



Migration: A European Question in Need of Urgent Answers

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Abstract

Migration is a major issue, not only for Europe but for the whole world, and it will remain so for years to come. It is a phenomenon caused by a number of factors and one that is beyond the capacities of a single state to tackle. Rather it requires solidarity and joint efforts to handle it. This article focuses on the migration/refugee issue in Europe, particularly from the perspective of Greece. It provides an overview of the efforts of Greece and the EU to address the challenge of irregular migration and the flow of refugees in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords

Greece, Migration, Refugees, Mediterranean, Solidarity, Turkey

Introduction

Migration is an international phenomenon that affects all aspects of everyday life across the world in terms of economics, society, and national and global security. In recent years a rise in migration has been observed that can be attributed to various causes, including conflicts, persecution and climate change, as well as a lack of security and opportunity in the countries of origin.

As the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports, migration ‘will remain a top priority for the foreseeable future’ (IOM 2018, 1). In the past two years especially, ‘there have been major migration and displacement events . . . that have caused great hardship and trauma as well as loss of life’ (IOM 2020, 2).

However, in the case of arrivals to the EU, migration occurs mainly for economic and geopolitical reasons. The migrants and refugees that arrive on the coasts of the

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Mediterranean come from authoritarian regimes, such as those in a number of African states, and conflict zones, such as Syria or Afghanistan, although a rising number of economic migrants are also arriving, mainly in the Eastern Mediterranean, from countries such as Pakistan and India.

This article focuses on irregular migration and the flow of refugees in the Eastern Mediterranean. This region—where Greece is located—acts as the border between Europe and the Middle East and Asia, as well as part of Africa. There are several reasons for the dramatic rise in the number of refugees and migrants arriving. The war in Syria, in conjunction with the role of Turkey and its particular geopolitical agenda, triggered and has perpetuated the migration flows and was responsible for the escalation in the number of arrivals that we experienced in 2015. The article provides an overview of the efforts of Greece and the EU to deal with the flow of people in the Eastern Mediterranean. It argues that irregular migration in the region is a challenge of such magnitude that no one European country is capable of handling it alone. It therefore requires a constant and effective expression of European solidarity.

The situation in the Eastern Mediterranean

According to data collected by Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, there has been a significant decrease in arrivals via the routes of the Central and Western Mediterranean, with numbers currently at their lowest since 2013 (Frontex 2020). However, in terms of arrivals via the Eastern Mediterranean route, an increase of 46% has been recorded (Ekathimerini 2020).

Since July 2019, we have witnessed a sharp increase in migration flows from Turkey to the Greek islands, which can be seen from the numbers of arrivals. According to the Greek authorities, in 2019 arrivals to the islands increased by 65% compared to 2018. A particularly dramatic surge has been recorded since July. At that time there was a clear statement/threat from Turkey regarding the migration challenge that Europe could be faced with. On 21 July, Turkish Minister of the Interior Suleyman Soylu stated that, ‘If Turkey does not bear this issue [of irregular migrants] with determination, no government in Europe will be able to withstand this wave for more than six months’ (Yilmaz 2019).

The constant threats and narrative by Turkish officials and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that they would allow the Syrian refugees hosted in the country to cross freely into the EU constituted a ‘pull factor’ in the sense that it mobilised refugees to move to Turkey’s western borders to wait for the gates to open and for the smugglers’ networks to smuggle people across the borders to Europe.

The situation described above illustrates the critical situation that the Eastern Mediterranean, and Greece in particular, is faced with. It needs to be understood by our European partners that the Greek borders are European borders as well and that a possible further increase in arrivals will threaten Europe as a whole.

The need for European solidarity

From the above it is clear that the Eastern Mediterranean is currently the area most affected by migration and in need of effective solidarity and assistance.

It should be noted that Greece was confronted with the refugee crisis of 2015 not long after the fiscal crisis of 2009. However, it is clear that the refugee/migration issue is primarily a European and not merely a Greek issue. Hence European solidarity and responsibility are key factors in the proper handling of the situation.

Solidarity is much more than a word or an idea. It is a core EU value and also has substantial political and legal aspects. Solidarity is enshrined in both the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Moreover, solidarity goes beyond mere economic support. Therefore, it is sad that a number of members of the European family are refusing to participate in the distribution of asylum applicants and thus to assist the front-line member states. This refusal is having the effect of leaving the countries on the front line exposed to the intensity of arrivals and the consequent burden that the flows cause.

It needs to be understood by our partners that only a fair distribution of refugees and migrants among the member states can bring real change to the current situation.

Greek efforts

Since assuming office, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has tried to sensitise Greece's European partners, as well as his international counterparts, to the intense migration challenge which Greece is facing. In this regard, he has held a series of meetings with his European counterparts, including French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, as well as President Erdogan. He has also put the migration issue on the agenda of European Council meetings.

My main responsibilities as Greece's Alternate Minister for Immigration and Asylum include the presentation and promotion of Greek concerns, priorities and goals in the international arena with regards to the migration/refugee issue. To achieve this, I am in constant contact with all the international stakeholders involved, with the aim of securing alliances and establishing stronger cooperation with our European and international partners. To that end I have conducted a series of meetings.

With Greece committed to the principles of constructive dialogue, I have personally held meetings with my Turkish counterpart, Mr Soylyu, to intensify cooperation between the Greek and Turkish authorities and to secure the proper implementation of the EU–Turkey statement of 2016. After all, we need to remember that the EU–Turkey statement is the only existing tool for successful cooperation with Turkey on the migration issue. However, it should be noted that the Turkish authorities, the Coast Guard and the

Gendarmerie in particular, are reluctant, to say the least, to respond to Greek calls when boats are apprehended leaving the Turkish coast, thus burdening the Greek authorities with daily arrivals of almost 500 refugees and migrants. We urge Turkey to implement the EU–Turkey statement in full, which is not currently the case, and to uproot the smuggler networks that operate within its borders.

Regardless of the situation with Turkey, European assistance remains compulsory. The Greek–Turkish migration issue only represents the bilateral part of the EU–Turkey statement. The EU must ensure further funding for Turkey (Gatopoulos 2019) so that the refugees that are now on Turkish soil can be accommodated and settled there.

Greece has taken a number of measures to deal with the migration issue. The actions taken by the Greek government can be said to cover both the internal and the European/international level. The following measures have been announced and implemented internally:

- The relocation of migrants to the mainland in order to decongest the camps on the islands in the Eastern Aegean Sea.
- The transfer of unaccompanied minors to the mainland in order to speed up the reunification of families.
- Further strengthening of the border patrols through closer cooperation with Frontex and NATO.
- The implementation, since 1 January 2020, of new asylum legislation. This change speeds up the examination of asylum requests and the return of rejected migrants. It should be mentioned that the current government inherited a backlog of over 75,000 unprocessed applications and that in the period 2015–19 only approximately 2,000 returns took place. This was mainly due to the false ideological view of the previous left-wing government of the Coalition of the Radical Left (Synaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás, SYRIZA), which perceived the migration issue as a purely humanitarian one, without focusing on the serious dimension of security.
- The provision of support for local communities. The islanders, as well as people in parts of the mainland, are experiencing ‘migration fatigue’. After five years of constant flows, they are still trying to accommodate and help the arriving migrants, but understandably they are tired.
- The implementation of initiatives to assist unaccompanied minors by providing shelter and appropriate living conditions.
- The construction of five new, strictly controlled reception and identification centres on islands in the Eastern Aegean Sea.

On the European level, there are a number of positive factors that indicate that a more focused and adequate approach is being taken to the migration issue. First and foremost, it is of significance that the European Commission, under President Ursula von der

Leyen and Vice-President for Promoting our European Way of Life Margaritis Schinas, has placed the migration/refugee issue at the top of its agenda. German Minister of the Interior Horst Seehofer has also set the issue high on the agenda of the forthcoming German EU Council Presidency in the second half of 2020.

Greece has been and will remain intensely involved in the negotiation of the new Common European Asylum System. So far, we have submitted three policy papers:

- We launched a trilateral initiative with Cyprus and Bulgaria to put the Eastern Mediterranean migration front at the centre of European attention. A joint text was submitted to the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council in October 2019.
- We submitted an initiative to the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council in December to establish a Common European Return Mechanism based on using leverage and incentives for countries of origin, an enhanced role for Frontex and, of course, an expression of solidarity from our fellow member states.
- At the last informal EU Justice and Home Affairs Council in Zagreb we submitted a proposal to address the issue of smugglers' networks. In Turkey in particular, as mentioned above, there is a vast network of smugglers operating within the borders, transporting people across the Aegean to Europe. The key element in tackling the migration/refugee issue and especially illegal migration is to uproot these networks.

With regard to the proposal of the European Commission to replace the existing Dublin III regulation, which provides a mechanism for determining which EU country should examine an application for international protection that has been lodged in one of the member states by a third-country national or a stateless person, we consider that it is indispensable that any new legal text takes into account the actual capacity of a member state to handle asylum applications. As mentioned earlier, Greece already has a backlog of over 75,000 unprocessed applications, inherited from the previous government, on top of which hundreds more are being added on a daily basis. According to Vice-President Schinas, the European Commission is expected to submit its proposals in spring this year (Ekathimerini 2019b).

Public diplomacy is another important aspect of dealing efficiently with the migration/refugee issue. It is necessary to design and implement campaigns that will both inform the public about the issue and convince third countries of the necessity of cooperating with the EU on this matter. In this context, it is necessary to point out that there should be incentives offered to third countries, on the basis of 'more assistance where there's more cooperation, and less assistance where there's less cooperation'.

Conclusion

It is sad and unacceptable that there are a number of EU member states that have come into the negotiations with fixed positions and that are disinclined to show willing and

effective solidarity. Front-line member states, such as Greece, cannot change their geographic position and therefore will take the responsibility that they have to take. However, it is unjust and goes against the principle of solidarity enshrined in the EU treaties that only a few front-line states should have to carry a burden beyond their capacity and power for the whole Union.

In light of all of the above, the need to address the migration/refugee issue is imperative. Greece is playing its part by dealing with the burden of the Eastern Mediterranean front on a daily basis and by participating actively in all negotiations that will form the European Commission's proposed New Pact on Migration and Asylum. However, none of the possible proposals and plans will succeed unless all European partners and stakeholders assume their share of responsibility for the common burden.

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Author biography



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