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The Greek State's Response to the Refugee Crisis and the Solidarity Movement

Event Analysis

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Introduction

Last year, Greece became the epicenter of attention not only for the newly elected SYRIZA government and the negotiations for a bail-out with creditors, but also for its role as the main border-crossing point for hundreds of thousands of refugees, coming from war zones in order to continue their journey towards central and northern Europe. The country, located 'on the doorstep of Europe', is on the frontline of Europe's biggest immigration crisis since the Second World War. It is thus a 'frontier' state between European Union states and the various countries which refugees or immigrants leave to seek asylum and/or a viable livelihood elsewhere. Hundreds of people are attempting the short but dangerous crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands in unseaworthy, overcrowded vessels that often founder and capsize.

The Greek state tried to cope with the rapidly increasing administrative and practical needs; but at the same time it is under the pressure of, on the one hand, a bewildered European Union [EU], improvising its immigration policy and, on the other, the implementation of a very strict patrolling of its external borders, which has nonetheless resulted in thousands of refugees drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. What started as a flow of refugees has become a political, humanitarian and existential crisis for the European Union, precisely because there has been no common European approach. Greece's incapacity to deal with refugee flows is related in various ways to the EU's incapacity to protect its external borders and also to comply with international law, which guarantees protection to persons fleeing violence and persecution.

According to the official statistics of the United Nations Refugees Agency, UNHCR,¹ the number of arrivals of refugees in Greece by sea reached 856,723 in 2015, while according to the Greek Police, the number of people who crossed the border illegally was 797,370 in the first eleven months of 2015, compared with only 72,632 in 2014.² Over 50% of the newcomers are clearly refugees. More precisely, refugees from Syria constitute 55%, followed by Afghans with 25% and Iraqis with 11%. The increasing arrival of refugee populations, the

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¹ UNHCR. n.d. Refugees Emergency Response. *The UN Refugee Agency* (accessed: 22. February 2016).

² N.N. 2015. Statistics. *Astynomia* (accessed: 22. February 2016).

loss of over 3,771 human lives in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea in 2015 alone, the closing of borders and the controversial decisions of national and European institutions constitute the main pieces of a puzzle that still awaits a solution.

According to several media, European and German officials claim that the outcome of current negotiations between the Greek government and the Troika is connected with Greece's stance on the refugee issue. That means that the more involved the Greek government becomes in the containment of refugee flows, the more "flexible" will be the handling of the issue of Greek debt. In reality, austerity policies were connected with a more repressive obstruction of immigrant and refugee flows in the domestic arena from the beginning of the financial crisis. The fence along the Greek-Turkish border was built in 2010 under the PASOK government, and later governments continued on the same path.

The fence along the shore of the river Evros was constructed in 2012. It is 11km long and covers a major part of the Greek-Turkish border where the main flow of immigrants was entering the country. According to the Greek minister of Internal Order, the purpose of the fence was to discourage smuggling and illegal immigration and this will send a message that Greece is not an open playground. According to minister, Greece will not allow to become a transit country for the other EU countries.

Today it is obvious that the fence did not stop the flow of refugees. However, it did achieve two very important things: First, it managed to seal Greece's northern borders. This was achieved alongside a militarization of the whole area that included border patrols, the use of thermal cameras, arrests and deportations. Secondly, it reoriented the immigrant and refugee flows towards the Turkish coasts and from there, to the Greek islands. It did not mean, in any case, an end to people entering the country. The figures rose from 11,447 reported in 2013 to 392,567 in the first nine months of 2015. The building of the fence and the closure of the land border with Turkey explains the reorientation of refugee flows towards the sea.

Civil Society Responses to the Refugee Crisis

In the last few months, thousands of immigrant families - mainly Syrian refugees - arrived in Greece every day. On islands like Lesbos and Kos, there was the possibility of a very serious humanitarian crisis as well as difficulties in responding to the issues of food and housing. The refugee families were sent to areas without sufficient infrastructure.

To cope with this, the State, local authorities, NGOs and volunteers have taken action in rescuing and supporting these people through their journey. Where the state apparatus was absent, or its structures were insufficient, civil society organizations in many different forms (e.g. professional NGOs, volunteers, ad hoc groups and collectives) tried to fill the gap. With the central government unable to properly provide for many of its citizens, let alone refugees or migrants, the humanitarian vacuum has often been filled with solidarity initiatives, and the management of the crisis has been left largely in the hands

of organizations working on the ground, in camps, without any larger policy guidance.

In the beginning authorities, especially in the island of Lesbos, tried to suppress local expressions of solidarity by arresting volunteers who used their own vehicles to move refugees from the shore to the cities, describing them as smugglers. The local transport system and taxis were not allowed to carry refugees. Eight collectives and NGOs that constitute a local solidarity network issued a public statement asking the authorities to stop arresting volunteers. The locals who were arrested were declared innocent in courts, although they explicitly said that they would defy the law. A few days later, a new bill was voted through by the parliament, allowing volunteers and citizens to transport refugees that were rescued from the sea. From that point on, civil society has tried to help.

In the main cities, the movement supporting refugees grew rapidly during the summer of 2015. Refugees coming to Athens from the islands gathered in public squares and stayed in tents, since there was no infrastructure to host them. The government did not have a plan to deal with the growing problem. Feeding the refugees was left entirely to volunteers and NGOs. Eventually, a place was found and a camp was constructed. On the islands the situation was no better. In Lesbos, all the ferries were booked and refugees were looking desperately to buy tickets to travel to the mainland, while registration camps lacked any form of a functioning queuing system as well as dignified infrastructure or provision for basic needs. More than 10,000 refugees were gathered in Moria, a registration camp in Lesbos, originally built as a prison. The situation in the first months was described by the media as similar to a war-zone, with unbearable conditions.

This kind of support was not confined to Greece alone. Under the motto “all refugees are welcome,” a solidarity movement made its appearance throughout the Balkan route. Support for refugees was expressed in all European countries via demonstrations welcoming refugees in train stations, but also via acts of civil disobedience, such as transporting refugees with private cars. In Vienna, for example, thousands of people welcomed the refugees in train stations offering food and clothing. On October 3rd, a demonstration took place, again in Vienna, that gathered over 30,000 people and was supported by many NGOs, trade unions and political parties. Similarly, in Germany many people helped refugees to cross the Austrian-German border.

Greek commitments

In the European Commission meeting of 25 October 2015, which discussed taking immediate action to manage the refugee flow, Greece agreed to increase reception capacity by 50,000 places in order to discourage the movement of refugees or migrants towards the border of another country of the region.³ To realise the 17-point plan of action agreement, Greece has to take measures that mean the prohibition of free movement and the containment of the incoming

³ European Commission. 2015. Meeting on the Western Balkan Migration Route: Leaders Agree on 17-Point Plan of Action. *Europa*, 25. October 2015 (accessed: 22. February 2016).

population in specific places. These decisions cover only small aspects of the matter. Until now, the country has not managed to comply and it is doubtful that it will do in the near future. So far the creation of hot-spots, places where registration and fingerprinting proceedings take place, or the creation of new camps, is a relatively slow process which has met with resistance from some local populations that depend mostly on tourism. At the same time, rumors and statements from member state officials are pointing towards the exclusion of Greece from the Schengen Agreement, due to the fact that the country has shown very slow - if any - progress in implementing the commitments. Under international pressure, the Greek government has called for the support of the Greek army to take over the construction and management of the camps. The government received a lot of criticism for this agreement, also domestically, mostly due to the fear that Greece will be converted from a transit country to a country of accommodation, or in other words, as a "country-barrier".

Given the situation in all reception areas, the quality of services that will be provided in terms of organized camps is also doubtful. More specifically, in order to make possible the creation of 30,000 places of reception, spaces have to be found that can support the desired number. The intent for the creation of facilities with the minimum possible capacity does not look feasible, because it cannot be supported administratively and will be relatively costly. For this reason, the creation of organized camps looks the most likely choice.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, the borders with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) remain relatively open, allowing all Syrian refugees heading to Austria or Germany to pass, while all other ethnicities (such as Iraqis or Afghanis) are excluded. At the same time, FYROM is building a double fence along its border with Greece, in order to be ready to stop all access to the Western Balkan route when the decision is taken.

In order to deal with the refugee flow, the EU started to make plans to stop the free movement of refugees. More specifically, the EU started negotiations with Turkey regarding stopping refugee flows within its own borders. Secondly, maritime borders will be controlled with the help of NATO forces, although their role is still unclear. A worrying implication is that the militarization of border control is not only about the political desire to protect nations by excluding vulnerable people; it may also be pushed by borderless financial interests. Thirdly, Greece accepted to create five "hot spots" in Greek islands, and 50-100,000 refugees will be hosted in Greek territory.⁴

In general, the Greek government adopted a "humanitarian" rhetoric and discourse, perceiving refugee flows as a moral obligation, which was confined to two main points: minimizing the human casualties and allowing refugees to exit the country.

⁴ Emoth, Robin and Ivana Sekularac. 2015. Greece Agrees to Host 50,000 Refugees as Part of New Plan. *Ekathimerini*, 26. October 2015 (accessed: 22. February 2016).

Refugee flows will not stop, as the geopolitical situation in the region will not change in the near future. On the contrary, they will become a permanent issue requiring substantial management. What we witnessed last summer is that the *ad hoc* management of the issue in times of high and rising tensions (large numbers of arrivals in entry points, large numbers of arrivals in the city of Athens, over-concentration in temporary camps) is hasty and fragmented. Still today, the policy response follows the events, but does not build the prerequisites for effective action.

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