States and Migration: The Human Movement Podcast
Episode 27 "When 900,000 Refugees Arrived: Georgios Kaminis on Leading Athens Through the 2015 Crisis"

Enhanced Transcript

By Emmanuel Comte – with the assistance of Andriana Lagoudes

Abstract: What happens when nearly a million refugees arrive in a city in just eight months? In this episode, Emmanuel Comte speaks with Georgios Kaminis, Athens' mayor during the peak of the 2015 refugee crisis, as he recounts the pressure on housing, public services, and social cohesion. Kaminis shares how he managed an urban humanitarian emergency, from launching Greece's first refugee camp to coordinating with over 70 NGOs. This episode offers unique insight into European asylum and migration policy, urban migration governance, and what it takes to lead a city in crisis.

Disclaimer: *This transcript has been produced for educational purposes to support the understanding and integration of information discussed in the related conversation. It is not intended for use in quoting the conversation verbatim. For accurate quotations, please refer to the original recording.*

Introduction

Emmanuel Comte: In the summer of 2015, more than 850,000 refugees crossed into Greece, many arriving through the eastern Aegean islands. Athens quickly became a frontline city in Europe's refugee crisis.

Today, I'm speaking with Georgios Kaminis, who served as mayor of Athens from 2011 to 2019. A constitutional scholar, Greece's first national Ombudsman, and an experienced policymaker, Mr. Kaminis brings a unique insider perspective on what it means to manage a city during a migration emergency.

We will discuss how Athens responded to the sudden influx of asylum seekers, the pressure this created on housing, informal labor markets, public safety, and city services. Mr. Kaminis will reflect on the institutional responses he helped build, the challenges he faced, and the valuable lessons that still resonate across Europe today.

This is a conversation about what urban leadership looks like in a global crisis.

Mr. Kaminis, thank you very much for taking part in this interview.

Georgios Kaminis: You're welcome. I'm very pleased to be here.

Emmanuel Comte: How did you first encounter the issue of immigration in your career?

Georgios Kaminis: My involvement began from the perspective of human rights, as I am a professor of constitutional law. That was my initial academic and professional approach.

Later, I worked as Deputy Ombudsman, and from 2003 onward as the National Ombudsman. Subsequently, as Mayor of Athens, I dealt with immigration during the period you mentioned.

Later on, I also served as a Member of Parliament for the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), where immigration and refugee matters fell under my responsibilities.

Emmanuel Comte: So immigration has been a consistent theme throughout both your intellectual and political career?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, among other areas, certainly.

The 2015 Crisis Hits Athens

Emmanuel Comte: Let's now focus on your time as Mayor of Athens during the major influx of refugees in the spring and summer of 2015. What were the main challenges the city faced at that time?

Georgios Kaminis: The city was already grappling with significant problems before the summer of 2015. We had large numbers of undocumented individuals living in Athens.

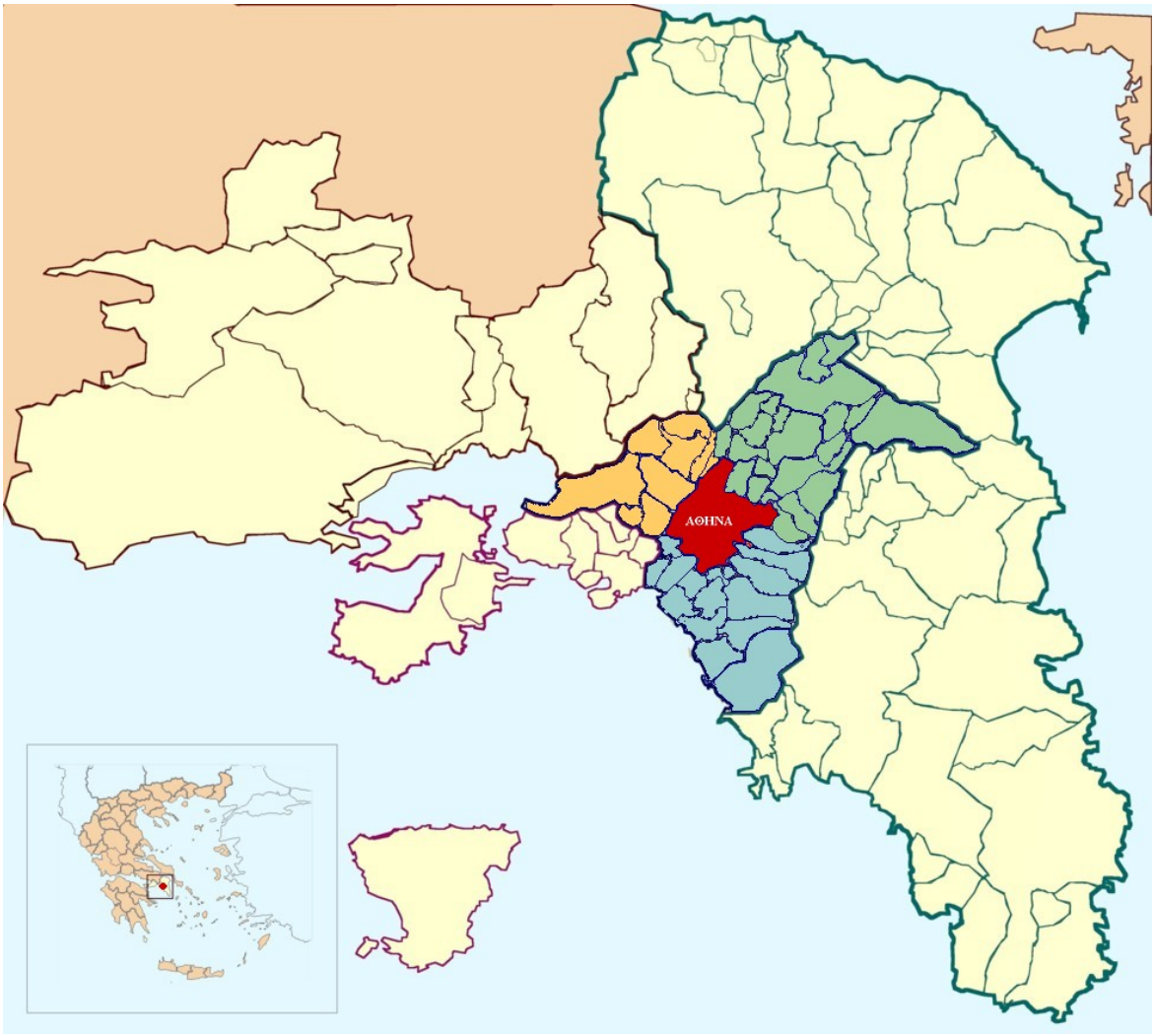
In fact, by December 2014, we had already seen the arrival of around 600 Syrian refugees. They were accompanied by NGOs and activists and lived for many days in Syntagma Square, demanding asylum. This became our first tangible encounter with the changing situation.

So, by the end of 2014, it was clear that the context had shifted—largely due to the conflict in Syria—and we anticipated that larger numbers would soon follow. In that sense, what occurred in the summer of 2015 was not entirely a surprise.

From June or July 2015 until February 2016, approximately 900,000 people arrived in Athens from the islands. While most continued on toward the borders, a significant number remained in Athens. We had to manage this urgent situation.

Emergency Responses and Housing Solutions

Georgios Kaminis: One of our first major tasks was to establish a refugee camp—the first to be created in the Attica region.



Athens in the Attica region

Before that, for two or three months, we had people living in tents in city parks and central squares, such as Victoria Square in Athens.

We had to act quickly and find a way to work in coordination with the government. The piece of land we offered was owned by the municipality, and it became the site of the first refugee camp, in Eleonas.

Source: UNHCR Information Management Unit

Emmanuel Comte: I see. So, I understand the first and most pressing issue you faced was about the presence of these individuals in the urban space.

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, exactly. Their presence in public spaces was a major issue. Even the refugee camp in Eleonas was too small. We worked closely with the representatives of the UNHCR.

Emmanuel Comte: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, yes.

Georgios Kaminis: Correct. We participated in a housing program financed by the European Union, which provided funding to the UNHCR. The UNHCR then collaborated with NGOs and the City of Athens. We located apartments across the city—at the time, many were vacant due to the economic crisis. Through this program, if I remember correctly, we rented around a hundred apartments in Athens to house refugee families.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you were paying rent to the landlords?

Georgios Kaminis: Not directly. We acted as managers, but the rent was paid by the UNHCR.

Emmanuel Comte: So, the UNHCR covered the rent for these people temporarily?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, temporarily. I don't recall all the details, but the program was called ESTIA. It worked very well. In addition to housing, we provided vouchers and coupons to the refugees, which allowed them to shop in local neighborhoods. This had a positive impact, not just for the refugees but also for the local economy during the financial crisis.

Emmanuel Comte: How long did these families remain in the rented apartments? I imagine many would have preferred to stay longer if rent was covered.

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, certainly. If I remember correctly, some families stayed for up to two years. The program remained active until 2020. It was a large and successful initiative.

Emmanuel Comte: So, for up to five years, asylum seekers and migrants received support from the UNHCR, including accommodation and some expenses?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes. Apart from that, the municipality undertook three key initiatives. The second was the creation of the Migration and Refugee Integration Hub on Menandrou Street in Athens, near Omonia Square, in the neighborhood of Agios Pavlos.

This hub brought together the City of Athens and over 60 to 70 NGOs and public agencies. We even established a new position: Vice Mayor for Refugee and Migration Issues—the first of its kind in Greece. All stakeholders collaborated to develop joint programs. It was a significant experience that enabled information sharing, best practice exchange, and cohesive response efforts. The hub was very effective.

Emmanuel Comte: And the third initiative?

Georgios Kaminis: The third was a European-funded program during the refugee crisis. We applied through a competitive process, and our proposal was selected. It involved the University of Athens offering Greek language courses to refugees. At the same time, the city worked to find apartments for participants. There was an incentive structure: refugees who learned Greek gained access to housing. These three pillars formed the core of our refugee strategy in Athens.

And of course, we continued to support refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants through our existing social services as well.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. So, the three pillars were: first, the housing program funded by the EU and managed by UNHCR; second, the "During the Limbo" program, which focused on providing training and classes to refugees, while also housing them—running in parallel to the first program. And the third pillar?

Georgios Kaminis: The third was the Eleonas Camp, which housed those who couldn't find accommodation in the city.

Emmanuel Comte: Okay.

Georgios Kaminis: At the same time, we established a network with other cities in Greece to exchange practices and experiences. The City of Athens, being very experienced in refugee-related

issues, took a leading role. Many of the participating mayors were liberal or left-leaning, particularly in some cities in Crete, and they were open to receiving refugees.

We also engaged actively at the European level through networks of the European Union. At the time, Athens was truly at the forefront—on the cutting edge—of many initiatives related to refugees and migration.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you believe these programs helped ease the arrival of refugees? That is, they could find accommodation more easily, purchase food, and receive training—like learning Greek—more efficiently. I understand the intent was to respond to a massive influx, but eventually, these programs had to be phased out. How did you envision the transition from supported accommodation to independent living, where housing would no longer be funded by the EU?

Georgios Kaminis: To be honest, I don't have a very clear picture. Unfortunately, people largely had to integrate on their own. The Greek state was neither efficient nor eager to assist with the integration of refugees and migrants—even though, now, there's a growing labor shortage in Greece, and every incentive exists to integrate these individuals as quickly as possible. During that earlier period, though, we created a municipal structure in Athens composed of 60 young people. They were divided into teams of three, and each team managed about 10 apartments. They supported refugees by helping them access hospitals and resolving issues with neighbors.

Emmanuel Comte: Were these volunteers?

Georgios Kaminis: No, they were paid employees—funded by both the Municipality of Athens and UNHCR. It was a crucial initiative, as it also created a pool of individuals who became experts in refugee and migration issues.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. But you don't have a clear picture of how the programs were phased out because that happened after your term?

Georgios Kaminis: Correct. When I left the municipality in 2019, the projects were still active. After the 2019 elections, the new Minister for Migration Policy, Mr. Mitarachi, created many camps. However, the program for housing refugees in apartments was gradually phased out.

Notis Mitarachi, Minister of Migration and Asylum of Greece, 27 June 2022

Emmanuel Comte: So, the phasing out happened after you left?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, after I left. We considered that after March 2016—following the implementation of the EU–Turkey agreement—the influx of asylum seekers dropped dramatically. The housing program wasn't extended to new arrivals as much as it continued to serve those already present, ensuring they remained in decent living conditions.

Integration Challenges and Informal Labor

Emmanuel Comte: Understood. That gives a broad overview of the housing situation for migrants, which seemed to be your main concern upon arrival. What about employment? Did you observe any impact on the informal labor market in Athens—such as in street vending, domestic work, or construction? How were refugees supporting themselves outside of these programs?

Georgios Kaminis: Largely through those informal channels you mentioned.

Emmanuel Comte: Was it primarily in the black market?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, mostly in the black market. However, at the same time, all our social care structures—such as kindergartens and medical stations in the neighborhoods—were open to everyone.

Emmanuel Comte: To migrants and refugees?

Georgios Kaminis: Mainly to those with documentation, but in some cases, even undocumented migrants could access certain services.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. So, kindergartens and primary schools?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, as well as municipal medical offices.

Emmanuel Comte: So, for children, both education and medical care were accessible?

Georgios Kaminis: Exactly. These services were open to everyone.

Emmanuel Comte: Understood. You mention that many turned to the black market for work. Was this due to the legacy of the economic crisis in Greece, or was the formal labor market simply not accessible?

Georgios Kaminis: It was both. The major economic crisis made the black market more attractive and viable. At the same time, there was a longstanding pattern of undocumented migrants working in informal jobs. That wasn't a secret—everyone knew it. So, for both reasons, many were absorbed into the black market.

Emmanuel Comte: So, this was a legacy of Greece's economic difficulties, particularly after 2010 and 2011. But aside from the economic crisis, why else was the formal labor market inaccessible to them? Why did they have to work informally, such as street vending?

Georgios Kaminis: I can't say with certainty, but I believe it was easier for them to find work in the black market. It was more affordable for employers, too.

Emmanuel Comte: That makes sense. Do you know which sectors they typically worked in within the black market?

Georgios Kaminis: No, I don't have specific information about that.

Refugee Families vs. Individual Migrants

Emmanuel Comte: Did you receive any feedback or observe any security concerns in the city related to immigrants, especially undocumented ones?

Georgios Kaminis: There were always some concerns, both before and after their arrival. However, because many were refugees arriving with families, they were generally more tolerated than individual young migrants arriving alone. Families were better accepted overall. Still, concerns about security were consistently present.

Emmanuel Comte: Could you provide some examples of these concerns?

Georgios Kaminis: Certainly. Whenever we set up a center for receiving migrants, we often received complaints from local residents in the neighborhood.

Emmanuel Comte: What kind of complaints?

Georgios Kaminis: Residents often felt threatened or simply uncomfortable with the presence of the newcomers.

Emmanuel Comte: You mentioned two types of immigrants: families who were refugees fleeing conflict, and young men arriving alone. What was the balance between these two groups during your time as mayor?

Georgios Kaminis: As mayor, I primarily dealt with refugees and documented migrants. The number of single, undocumented young men was smaller.

Emmanuel Comte: So, there were fewer of those?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes. Still, as I mentioned earlier, some of our social support structures—like food distribution—were open even to undocumented migrants.

Emmanuel Comte: Were both groups present during your first term as mayor?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, they were present, especially during my first term.

Emmanuel Comte: Okay.

Georgios Kaminis: Before the crisis, the majority of arrivals were migrants.

Emmanuel Comte: When you say migrants, do you mean individual people?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, individual migrants—not refugees.

Emmanuel Comte: Oh, I see. Not asylum seekers?

Georgios Kaminis: Most of them were asylum seekers, but they were considered undocumented migrants.

Emmanuel Comte: I see.

Georgios Kaminis: It was their way of trying to normalize their stay in Athens.

Emmanuel Comte: I understand.

Georgios Kaminis: We didn't have many refugees before the 2015 crisis. But after that, the number of refugees began to increase significantly.

Emmanuel Comte: So, when you took office in 2011, you were mostly dealing with a population of individual migrants. But then, with the Syrian crisis—beginning around December 2014—there was an influx of refugees. And it was for this second group that the various programs you mentioned earlier were created?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes.

Emmanuel Comte: By the end of your term, had the refugee population become more significant than the undocumented migrants?

Georgios Kaminis: More significant in what sense?

Emmanuel Comte: I mean in terms of sheer numbers in the city.

Georgios Kaminis: That's hard to say, because in reality, no one knows the exact number of undocumented migrants.

Emmanuel Comte: Right.

Georgios Kaminis: What I believe happened is that many undocumented migrants left the city during the period when the borders were open. Not only refugees left the country, but also

undocumented migrants—most of whom were aiming to reach Northern Europe. Once the border was closed, many refugees were stranded.

Emmanuel Comte: When was the border closed?

Georgios Kaminis: In February 2016. So, for several months, people were still able to cross.

Emmanuel Comte: Okay. So, many left during that window?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, and not only refugees, but also migrants. No one knows how many left or how many stayed.

Emmanuel Comte: So, there was considerable uncertainty regarding the actual numbers.

Georgios Kaminis: Once the Eleonas camp was established, we conducted an opinion survey among the refugees there. More than 90% of them expressed a desire to leave Greece. They didn't want to stay.

The main reasons were the economic crisis, the language barrier, and the fact that many had relatives in other European countries. So, they were determined to leave. Even after the border closed, many continued to find ways to leave the country through illegal channels to reach Northern Europe. That's why it's so difficult to provide definitive numbers.

Security Concerns and Managing Tensions

Emmanuel Comte: I see. Regarding security, you mentioned earlier that you received complaints from neighbors when refugee centers were established. Was that the main issue?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, even residents near Eleonas didn't want the camp in their area. They argued that they lived in a poor neighborhood and didn't want to bear additional burdens. This kind of xenophobia and racism is very present.

Emmanuel Comte: Even before the refugees arrived?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, even before. And afterwards, in some cases where entire buildings were used to house refugees, we continued receiving complaints from the local community.

Emmanuel Comte: So, even in individual apartments that were rented for refugees, there were complaints?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes. In neighborhoods where there wasn't a massive influx but where, say, one building housed many refugee families, there were still complaints.

Emmanuel Comte: What kind of complaints?

Georgios Kaminis: Representatives of the neighbors came to the municipal council to complain. They simply didn't want refugees in their neighborhood.

Emmanuel Comte: Was there anything specific, or was it just general opposition?

Georgios Kaminis: Mostly general opposition. Of course, the usual stereotypes were mentioned—crime, etc.—but when we probed further, there was no evidence that anything had actually happened.

Emmanuel Comte: So, there were tensions in the neighborhoods, but no significant criminal activity?

Georgios Kaminis: Exactly. And the tensions involving Golden Dawn had subsided at the time. Because of the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, however, most members of Golden Dawn were imprisoned, so we didn't have violent demonstrations.

Budget, Legacy, and Institutional Innovation

Emmanuel Comte: I see. Looking back on that episode, how much do you think it cost the city in terms of social services and housing? What was the financial burden on the city and other stakeholders?

Georgios Kaminis: It didn't have a significant impact on the city's finances. The housing was funded by the European Union through the UNHCR. The Eleonas camp was managed by the municipality but financed by the central government.

Emmanuel Comte: So, most of the costs were covered by other actors?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes. As for education and healthcare for children, those services were provided as part of normal operations, even before the crisis. There was no major spike in related expenditures.

Emmanuel Comte: Understood. What do you think was your most effective action as mayor regarding immigration and immigrants? What made a real difference?

Georgios Kaminis: That's something we're very proud of. We reacted immediately by offering land, which wasn't an easy decision since there were public complaints. We also set up a professional team to manage the apartments. One of our conditions for UNHCR was that refugees should not be concentrated in just a few neighborhoods. We insisted on spreading them across Athens and even the wider Attica region.

Despite the large influx of people, the impact on the city remained minimal. Things went smoothly, and I believe the municipality played a crucial role in that. We also established a coordination hub that brought together around 70 NGOs—both Greek and international—as well as the Attica region, central government, and the city itself. Everyone worked together, coordinating efforts effectively. It was quite an innovative model.

Emmanuel Comte: Was the hub meant to allocate funding?

Georgios Kaminis: Not directly. It served as a platform to exchange best practices and coordinate how to apply for funding from European and other programs. It also helped us understand what was happening across the city.

The Integration Gap and Political Reflections

Emmanuel Comte: What challenges still remain?

Georgios Kaminis: The main challenge is integration. I'm not sure things are progressing well in that area. There's still no clear policy. From my experience, even as an ombudsman, I've followed immigration and refugee issues closely since 1998, and I haven't seen meaningful steps toward integration.

It's unfortunate because Greece needs migrants. It's not just that they need us—we need them too. But as a society, we're not open-minded enough to see the mutual benefit of integration.

Emmanuel Comte: What aspects of integration are most problematic?

Georgios Kaminis: Language is a major barrier. Integration into the labor market is also a challenge, as is access to education and other services.

I don't follow developments closely anymore since I'm not an MP, but my impression is that things could move much faster. The current government is conservative and seems more focused on appeasing its electorate. The responsible minister and the deputy minister in charge of integration, Sofia Voultepsi, are both extremely conservative. As a result, progress has been slow and lacking in open-mindedness.

Emmanuel Comte: When you say Greece needs migrants, are you referring primarily to declining demographics or other factors?

Georgios Kaminis: Primarily the demographic decline, yes. But also, welcoming new people is generally beneficial—if the right conditions are in place.

Emmanuel Comte: Thank you very much for your insights and for sharing your experiences, especially from the crucial period around 2015. What are you working on now?

Georgios Kaminis: I'm writing a book based mainly on my experience as a mayor, but I also include my time as an ombudsman and as a Member of Parliament.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you are writing your memoirs?

Georgios Kaminis: In a way, yes. I don't like to call it that, but it's turning into something similar. My time as mayor was the most challenging because those years were so critical. I believe anyone

who held public office during that period should document their experience—so much happened that changed the country.

Currently, I've returned to my academic background. I'm a member of the scientific committee of the Greek Parliament. I no longer teach at the university, but I read extensively and try to stay active.

Emmanuel Comte: Just one final question. You said your time as mayor was the most challenging, yet the immigration issue seems to have been well-managed. Were the bigger challenges in other areas?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, the challenges were across all aspects of city governance. The country was in default. The municipality itself was bankrupt when I took office—we couldn't even pay salaries. There were violent demonstrations and a lot of social unrest. It was a very difficult period.

Emmanuel Comte: So, most of the difficulty came from the aftermath of the financial crisis?

Georgios Kaminis: Yes, exactly. I became mayor in January 2011 and left office in May 2019, so I was there for almost the entire duration of the crisis, except for the year 2010.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. Thank you very much, Mr. Kaminis. I truly appreciate you sharing your experience.

Georgios Kaminis: It was my pleasure.