to demonstrate solidarity and support each other.

This research as discussed in the methodology chapter faced limitations. The focus on the experiences of NGOs is indicative of the experience of civil society; however, they are not definite. Future research should be focused on how securitisation impacts community-based

organisations by institutionalising them. Potentially the introduction of registration status and interference of state actors to their operation could lead to the “NGO-isation”³ of these organisations, minimising that way individuals’ capacity to form and affect politics. Additionally, while using thematic analysis the researcher has to be careful of their own biases and always reflect on the findings.

Moreover, further research needs to be done regarding securitisation on individual or community-based organisations and on creating a comprehensive guide of coping mechanisms for NGOs. Lastly, according to my research, foundations tend to prioritise grassroots organisations for funding opportunities. I suggest that further research should examine the consequences of securitisation for smaller organisations.

In conclusion, this research has provided a comprehensive explanation of how restrictive policies towards migration and freedom of movement and anti-civil society policies affect professionals of human rights. In order to fully understand the implications of securitisation it requires extensive research not only on the governance of migration but also on the governance of the organisation, that supports them. By examining the everyday experiences of civil society in a restrictive environment, it is revealed how humanitarian space is progressively reshaped through routine administrative, financial and political practices. Civil society, however, demonstrates resilience and agency while navigating through it.

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³ NGO-isation refers to the process according to which civil society organisations become highly professionalised, due to the high level of bureaucracy, when working with state funding (see further: Bolleyer, 2021).

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Appendix I. Interview guide A

Introductory Questions

- Could you describe your role within your organisation and your main responsibilities?
- Could you briefly describe your organisation's mission and activities?
 - What were your priorities at the beginning?
 - What gaps were you trying to fill?

Operational Challenges

- How has the organisation's strategy evolved since its founding?
 - Have your operational priorities changed?
 - Have you expanded or reduced certain activities?
- What were the main challenges the organisation faced in its early years?

Policy Evolution

- How have EU and Greek migration policies affected your organisation's work overtime?
- Have you experienced or observed forms of criminalisation or restriction of NGO activities?
- How have these pressures influenced your organisational strategy?

Funding

- Could you describe your main sources of funding?
- Have your fundraising strategies changed since the organisation was founded?
- Do you receive support from national or EU programmes?
 - Why or why not?
- Have funding opportunities changed after the peak of the 'migration crisis'?

Media Representation and political narratives

- The "migration crisis" is no longer framed as a crisis in public discourse. Do you think this has influenced funding opportunities and public support?
- How would you describe your relationships with the authorities

- How would you describe your relationships with other NGOs?

Reflection

- Looking back, what has been the most significant change in how your organisation operates?

Appendix II: Interview Guide B

Introductory Questions

- Could you describe your role within your organisation and your main responsibilities?
- Could you briefly describe your organisation's mission and activities?
- How does advocacy fit within your organisation's broader humanitarian work?

Migration Governance and Policy Environment

- How would you describe the evolution of migration governance in Greece since 2015?
- What changes have had the biggest impact on refugees and migrants?
 - How did it affect your work?
- How do you think EU migration policies influence the situation in Greece?

Humanitarian Space and Civil Society

- How would you describe the operating environment for NGOs in Greece today?
- Do you think humanitarian space has changed since 2015?
 - Have you observed restrictions on NGO activities over time?
- What are the main challenges NGOs face today compared to previous years?

Advocacy and Public Discourse

- How has public discourse on migration changed since 2015?
- Have you observed changes in the way refugees and migrants are presented in media discourse?
- Have narratives around NGOs also changed?
- Has advocacy become more difficult over time?
- Have there been moments when your organisation felt pressure not to publicly criticise policies?

Integration and Securitisation

- Your organisation focuses on integration. How do restrictive migration policies affect your services?
- How would you describe your relationship with governmental authorities?

Funding and Sustainability

- What are your organisations main sources of funding?
- Have funding opportunities changed since 2015?
- Have donor priorities shifted over time?

Reflection

- In your opinion, what is often misunderstood about the work of NGOs supporting refugees and migrants?

Appendix III: Interview Guide C

Introductory Questions

- Could you briefly describe your expertise and your main responsibilities?

Political and Institutional Context

- How would you describe the evolution of European migration governance from 2015 to the present?
- Have you observed any changes in the balance between migration management, border security, and the protection of fundamental rights?
- In your view, what role has securitisation played in shaping European migration policies?
- What recurring patterns have you observed in Greece's migration governance?
- Are there specific legal issues that consistently arise in the cases your organisation handles?

Civil Society

- Have you observed increasing restrictions on organisations working in the fields of migration and refugee rights?
 - How have these pressures affected the ability of civil society organisations to advocate for and protect the rights of migrants and refugees?

Criminalisation and Public Narratives

- Have you observed attempts to criminalise acts of solidarity or humanitarian assistance?
- How do political and media narratives influence the treatment of organisations working in the field of migration?
- How do you think NGOs working on migration and refugee rights are portrayed in public discourse today?

Reflection

- Looking back over the past decade, what do you consider to be the most significant change in European migration governance?

Appendix IV. List of Interviews

<i>Table 3. List of Interviewees</i>	
Interviews	Date
NGO1	30/4/2026
NGO2	5/5/2026
NGO3	6/5/2026
NGO4	22/5/2026
NGO5	26/5/2026
Law Expert	9/6/2026
NGO6	19/6/2026
NGO7	22/6/2026
NGO8	24/6/2026

Appendix V. Codebook

Table 4. Codebook					
Theme	Code	Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Example Quote
NGO Responses	Strategic Flexibility	References to organisational changes, practices or decisions adopted in response to external challenges, migration policy changes or operational constraints.	Changes in organisational structure, services, priorities, staffing or operations in response to external pressures.	General discussions of funding difficulties without reference to organisational response. Statements that describe only challenges they face.	"The most important change, or perhaps the most important characteristic and capability we have developed, is flexibility."
	Collaboration with State	References to fluctuating relationship between civil society and the state regarding implementation of common programmes and funding. Any discussions regarding cooperative, dependent or conflictual	References to interactions, cooperation, tensions, negotiations, dependence, or contradictory relations between NGOs and state actors.	References solely about funding delays, donor requirements, or legislation unless state–NGO interaction is explicitly discussed.	"More often, difficulties arise with the Ministry's services. On the hand, there is this rhetoric about 'bad NGOs.' On the other hand, whenever there is a problem, they use us as the easy solution. For example, 'We

		relationship between NGOs and state authorities.			need some items transported.' Fine. 'Cover the cost'."
	Expansion of services	References to growing, adding services and activities. Expansion of humanitarian space during the 2015 refugee influx.	References to expansion, creation, diversification or scaling-up of organisational services in response to emerging needs and governmental inefficiencies.	References to routine service delivery without organisational growth or expansion.	"We already existed before, but during 2015 - 2016 we grew substantially because there was such an enormous need for action, and we possessed the experience and expertise required to respond."
	Operational consequences of securitisation	References showing the practical consequences of securitisation in NGO operation, references of insecurity/	References to the consequences of external policies, public narratives, securitisation measures, reputational	Descriptions of organisational responses (Adapt_Str), funding challenges (Funding and Sustainability), or state	"As a result, people leave. You then face reputational risks because your reputation begins to suffer." "

		uncertainty in operations. Additionally, references highlighting the existence or lack of solidarity network among civil society.	risks, or restrictions on NGO operations, legitimacy, staffing, or effectiveness.	relations (Collab with State).	
	Setting priorities	Participants mentioning their organisation priority criteria during the strategy building plan based on needs and humanitarian values.	References to organisational values, strategic goals, mandates, criteria for action, or decisions about where resources should be allocated.	References to operational adaptations, service changes, or funding constraints unless participants explicitly discuss organisational priorities guiding those decisions.	"A second consideration was maintaining a degree of independence"
Effects and Practices of securitisation	Bureaucratic challenges	Any reference to administrative, procedural or regulatory obstacles that delay organisational	References to registration requirements and procedures, volunteer registration requirements,	Any references to restrictive legislations, police interventions, funding shortages,	"So, the involvement of the state, and direct dependence on state funding, creates very significant

		operations, staffing, volunteering, programme implementation and funding imposed by public authorities that constrain, delay, or complicate NGO operations. References on the root of the problem, why the problem exists.	administrative requirements attached to public funding, delays resulting from governmental procedures.	internal organisational difficulties.	difficulties. Even within the state itself, delays occur constantly. It is not necessarily because there is a problem with a report or a project. A document has to move from one ministry to another, each ministry has different internal procedures, and the entire process becomes incredibly slow. This greatly complicates the functioning of the organisation. If you want to retain good staff, people naturally expect to be paid on time"
	Human Right Concerns	Participants discussing	Any references to	References to general	"We could not accept this. It

		alleged or documented human rights violations on the Greek sea by national or European authorities.	events of human rights violations, camp conditions, pushbacks, restrictions on asylum access.	critique of migration governance, media representation, bureaucratic obstacles.	went against our core principles, such as humanitarianism. And medically, we also saw people being left exposed. Take mental health, for example, and what it means for someone who has endured an entire migration journey, finally arrives after enormous hardship, and then ends up locked inside a facility as if imprisoned. And now, because of the policies that have been adopted, the approach is either detention or return."
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	Media and Public Opinion	Participants commenting on representation of civil society in media and political rhetoric and public discourse.	Any references to reputational risks, targeting of civil society in media, stigmatisation of NGOs, relationships with public, narratives of 'good' and 'bad' NGOs, references on the depiction of 'migration crisis'.	References to formal policies, administrative restrictions, direct operational consequences, human rights violations.	" The Minister responded by saying that these organisations were 'enemies of the state' and were acting against national policies. "
	Securitisation practice	Participants discussing restrictive migration policies that frame migration as a security issue and suppressive practices by the authorities against civil society.	References to restrictive legislations, new laws, police suppression, suspension of asylum provisions, criminalisation of solidarity, border control measures, funding related to new	References to media and public discourse, funding as a means of securitisation, bureaucracy, public discourse and media narratives.	"Then there is the law that was passed this February, which ultimately includes the provision that simply being a member of an NGO registered in the official Registry can be treated as an aggravating factor if you are accused of

			equipment, new technologies etc.		facilitating smuggling or the movement of migrants."
	Shrinking of humanitarian space	References to the reduction of civil society's ability to operate freely, help, advocate for rights, or participate in public life because of political, legal, administrative, or social pressures.	References to the consequences securitisation practices according to Human. Sec. and Paris School, intimidation, obstacles to advocacy, reduced autonomy and independence, chilling effect.	References to restrictive policies and media and public discourse without also showing how this affects their operational space, human rights violations.	"It appears that certain people are deliberately targeted, and when cases finally reach court years later, they are acquitted. To me, that suggests a strategy of intimidation: frighten people as much as possible, regardless of whether they are eventually cleared, so that for years they remain afraid to help."
	Funding Trends	References to changes in funding availability, donor behaviour, or resource flows	References to donor priorities and behaviour, increase or decrease of available	References to organisational decisions, consequences of funding challenges.	"The years of urgency were roughly from 2015 - 2016 until around 2019. Those were the years

		affecting the organisation over time.	funding, shifts between international, European and national funding.		when funding levels were at their highest. There were enormous needs. After that point, however, we began to see a gradual reduction in resources. At the same time, we saw a major shift in funding. Previously, funding came primarily from international organisations- from UNHCR, for example, and even directly from the European Union. Then, gradually, state funding increased to around 60–70% of X's overall resources, while the remaining 30% came from elsewhere."
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	Funding Priorities	References to the criteria, strategic or organisational considerations guiding fundraising decisions and the allocation of financial resources.	Reference to how priorities are determined, decisions on recourse allocation, organisational considerations .	References to changes in donor behaviour, administrative or bureaucratic challenges, descriptions of funding shortages.	"Speaking about the organisation in general first, and then specifically about the refugee field, we receive funding from different sources, although fundraising is not really our primary area of work."
	Operational consequences of securitisation	References to the organisational consequences of funding changes, including effects on staffing, service provision, programme continuity, organisational capacity, or sustainability.	Participants discussing downsizing, staff reductions, programme cuts, cash-flow difficulties, sustainability.	Any references to funding opportunities, relations to state actors.	"Previously there was a programme for children, and suddenly that programme was cut. For the last two years there has been no non-formal education for unaccompanied minors, and you find yourself saying: "My mandate as X is to respond to needs. I cannot

					simply do nothing.” So, you start bringing in volunteers and creating programmes where volunteer teachers take on that role. Then new challenges emerge: how do you ensure that volunteers are reliable and attend classes consistently when they have a responsibility towards the children?”
	Private Donors	References to private donors, corporate partnerships, or independently sourced funding .	Participants discussing of advantages and disadvantages of private donors, organisational independence, reputational risks.	Any reference on state/ European funding opportunity or international donors.	"For example, if at some point we wanted to build a broader public support base— something similar to what other organisations have, such as Médecins Sans Frontières or

					other field based humanitarian organisations—then those perceptions become relevant. More broadly, it also affects the level of public support for the work that organisations like ours carry out."
	State Funding	References to funding provided by national authorities, ministries, governmental agencies, or publicly funded programmes.	References to state-funded projects, delays in payments, dependence on governmental funding, changes, administrative requirements.	References to EU funding, international donors, private donors.	"That said, another difficulty associated with state funding is delays in payments. I think that is a very significant and very specific issue. Everyone experiences it. There is a huge amount of paperwork and administrative procedure involved before

					payments are processed and before projects can move forward."
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