



The refugee crisis in Greece in the aftermath of the 20 March 2016 EU-Turkey Agreement

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Description

The high inflow of people seeking international protection, along with the closure of the Balkan route to northern Europe and the EU-Turkey Agreement, have left nearly 57,000 of them “trapped” in Greece. As this population is changing from a population in transit to a more permanent one, the state should not only aim to respond to short-term basic needs but also to address long-term needs relating to their social integration.

More than one million people seeking international protection, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, have entered Greece through Turkey since January 2015. For the whole year 2015 the number of sea arrivals to Greece from Turkey amounted to 856,723, while for the first 6 months of 2016 it went down to 155,989. Today, out of the total number of more than 1 million people who have entered Greece since January 2015, it is estimated that nearly 57,000 remain in the country.

Greece was not ready to respond to such a high inflow of people seeking international protection. The Greek state responded belatedly and the Greek authorities have been struggling to manage the registration and reception of new arrivals, especially in key entry points such as Lesbos and Chios islands.

Despite the high number of people entering Greece, until recently only very few of them applied for asylum in the country. According to the Greek Asylum Service, in 2015 there were only 13,197 asylum applications, i.e. just 1.54% of the total number of arrivals in Greece during the same period. The reason is that the majority of these people do not want to stay in Greece, a country hard-hit by the economic crisis, with a weak and ineffective welfare state and a staggering unemployment rate (24.9% in 2015); rather, they opt to continue

their trip to northern Europe, mainly to Germany and Sweden.

However, the full closure of the so-called “Balkan route” to northern Europe (on 8 March 2016) and the EU-Turkey Agreement (which came into effect on 20 March 2016) changed the way that the asylum seekers and refugees had been dealt with by the Greek Government until that date. According to the Agreement, people seeking international protection who arrive to Greece from Turkey after this date (regardless of nationality and need for international protection) are subject to possible deportation back to Turkey after a fast-track asylum process.

This meant that two groups were created: those who arrived **after the 20th of March** and those who arrived before the 20th of March. According to the Agreement, any person who arrived after 20 March must stay in detention facilities/ hotspots in specific Greek islands. This, in turn, means that overnight, the hotspots on the Greek islands became pre-departure detention facilities where all new arrivals are held while their case is being assessed, most of them waiting (for at least six months) to be sent back to Turkey. This development raised serious concerns among NGOs and also by some international organisations such as the United Nations’ Refugee Agency

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(UNHCR), opposing the transformation of hotspots into dangerously overcrowded, police-run detention facilities. Some of them reassessed the level of their involvement, and then suspended many of their activities.

Those who arrived **before 20 March** may no longer travel on to other European destinations. Their only option is to apply for asylum in Greece or to apply for relocation to other EU countries according to the EU approved list of available places. The lack of alternatives has led to an increase in the number of people applying for asylum in Greece. Available data for June 2016 brings the number of asylum applicants to 4,255 as compared to only 1,121 in June 2015.

There are now approximately 57,000 third-country nationals who are “trapped” in Greece. Out of those, about 46,000 arrived before 20 March 2016 and are expected to be hosted in Greece for at least the medium or long term (though the precise time period cannot be estimated).

Outlook & Commentary

The closure of the Balkan route and the EU-Turkey Agreement on refugees have transformed Greece from a transit country to a host country. This, in turn, has brought about even more problems and challenges. It has undoubtedly caused significant additional strain to the country’s already overloaded reception, registration and asylum procedures.

Volunteers, activists, ordinary citizens and NGOs have tried to fill the gaps and contribute in any way they could to these third-country nationals' needs; still, though, considerable problems remain. The provision of sufficient

and adequate accommodation facilities, comprehensive information and better and faster access to Asylum Procedures are considered to be among the main short-term problems that need still to be solved, while measures for facilitating their medium and long-term stay in the country are still pending. As regards accommodation, in particular, Greece still lags behind in providing safe and decent living conditions for all the asylum seekers and refugees population. The conditions in many sites are inadequate even to host people for a few days, let alone for months.

Undoubtedly, the Greek state has made efforts to address this reception crisis. These efforts have been supported by the EU and have resulted in a modest improvement of the situation. Yet, it is questionable whether the current efforts together with the pledged additional EU support will suffice to meet the ever-emerging needs in the medium and long term. Given the current harsh socioeconomic environment (characterised by unprecedentedly high rates of unemployment and particularly tight fiscal consolidation policy), it would seem extremely difficult to successfully promote the smooth integration of refugees into Greek society.

Notwithstanding the above, Greece still needs to improve policy planning and implementation and to draw up a comprehensive Integration Plan, which should include all the necessary means and ways to facilitate the gradual participation of asylum seekers and refugees in the economic and social life of the country.

Further reading

Amnesty International, 2016, Trapped in Greece: An avoidable refugee crisis:

http://www.amnesty.eu/content/assets/Docs_2016/ReportsBriefings/Trapped_in_Greece_final_140416.pdf

Triandafyllidou A., 2015, Turning the Refugee Crisis into an Opportunity? Current Challenges for Greece and Suggestions for Action, Issue 2015/02, December 2015:

[http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/37926/Policy_brief_152\(English-online\).pdf?sequence=1](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/37926/Policy_brief_152(English-online).pdf?sequence=1)

European Commission –Press Release, Fact Sheet, Brussels, 19 March 2016 EU-Turkey Agreement: Questions and Answers:

http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-963_en.htm

European Commission – Migration and Home Affairs, Glossary:

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/e-library/glossary/index_a_en.htm

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