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## *Turning the Refugee Crisis into an Opportunity? Current Challenges for Greece and Suggestions for Action*

*Anna Triandafyllidou<sup>1</sup>*

### **The Refugee Flows: An Apocalyptic Scenario**

Despite being confronted with a severe economic and social crisis for the past six years, Greece has been faced with exponentially rising flows of asylum seekers and irregular migrants since 2013, and particularly during 2014-2015. None had predicted the dramatic escalation in asylum-seeking flows that took place during the first 10 months of 2015 and which are still in full swing.

By 13 November 2015, 666,502 people had arrived in Greece, mostly crossing from Turkey to the Aegean islands, and most fleeing war and violence in their home countries (Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, but also Pakistan and Somalia). In October alone, more than 200,000 people crossed the Mediterranean to Greece, many of them specifically passing through the island of Lesvos. During the same period (Jan to mid-November 2015), Italy received 141,777 people.

<sup>1</sup> Professor, European University Institute, Florence, Italy Member of Board of Directors, Solidarity Now - [www.solidaritynow.org](http://www.solidaritynow.org)



**Figure 1: Arrivals and Deaths at the Mediterranean EU Borders 1 Jan – 3 Nov 2015**



Source: IOM, Missing Migrants Project, <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

**Table 1: Top five countries of origin by total arrivals in Greece, Italy, Spain and Malta**

Country of origin	Total arrivals
Syria	277,899
Afghanistan	76,620
Iraq	21,552
Pakistan	14,323
Albania	12,637

Source: IOM, Missing Migrants Project, <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

The top countries of origin of migrants to Greece are in particular Syria, with over 50% of the arrivals, Afghanistan (approx. 30%) and Iraq (over 10%). These are populations that are clearly in need of international protection.

### Reception Capacity and Volunteer Help

The main brunt of dealing with the arrivals is born on the Greek islands, where reception capacity has increased during recent months but still remains insufficient. Thus, in Lesbos (where over half of the arrivals are registered), reception is organised at two main reception centres, Kara Tepe and Moria, which have a total capacity of 2,800 persons. As UNHCR notes, there is an urgent need to increase this capacity (including improvement of sanitary and other facilities, winterisation of shelters, and the setup of a management unit for both centres to allocate people – as the current self-managed system functions to the detriment of the more vulnerable people). The reception capacity in other islands, like Chios and Samos, is quite small (approx. 300) and also needs to be increased. In Athens, where most refugees arrive from the islands by boat, there are currently three reception centres operating: Elaionas, with a capacity for 700 people, Galatsi (Olympic facilities) with a capacity for 1,000, and Elliniko (Hockey), which can take 600.



While the reception centres in Athens operate under the responsibility of the Alternate Ministry for Immigration Policy, coordination on the islands is divided between the Ministry for the Aegean, the local municipality and the Hellenic police, while the UNHCR co-chairs coordination in most of the sites. There are, however, concerns that all the organisations (small and large, local and foreign, international) operate on their own initiatives to contribute to creating a landscape of help, reception and solidarity and to respond to the basic critical needs of the arrivals, but without general coordination. There appears to be a reluctance on the part of the UNHCR to undertake coordination, while the Greek state authorities are seeking to improve capacity but without yet fully succeeding in this task.

Although not only state and local authorities but also local volunteers, NGOs and international organisations have mobilized to face the emergency, the situation remains critical, and it is actually surprising that despite the harsh economic conditions, public opinion overall remains welcoming to the refugees. Mobilisation, solidarity, food and clothing donations, and voluntary work have been rising to impressive levels, not only on the islands but also in Athens and other municipalities. These efforts come not only from civil society, but also simple citizens who had not been civically active before but feel the urge to help.

## The Balkan Route

This refugee influx – the largest refugee flow that Europe has experienced on its soil since the Yugoslav wars of the mid-1990s – has led to important changes at the European level, including a *de facto* or *de jure* interruption of Dublin III and the first safe country principle, and to intensive talks about Dublin III needing to be radically reformed. The irregular migrants and asylum seekers arriving in Greece during 2015 have for the most part continued their journey via other south-eastern European countries (FYROM, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia – in different combinations) to central Europe (Hungary, Austria and eventually Germany, or even further north to Sweden), seeking refuge in countries where support and jobs are more available to them than in crisis-stricken Greece. Interestingly, countries like France, the Netherlands and Denmark have experienced very small increases in their asylum applications, refugee reception and irregular migrant flows.



**Figure 2: The Balkan Route (path via Slovenia and Croatia)**



Source: European Asylum-Seeker Crisis: Scenarios, 4 November 2015, ACAPS ([www.acaps.org](http://www.acaps.org)), p.4.

**Figure 3: The Balkan Route (initial path via Hungary)**



Source: UNHCR, 15 October 2015

**European Union Initiatives**

In response to the refugee crisis, the European Commission has taken several initiatives that immediately concern or involve Greece:

- Operation Sophia, decided in May 2015, aims at attacking smuggling networks through military means in the countries of last transit, notably Libya. However, it has effectively remained inactive for a number of reasons, including the fact that the actions should take place in the territory of the third country (Libya) on agreement with this country’s provisional government, and should be authorised by the UN Security Council (which is quite unlikely to concede authorisation).
- Relocation quotas were decided in May 2015, and again in October 2015, for a total of 160,000 people.



- On 15 October 2015, an EU-Turkey joint action plan was prepared with a view to improving cooperation with Turkey in managing the asylum-seeking flows that transit through the country towards Greece. The plan includes EU financial support for Turkey and Turkish cooperation to combat smuggling networks that operate on its shores.
- A 17-point plan was decided on at an EU summit on 25 October 2015 with a view to effectively managing the flows and avoiding countries in the Balkans and further north in the EU closing their borders, leaving tens of thousands of refugees stranded at various border crossings without shelter for the winter.
- Special emphasis has been put on increasing capacity to provide shelter to refugees along the Balkan route to ease the pressure on other European countries that are the end destinations. Greece has offered to create 30,000 reception places by the end of the year and 20,000 more through rent subsidies and family hosting with the support of the UNHCR.
- A further action plan enlisting the cooperation of African countries with a view to taming the flows was proposed at the Valetta Summit of 11-12 November.

The challenge that Greece faces today is to manage the large refugee flows efficiently while respecting the human rights of the people arriving in the country, to provide appropriate registration of the arrivals, and to create the 50,000 reception places for asylum seekers that were agreed on at the EU summit on 25 October 2015.

### **Key Areas for Intervention and Policy Recommendations**

Despite the huge flows of arrivals, asylum applications in Greece remain limited in number (see Table 2 below). The vast majority of Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis do not wish to apply for asylum in Greece as support measures, like accommodation, food and language training, are non-existent and jobs are certainly scarce. They thus move further north with the help of smugglers, voting with their feet, so to speak, and defying the Dublin III regulations. Indeed, the current numbers of asylum applications are in stark contrast with the size of the flows that are going through the country.

While the challenge that Greece is facing is huge, even to manage the flows, the higher risk is that of countries further north starting to close their borders, with the immediate danger that Greece remains hosting several tens of thousands of refugees, even temporarily. In other words, setting up well-functioning hotspots, increasing reception capacity and creating a longer-term reception scheme are three components of a single policy triptych that need to develop in full synergy.



**Table 2: Asylum Applications, 2013-2015 (totals and top 5 countries of origin)**

Asylum applications	2013	2014	2015*
Country of origin			
Afghanistan	804	1,708	1,586
Pakistan	610	1,617	1,474
Syria	253	786	2,965
Bangladesh	46	635	603
Albania	419	569	714
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,816</b>	<b>9,432</b>	<b>10,718</b>

First 10 months of 2015. Data available at [http://asylo.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Greek-Asylum-Service-statistical-data-October-2015\\_gr.pdf](http://asylo.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Greek-Asylum-Service-statistical-data-October-2015_gr.pdf)

The 17-point plan agreed by the EU leaders at their meeting on 25 October and released by the European Commission on the same day requires Greece:

- to increase its asylum-seeker reception capacity to 30,000 people;
- to work with the UNHCR to provide rent subsidies and host family programmes for another 20,000;
- to cooperate better with FYROM, Albania and Turkey on border management and on fighting migrant smuggling networks;
- to improve registration in Greece.

These points have been put forward as requirements related to the relocation quotas that have just started operating in Greece (with the first transfers taking place in early November). The overall question is particularly sensitive as in a statement of 6 November 2015 the President of the European Commission, Jean Claude Juncker, criticised Greece for rejecting joint coastguard patrols in the Aegean.

The situation presents special challenges as the installation of hotspot centres for the registration of arrivals on the island of Lesbos has resulted in a huge backlog in processing and departures. In mid-October, more than 16,000 people were stranded on the island due to the start-up of the hotspot operation. The challenges to registration include a lack of Eurodac machines for fingerprinting and insufficient staff. Obviously, the more people that are left on the island the greater the needs for reception, shelter, food and medical aid. It is expected that deteriorating weather conditions and rough seas may push the flows towards the Greek-Turkish land border, where part of a previously-constructed fence collapsed during floods last winter.

It is of the utmost political and economic importance for Greece to turn this refugee crisis into an opportunity. In order to face the above challenges Greece needs to take the initiative on several fronts.

### **Increase the First Reception Capacity in Border Areas**

- There is a need to increase and improve reception capacity, not only in Athens but particularly on the islands. The functioning of the hotspots and the comprehensive registration and screening of arrivals requires better and larger reception facilities. There is a need to further pursue the disbursement of the relevant EU funds accorded to Greece. In fact, so far only 42 million out of the promised 259 million Euros have been received.
- There is also urgency to create reception centres at Idomeni (Greek FYROM border) and in Evros. At Idomeni, cooperation with FYROM has been very good and flows were managed efficiently, minimising problems



even though arrivals range from 5,000 to 11,000 per day but a new emergency has been created as of November 21, when FYROM partially closed the border and allowed to pass only Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis. Thus a couple of thousands (and constantly increasing) Iranians, Moroccans, Palestinians and other nationalities remain stranded and current capacities certainly do not suffice to face the situation.

- There is a need for Greek-Turkish cooperation between Edirne and Evros in creating reception capacity on both sides of the border, as it is very likely that rough weather will push the flows towards the land borders.
- There is a need for better use of the organisational and financial capacity of international organisations like the UNHCR in border areas, where they should take a more central role in the management of first reception. This is of absolute importance as currently there is a probable waste of effort because of non-coordination by different NGOs and volunteer groups.
- There is an urgent need to increase the number of Eurodac machines and the related staff for fingerprinting at the hotspots all over the country so as to avoid backlogs and temporary crises, particularly in small places like the islands, but also perhaps in the future in the green border areas.

### **Informing Asylum Seekers about Relocation**

It has so far been seen positively that asylum seekers are not interested in staying in Greece but instead prefer to move on quickly, either on their own or by using smuggling networks. Indeed, this issue already arose last year when

300 Syrians protested in Syndagma square, refusing to apply for asylum in Greece because support would be minimal and jobs inexistent. This protest anticipated what would later become a massive phenomenon: people enter Greece but within a matter of days or weeks (depending on their resources and networks) move on via FYROM and the Balkan route to other European countries, and predominantly Germany.

Greece is currently at risk of not attracting sufficient asylum seekers to activate the relocation quotas. It may not be clear in the media discourse, but the relocation quotas concern asylum seekers, not people who are simply entering the EU through Greece and then moving on.

- Addressing asylum seeker mistrust is of paramount importance. Right now, Syrians and Afghans arriving on the Greek islands, and even further in Athens, are not informed of the possibility of relocation if they apply for asylum in Greece. Moreover, even when they are informed they are afraid that this may not eventually turn out to be the case. An additional negative point is that even if they are selected for relocation they cannot choose the country of destination. While the relocation system certainly has its weak points, there is a need to provide information through NGOs and volunteers in a language that the asylum seekers understand. This can be done by means of printed materials and oral interventions at the major reception centres on the islands and in Athens.



## Preparing Refugee Reception and Integration

- Greece needs to draw up a **plan to distribute asylum seekers in municipalities across the country**. There should be a call for municipalities to volunteer to host 5 to 30 families each (depending on the size of each municipality – a rough calculation is that 325 municipalities taking an average of 20 families, with an average family size of 6, comes to a total of 39,000 people). This is a plan that can be managed at a local day-to-day interpersonal level, particularly in small towns and villages. It is clear that children will be more easily integrated in small schools and neighbourhoods and adults can find jobs in local economies. These may initially be bottom-of-the-ladder jobs, but they would still be better than being unemployed or risking one's life on the Balkan route. The [story of Julien](#), a young asylum seeker who lived in Konitsa and succeeded in passing his university entrance exams in June 2015, can serve as a good example of how such local processes can be successful. In another example outside Greece, the Finnish Red Cross<sup>1</sup> in agreement with the national government and in cooperation with the IOM, municipal authorities and other NGOs has set up a programme for the integration of refugees in Finland.
- **An Integration Partnership Model** can be set up by the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Education with participation by civil society stakeholders

that different municipalities could implement. Such a plan would mobilise and bring together local authorities, local NGOs, parishes and citizen groups in each small town to prepare to host the refugees. This would involve:

- **finding accommodation** (often flats are closed if they are not rented – citizens could put their flats at the disposal of the municipality for a 5-year period in exchange for a nominal rent).
- **organising education courses taught by volunteers** – in learning Greek for adults, in retraining for specific jobs (for men and women separately). These courses could build on existing courses for unemployed or other vulnerable persons. There is no need to re-invent new courses.
- **issuing work permits along with refugee or international protection status**, so that people can work legally. It is likely that the refugee flows can have a positive impact on the Greek economy if the human, financial and social capital that the refugees bring can be put to work. It should not be forgotten that the people who arrive in Greece and other European countries are often the more resourceful, and they are certainly determined. It is important to provide them with the legal means to recreate their lives in Greece and also to avoid boosting the action of criminal networks and exploitation (and illegitimate competition with the local labour force).

<sup>1</sup> Fundamental Rights Agency (2015), Legal entry channels to the EU for persons in need of international protection: a toolbox, FRA FOCUS, 2/2015





- **assigning a mentor to each family** – e.g. a local woman or man who becomes the reference person for the mater/pater familia, a local child who becomes the guardian angel for a new child in school, a local teacher or social worker who helps the family in general.
- **providing migrant families with a subsistence allowance** – this could be financed by large NGOs such as Solidarity Now for the first year of the family's stay in Greece with a view to catering for immediate day-to-day needs. Social grocery stores would also be important in providing food etc. These should be included in the larger solidarity initiatives that are being taken in Greece today to provide for the local poor, be they citizens or foreigners.

### **Border Management and Fighting Smuggling Networks**

A greater challenge for Greece is probably border management. It is possible that in proposing joint patrolling the European Commission is trying to please Turkey in order to buy its cooperation in the overall management of the crisis, and particularly in effectively implementing the readmission agreement with the EU. Greece, by contrast, **should put the emphasis on intelligence and cooperation in the fight against criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling**, not only with Turkey but also with FYROM and Albania. This is the most effective way to prevent deaths at sea and it would not raise questions regarding Greece's border management capacity. This is a sensitive issue as Greece has difficult relations with all three countries.

Despite the friendly talks between Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania, and Alexis Tsipras during the UN meetings in NYC in October, there are tense relations between the two countries and, given the economic recession that is also plaguing Albania, Greece and the Greek minority in Albania represent convenient scapegoats to divert attention from internal Albanian problems.

The FYROM name issue remains unresolved, making relations between the two countries difficult, while in Turkey the new AKP government is likely to become more arrogant after its landslide electoral victory of 1st November.

There is thus probably a need for high-level declarations of cooperation followed by diplomatic support and then ground-level operational support. There is a need for the European Commission to support Greece in this endeavour and also buy into this option and to be convinced that this is a more effective and appropriate way to act.



### Regarding border management, Greece should:

- **promote cooperation with Frontex** rather than jointly patrolling with Turkey, and should argue at the political level that the EU borders are better guarded by joint Frontex forces rather than by a non-EU country. Recalling that there is an overall process towards Turkish accession to the EU, as the Prime Minister did recently, is also a good strategy.
- **propose that Frontex should be mobilised to improve Turkey's capacity to manage its borders and prevent departures**, in line with the EU-Turkey [revised Joint Action Plan](#). The case of Spain and Morocco in the last decade could serve as a useful example: Morocco's capacity was strengthened and EU support was developed via Frontex operations to increase the technical capacity of border patrols. The same should happen with Turkey. It should be made clear that Turkey, crucial though it may be in the region, is still a non-EU country.
- **create hotspots on Turkish soil with the deployment of Frontex and EASO officers** in line with improving the management of Greek-Turkish sea and land borders. This would improve the safe passage of asylum seekers and decrease pressure on Greece. It would also decrease the burden on the Balkan countries and the profits of smuggling networks.

### Influencing Public Opinion across Europe

- There is a need for a media campaign in both conventional media (newspapers and television) and social media (facebook etc.) to showcase the level of solidarity and volunteer mobilisation in Greece. This is important to turn the tide in European public opinion concerning Greek citizens, who, unfortunately, are generally portrayed or stereotyped as lazy people receiving pensions from the age of 45 and avoiding paying tax.
- The contribution of civil society and of large international NGOs like Solidarity Now with the support of the OSF and organisations such as the International Rescue Committee and Amnesty International is crucial and very much needed.



Global Governance Programme  
Robert Schuman Centre  
for Advanced Studies

European University Institute  
Villa La Fonte  
Via delle Fontanelle, 18  
50014 San Domenico di Fiesole - Italy

Contact GGP:  
[GlobalGovernance.Programme@EUI.eu](mailto:GlobalGovernance.Programme@EUI.eu)

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