ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER Akademik Dergi

ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER KONSEYİ

ISSN: 1304-7310 (Print) 1304-7175 (Online) http://www.uidergisi.com.tr

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Dimitris KERIDIS

Prof. Dr., Department of International, European and Regional Studies, Panteion University

To cite this article: Keridis, Dimitris, "The Migration/Refugee Crisis and the (Un/Re) Making of Europe: Risks and Challenges for Greece", *Uluslararasi İliskiler*, Vol. 15, No. 58, 2018, pp. 69-80, DOI: 10.33458/uidergisi.518934

To link to this article: https://dx.doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.518934

Submitted: 15 January 2018
Printed Version: 01 June 2018

Uluslararası İlişkiler Konseyi Derneği | International Relations Council of Turkey
Uluslararası İlişkiler – Journal of International Relations
E-mail : bilgi@uidergisi.com.tr

The Migration/Refugee Crisis and the (Un/Re) Making of Europe: Risks and Challenges for Greece

Dimitris KERIDIS

Professor of International Relations, Department of International, European and Regional Studies, Panteion University, Athens, Greece.
E-mail: Dimitris.Keridis@tufts.edu

ABSTRACT

The migration and refugee crisis that erupted in 2015 landed recession riven Greece with a series of humanitarian, political, social, and financial as well as foreign policy and security challenges. Following a near disastrous open-borders policy steeped in leftist ideological parochialism, Athens aligned itself closely with Germany in support of the EU-Turkey deal that drastically reduced the human flows from Turkey into the EU and invited NATO naval forces to help monitor the implementation of the agreement. This paper is structured around two parts: the first part describes the immigration and refugee crisis itself, from a global, European and national-Greek perspective; the second part analyzes the risks to and policy responses of Greece and how they relate to the country's overall geostrategic position, at a time when Europe is being redefined as it struggles to respond to a multitude of challenges.

Keywords: Migration, Refugees, Schengen Area, Frontex, Aegean

Göç/Mülteci Krizi ve Avrupa'nın Dönüşümü: Yunanistan için Riskler ve Zorluklar

ÖZET

2015'te patlak veren göç ve mülteci krizi Yunanistan'ı, dış politika ve güvenliğin yanı sıra bir dizi insani, siyasi, sosyal ve finansal sorunla da karşı karşıya getirdi. Atina, dar görüşlü solcu bir bakış açısıyla şekillendirilen ve neredeyse büyük bir felakete dönüşen açık-kapı politikasının ardından, Almanya ile yakınlaştı. Türkiye'den mülteci akışını büyük ölçüde azaltan AB-Türkiye anlaşmasını destekledi ve NATO deniz gücünü ilgili sözleşmenin uygulanmasını denetlemek üzere davet etti. Bu çalışma, iki bölümden oluşmaktadır. İlk bölümde, göç ve mülteci krizi küresel, Avrupa ve ulusal-Yunan perspektifinden açıklamaktadır. İkinci kısımda ise, Avrupa'da zorluklarla mücadele şeklinde tanımlanana bir dönemde, Yunanistan'ın karşılaştığı riskler ve verilen politika tepkileri ile bunların ülkenin genel jeostratejik pozisyonuyla nasıl ilişkilendirildiği üzerinde durulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Göç, Mülteciler, Schengen Bölgesi, Frontex, Ege

Introduction

In 2015 Greece faced an unprecedented crisis when almost a million people crossed disorderly its borders from Turkey on their way to Europe. The crisis landed Greece with a humanitarian challenge at the peak of its own economic recession, while it threatened to overwhelm the Greek state's limited administrative capacity, destabilize the regional order by potentially igniting tensions with neighbouring Turkey and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), marginalize Greece further within the European Union (EU), both politically and physically, and upend European integration at a time when Greece needed and depended the most on the solidarity of its EU partners.

At first, the incoming government of Alexis Tsipras exacerbated the problem by adopting an open-borders policy that reversed some of the border controls that its predecessors had struggled to introduce. Eventually, however, Athens proved flexible and realistic. It supported the emerging EU consensus on enhanced border protection and the controlled and measured flow of refugees into the EU. The Greek government abandoned its leftist proclamations and aligned itself closely with Germany in support of the EU-Turkey deal that drastically reduced the human flows from Turkey into the EU. Furthermore, the Greek government invited NATO naval forces to help monitor the flows in the Eastern Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece. Finally, the Greek government buried away much of its populist euro-scepticism and turned into a champion of furthering integration, especially in the field of immigration and asylum policy that should be dealt with at the EU level rather by each state separately.

The crisis, however, weakened the EU as a whole as it seemed to confirm its geopolitical weakness while it strengthened the nationalist, euro-sceptic voices within many EU member-states and contributed to the *Brexit* vote in the British referendum of 2016. In Germany, the EU's core country, it allowed a xenophobic, right-wing party, named 'Alternative for Germany', to enter the federal parliament, coming third in the September 2017 elections, making the formation of a new governing coalition in Berlin a difficult political and numerical exercise.

The Schengen Area did hold together, as its dissolution would have been extremely costly, especially for the very open and inter-dependent economies of northern Europe. But the crisis, that followed a period of severe economic contraction after 2008, has had a deep political impact, turning Europe sharply rightwards. With the exception of France where, thanks to the electoral law and the daring charisma of Emmanuel Macron, a staunchly Europhile president and parliament were elected, the crisis accelerated the decline of Europe's most distinct political force, that of social democracy, and contributed to the rise of a group of nationalist and, occasionally authoritarian, leaders in Central Europe that view Brussels with increasing hostility. In fact, the crisis threatened to divide the EU along a Western mainstream and an Eastern alternative (plus an exiting Britain) that has come to resent the influence and the reforms propagated by the EU bureaucracy.

Moreover, it seems that there has been no permanent fix to the challenge of managing the influx of migrants and refugees and that a new crisis might occur with devastating consequences for the future cohesion of the European Union. There is still no administrative capacity in Greece to process in a timely manner the influx of people and return significant numbers of illegal immigrants to Turkey. Germany, with its fairly generous asylum policy and with an economy of full employment, continues to act as a gigantic magnet stimulating human flows that can undermine European integration and strengthen further the return to strict national border controls.

This paper is structured around two parts: the first part describes the immigration and refugee crisis itself, from a global, European and national-Greek perspective; the second part analyses the risks to and policy responses of Greece and how they relate to the country's overall geostrategic position, at a time when Europe is being redefined as it struggles to respond to a multitude of challenges.

The Crisis

With one person displaced every 3 seconds, there are more displaced people in the world today (circa 65 million) than during World War II.[1] Still, with armed conflicts becoming more protracted and environmental pressures mounting, the number of refugees is bound to increase. Despite the magnitude and the importance of this phenomenon, general perceptions and policy responses are often incorrect or inadequate and the gap between public opinion and the opinion of experts is vast and growing.

While recent wars in the Middle East and Northern Africa pushed a dramatic wave of asylum seekers and migrants toward Europe in 2015-2016, 84% of the displaced remain in low to middle-income countries and 8 out of 10 refugees are living in neighbouring countries. With more than 40% of refugees displaced for more than 10 years and 20% for more than 30, supporting alternative livelihoods and ensuring access to services and legal protection has never been so compelling.

The above short exposé provides a concise picture of the refugee challenge from a global perspective. Zooming into Europe, before dealing with the specifics of the 2015 crisis, it is useful to bear the following facts in mind. The international regime protecting the refugees was put in place in the aftermath of World War II. The provisions of the regime are generous and mandate the full protection of refugees.

The regime was meant for the protection of the few political refugees escaping communism or military dictatorships during the Cold War, in other words for the protection of people coming from the First or the Second World, sharing the colour, religion and cultural outlook of Europeans and not for people from the impoverished and culturally alien global South. Indeed, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was created in 1950 and came of age with the 1956 refugee crisis, caused by the failure of the Hungarian revolution and the invasion of Hungary by the Soviet army when, as a result, 200,000 Hungarians fled to the West.[2]

Moreover, some Western countries, including Germany and Greece, went further and introduced specific refugee-protection clauses into their constitution. The Greek constitution of 1975 provides a good example of that when it states that "The expulsion of an alien under persecution for his defence of liberty is forbidden." (article 5, paragraph 2).

However, things evolved differently. There has been an interesting but much understudied chain of developments during the post-war era. War between states became rare and war among great powers became obsolete, in part thanks to nuclear weapons. War has not disappeared but

1 The UN Refugee Agency, *Statistical Yearbooks*, 19 June 2017, http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

2 The UN Refugee Agency, *History of UNHRC*, http://www.unhcr.org/history-of-unhcr.html (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

it has been 'domesticated'. The vast majority of wars in the post-war era have been civil wars.[3] Civil wars are very much associated with poverty and they occur, almost exclusively, in the global periphery or what used to be the Third World.[4] As a result, contrary to the experience of World War II, that gave birth to the current international regime for the protection of refugees, the vast majority of refugees and internally displaced people today come from poor, third-world nations engulfed in civil war.

As already mentioned above, traditionally, most of these people have remained either within their country of origin or in neighbouring countries. This has been the case with the millions of Palestinians festering in various Arab states, the millions of African refugees, as a result of the recurring sub-Saharan civil wars, surviving in the various African refugee camps or the millions of Afghans in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. As long as these people remained far and away from the West, little attention was paid to them. They were a concern for the hosting countries and the international humanitarian agencies dedicated to dealing with these issues but they were not a concern for the leaders or the public opinion of the powerful nations of the world.

An exception in this 70-year long history was the forced displacement caused by the Yugoslav wars of succession in the 1990s. The violent disintegration of Yugoslavia produced an intra-European wave of refugees not seen since World War II. However, the sympathy towards the victims and the relatively small numbers involved did not produce an anti-refugee backlash among the Western publics. After all, most of the forcefully displaced people remained within the borders of former Yugoslavia, with Serbia receiving the vast majority of them, some 800,000 Serbs from Croatia and Bosnia. When war came to Kosovo in 1999, it was neighbouring FYROM that hosted the hundreds of thousands of Albanian refugees escaping Slobodan Milosevic's terror. In short, the Yugoslav tragedy was a European war fought by Europeans. Europe and the West, after some hesitation, were both able and willing to deal with it. It took place in the midst of the euphoria caused by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of East European communism and the end of the Cold War. As a result, NATO intervened militarily twice, first in Bosnia in 1995 and then in Kosovo in 1999. The United States, together with its major European allies, imposed a peace settlement first at Dayton over Bosnia and then, with Security Council Resolution 1244, over Kosovo, that opened the way for the secession of Kosovo from Serbia.

Things changed dramatically two decades later with the refugee crisis of 2015. With the advent of the crisis, Europe and Germany, in particular, were flooded by non-European, non-Christian and culturally alien refugees and immigrants at a time of increasing Islamophobia and social anxiety. For the first time since the introduction of the refugee-protection international regime, Europe was asked to walk the humanitarian talk it has been preaching for seven decades.

At first, Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, welcomed the newcomers and, in a famous proclamation that has haunted her ever since, she welcomed the challenge and reconfirmed post-war Germany's commitment to the full protection of refugees wherever they come from. However, as the crisis deepened, her allies started to abandon her. First it was Austria and then the sister party of her

3 Fotini Christia, "The Closest of Enemies: A Theory of Alliance Formation in Civil War", unpublished paper, 2. Also, Themner Lotta and Peter Wallensteen, "Armed Conflicts, 1946-2012: A New Dataset", *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol.50, No.4, 2013, p. 509-521.

4 Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns and Votes*, Harper-Collins, New York 2009.

Christian Democrats, the staunchly conservative Bavaria-based Christian Social Union. Eventually, she was forced to change course, accepted the closing of the Balkan corridor, through which most of the influx took place, with the erection of heavily guarded border fences, and sponsored an EU repatriation agreement with Turkey that decreased the flow by 97%.

Meanwhile, as a result of the crisis, many in Europe started calling for the tightening or even the abandonment of the international regime for the protection of refugees altogether. They include not only the Visegrad extremists, of the likes of Viktor Orban[5], who has equated the refugees with terrorists, but many conservatives on the centre-right as well. The overall European consensus has moved towards the better management of borders[6], the speedy review of asylum claims, the repatriation of those whose claims were rejected and the granting of economic aid to the poor and distressed countries where most immigrants come from, provided they do a much better job in controlling their borders effectively.[7]

As the French President Emmanuel Macron put it in his speech at the Sorbonne in September 2017:

> Only with Europe can we effectively protect our borders, take in those eligible for asylum decently, truly integrate them, and at the same time quickly return those not eligible for such protection. So long as we leave some of our partners submerged under massive arrivals, without helping them manage their borders; so long as our asylum procedures remain slow and disparate; so long as we are incapable of collectively organizing the return of migrants not eligible for asylum, we will lack both effectiveness and humanity ... we need to do that without leaving the burden to the few, be they countries of first entry or final host countries, by building the terms for genuine, chosen, organized and concerted solidarity.

Nevertheless, the feeling remains that the problem of immigration and refugees is here to stay, that the income inequality among the world's regions has increased, that globalization has facilitated immigration and that Europe will be facing similar or worse crises repeatedly in the future.[8] Interestingly, the 2015 crisis proved that even small numbers can have huge political consequences. There were no refugees going to Great Britain and, yet, the images of disorder and chaos emanating from the Greek islands of the eastern Aegean played a major role in the voters' turn against Europe in the British referendum. There are no refugees in Hungary today and, moreover, there are no refugees who want to go to Hungary anyway. This did not stop Orban from turning the refugee crisis into a major public concern and from proclaiming a crusade against the refugees and the cosmopolitan elites of Brussels who supposedly support them. Even the number of close to two million people who came into Europe in 2015, while much higher than in previous years, is, comparatively speaking, manageable, one might argue, for a European Union of 510 million with vast economic resources at its disposal.

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5 Neil Buckley and Byrne Andrew, "The rise and rise of Viktor Orban", *Financial Times*, 25 January 2018, https://www.ft.com/content/dda50a3e-0095-11e8-9650-9c0ad2d7c5b5, (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

6 Thierry Tardy, "Operation Sophia's World: Changes and Challenges", *Brief Issue, EU Institute for Security Studies*, Paris, November 2017.

7 Uuriintuya Batsaikhan *et al.*, *People on the Move: Migration and Mobility in the European Union*, Blueprint Series 28, Bruegel, Brussels, 2018.

8 Zsolt Darvas, "How the EU has become an immigration area", *Blogspot, Bruegel,* 6 December 2017, http://bruegel.org/2017/12/how-the-eu-has-become-an-immigration-area/ (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

With this background in mind, let's now turn to the crisis itself and its impact on Greece. The numbers paint a dramatic increase in the amount of illegal crossings into the European Union during 2015. While there were 72,500 crossings in 2012 and 283,500 thousand in 2014, the number exploded to 1.8 million crossings in 2015, reports Frontex Risk Analysis Network.[9] According to UNHCR, the majority of these crossings, around one million, took place through the Mediterranean Sea routes, and, more specifically, from Turkey into Greece, through the eastern Aegean Sea.[10] The total number of arrivals in Greece increased from 77,000 in 2014 to 911,000 in 2015. Whereas in the past, prior to 2014, most arrivals involved land crossings, mainly over the river border between Greece and Turkey in Thrace, in 2015 more than 90 percent of arrivals were by sea, with the Greek island of Lesbos being the primary destination followed by the islands of Chios and Samos. From these and the other Greek islands across from the Turkish coast, refugees and migrants were transferred to the northern border at Idomeni, on their way to Central Europe, in what became known as the Balkan corridor.

According to Greek Police statistics, the number of sea crossings increased 1,905 percent between 2014 and 2015, from 43,500 to 872,500, of which half a million came from Syria, 213,000 from Afghanistan, 92,000 from Iraq followed by citizens of Pakistan and Iran.[11] Among Syrians there were many women, children and older people. However, incoming Afghanis were mostly young men. The crisis peaked in October 2015 with 218,000 sea crossings into Greece but the number remained substantial until March 2016, when, following the signing of the EU-Turkey agreement, the influx started receding.

However, according to the *Financial Times:*

> … some worry the problem is merely being moved elsewhere." In April the numbers of migrants reaching Italy exceeded the total for Greece for the first time since June 2015, according to Frontex, the EU border agency. Some 8,300 migrants were detected on the central Mediterranean route compared with 2,700 on the Turkey-Greece crossing.[12]

According to UNHCR, there are around 15 million refugees in the world today, excluding the internally displaced people and the 5.1 million Palestinian refugees, registered with UNRWA since 1949. Syrians constitute the largest group, followed by Afghanis and Somalis. Due to the Syrian civil war, Turkey became the largest refugee-hosting country worldwide in total numbers, for the first time ever, but Lebanon remained the country with the highest concentration of refugees in per capita terms.[13] Today, it is estimated that some 3.1 million Syrians are in Turkey alone,[14] with only 10 percent in refugee camps and the rest in various Turkish cities, according to a Turkish Confederation of Employer Associations' report.[15] It is important to keep this broader picture in mind because while the increase in refugees and illegal migrants heading to Europe in 2015 was dramatic, the actual number reaching the European Union, which comprises 28 member-states, remained relatively small,

9 *Demo News*, Vol. 26, 2016, p.5.

10 Ibid, p.6.

11 Ministry of Citizens' Protection, *Information Report (unofficial)*, Athens, 5 February 2016.

12 Kerin Hope, "Migrant numbers returned to Turkey fall short", *The Financial Times*, 15 May 2016, https://www.ft.com/content/491d2bf6-1aa7-11e6-a7bc-ee846770ec15 (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

13 *The 2015 Refugee Crisis through Statistics*, European Stability Initiative, 17 October 2015.

14 *Turkey: Refugee Crisis,* ECHO Factsheet, European Commission-Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection, April 2016.

15 Murat Erdogan and Unver Can, *Syrians in Turkey*, Turkish Confederation of Employer Associations (TISK), Ankara, December 2015, p.22-23.

especially when compared with the number of refugees reaching some smaller and much poorer countries outside Europe.

Why the surge? The answer to this question is not so straight forward. There is the obvious reason of the Syrian civil war. Indeed, while violence in Syria erupted in 2011 and intensified after 2012, the summer of 2015 was a turning point. The reversal of Assad's fortunes, with the help of Russia, meant the prolongation of the war and persuaded many Syrians to leave and seek permanent resettlement elsewhere, preferably in Europe. The Islamic State's reach from Syria's eastern wastelands into its Kurdish and Arabic heartland, in the north and the west, and into Iraq, with the fall of Mosul, that country's second largest city, together with the intensification of the fight around Syria's main city, Aleppo, further contributed to the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and Iraqis.

However, there is no consensus that the objective realities on the ground in Syria and Iraq alone caused the surge. Far from it, the cause of the surge is hotly debated in Europe, as the refugee crisis became highly politicized and polarized between two opposite visions. One is best represented by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and the other by Hungary's Prime Minister Victor Orban. For Orban, there was no influx of refugees but an 'invasion' of illegal immigrants, as even Syrians came to Europe not directly from war-torn Syria but through safe Turkey. Furthermore, the flow included many non-Syrians, coming from poor third-world nations. According to Orban, this 'invasion' took place because of the misguided perceptions and the policy mistakes of the passive liberal elites of Europe who espouse multi-culturalism at the expense of Europe's Christian identity.

Critics of Merkel, both inside and outside Germany, pointed to her statements, welcoming the Syrian refugees stranded in Hungary in September 2015, as a main reason for turning the refugee wave into a tsunami.[16] Similarly, the newly elected Greek government of Alexis Tsipras, initially a radical leftist, was accused of foolishly abolishing all border controls and doing away with the detention of all illegal entrants, as applied by the previous Greek administration, led by Antonis Samaras, a conservative.

Critics claim that when it comes to influxes of such magnitude, being "humane" has the unintended consequence of acting as a magnet, attracting more people and complicating, rather than resolving, the refugee problem. They point to the fact that whereas, in the past, Italy was the prefered gate of entry into Europe, after the election of Tsipras to the Greek premiership, in January 2015, Greece became, by far, the most heavily trafficked entrance into Europe. Furthermore, the influx receded when the "inhumane" closing of the land border took place, effectively blocking the Balkan corridor.

It is true that the Greek government included many activists and supporters of migrant and refugee rights. But even Greeks who did not belong to the Left showed a certain understanding for the government's argument. Faced with Turkey's intransigence, boats entering the Greek territorial waters could only be escorted to the nearest Greek port and not be pushed back towards Turkish waters, since this could easily have caused their sinking and the loss of human lives. However, when the pressure from Europe to do something and start controlling the flows mounted, Tsipras, quite

16 Christiane Hoffmann, "Merkel's Humane Refugee Policies Have Failed", *Der Spiegel*, 26 February 2016, http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/the-limits-of-humanity-merkel-refugee-policies-have-failed-a-1079455.html (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

realistically, subscribed to Merkel's plans for a deal with Turkey, that involved the return to Turkey of all people coming to Greece after 20 March 2016, and the detention of all entrants in the Greek islands away from the Greek mainland.

Apart from the 'pushing' and 'pulling' factors described above, that directly contributed to the surge, there has been a third set of indirect factors. These factors concerned the policies of other countries in Europe's borderlands. Italy, under the leadership of Matteo Renzi, abandoned the policy of '*mare nostrum*' and intensified the patrolling of its sea borders during 2015. Morocco successfully cooperated with Spanish authorities to effectively control the land and sea border between the two countries. On the contrary, Turkey, faced with a humanitarian crisis within its borders, a failed policy in Syria and Europe's indifference, did not do much to stop or, even limit, the smuggling of hundreds of thousands of people from its coasts.

The refugee crisis afflicting Europe in 2015 was the result of many factors, with each factor pointing to a different culprit and requiring a course for future action.[17] While there has been a certain rise in the 'demand' for crossing illegally into Europe, the incoherent and ineffective border-controlling and refugee/immigration policy on the part of the EU as a whole exacerbated the problem. The increased 'supply' of illegal, uncontrolled, undocumented and, often, chaotic crossings further stimulated the demand to migrate in the first place.

As a consequence, during 2015, there was a continuing shift in the flows of people coming out of Syria from Lebanon and Jordan towards Turkey, as the easiest conduit into Europe. Similarly, Turkey attracted many economic immigrants from Africa and Asia who wanted to cross into Europe. It has been little noticed and not much discussed in Europe but this accelerating shift threatened to destabilize Turkey and provided the main impetus for agreeing to the March 2016 deal with the EU.

In sum, all these events affirmed Europe's need for both an effective and unified border-control mechanism and a legal and organized way for immigration, grounded in the protection of refugees according to international law, a *via media* as proclaimed by President Macron.

Greece's Geostrategic Position in and after the Crisis

While the crisis initially threatened Greece's international standing, at the end it was somehow and, at least momentarily, resolved thanks, in part, to its privileged geostrategic position. What were the primary risks involved? To begin with, the risks were many and serious. The first and most immediate of them all was to have Greece cut off from the Schengen area where it belongs and turned into a pan-European hotspot and detention centre for immigrants and refugees alike. In the most nightmarish scenario, Greece would have become for Europe what Nauru is for Australia. The small island republic of Nauru in the south Pacific has been turned into a giant camp for the detention of all boat arrivals into Australia in exchange for some financial aid.[18] The prospect seemed real when the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia built a fence along the border with Greece and policed it with the help of some of Greece's EU partners. The then foreign minister of Austria, Sebastian Kurz, currently the country's newly elected chancellor, organized meetings with his counterparts from the countries lying

17 Roderick Parkes, "Nobody Move! Myths of the EU migration crisis", *Chaillot Papers*, EU Institute for Security Studies, Paris, December 2017.

18 *Refugees and asylum in the Aegean, Report*, European Stability Initiative, 26 January 2018, p.12.

along the Balkan corridor excluding Greece. Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency) dispatched a mission on FYROM's border with Greece. There was a lot of noise for suspending Greece's membership in the Schengen area. Finally, on 12 November 2016, Germany temporarily reintroduced border controls for the flights from Greece, citing concerns for the security situation and the threats resulting from the continuous significant secondary movements. Since Greece shares no land border with any other member-state of the Schengen area, border-free travel from Greece is only possible through air and through the sea lane to Italy.

Another risk had to do with the security of Greece as a hosting nation, in the broader sense of the term. There is no doubt that the human wave of 2015 coming into Greece from Turkey included a small percentage of criminals, terrorists and would-be jihadists. A gunman, killed during the terrorist attack against the *Stade de France* in Paris in November 2015, carried a passport that belonged to a Syrian refugee who had passed through Greece the month before. There have been several stories of smuggled guns, forged passports and jihadist networks reported in the press. There was also a concern about public health and a fear of epidemics which did not materialize.

Another risk arose unexpectedly from the work of NGOs and international agencies. As the crisis gathered pace, Greece was flooded by a plethora of NGOs, pro-refugee activists and the media. UNHCR established a mission in Greece to deal with the emergency. While most of their efforts were commentable and they efficiently filled a gap in the management of the human flows crossing the waters in the Aegean Sea, their priorities and interests occasionally clashed with those of the Greek state. To begin with, these groups and agencies did not recognize the distinction between a refugee and an economic immigrant and thought of every incomer as deserving a free passage and asylum if he/she chose to apply for one. There were many incidents when activists attempted to mobilize and organize demonstrations and various forms of civil disobedience against the Greek authorities. The UNHCR itself is not accustomed to operate within a European environment as most of its past experience had to do with situations where state authority was non-existent or very weak. Many of these organizations had a lot of funding from various sources, including the EU, a significant administrative capacity, a long experience dealing with crises and a very good access to world media. As a result of this mostly complementary but sometimes antagonistic symbiosis between the Greek state and the NGOs/UNHCR, a peculiar relationship developed, punctured by the occasional flare ups of accusations of corruption from each side against the other.

In a more traditional sense, the crisis threatened to cause a deterioration in Greece's relations with Turkey. At a minimum 'search and rescue' operations in the Eastern Aegean are complicated affairs. The proximity of the Greek islands to the Turkish mainland make the crossings easy during most of the year and limit the time for the coast guard to respond to just a few minutes. When NATO was invited to monitor the situation and assist the two states and Frontex, the Greek-Turkish rivalry complicated its mission. Alarmed by the crisis, NATO's defence ministers decided to dispatch NATO's Standing Maritime Group 2 to conduct reconnaissance, monitoring and surveillance in the territorial waters of Greece, Turkey as well as in international waters. But NATO's mission has included only the northern and not the southern Aegean and cooperation with Frontex has been rocky. In both cases, it was Turkey objecting to the expansion of NATO's mission into the Greek Dodecanese and in working closely with an EU institution, since Turkey wants no NATO operations in the demilitarized Dodecanese islands and is not part of the EU.

In addition, the flow threatened the stability of all the countries lying along the Balkan corridor, most of which are poor and fragile to begin with.[19] The building of a fence by the authorities of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia along the border with Greece was received as a particular afront to Greek pride. More ominously, the crisis seemed to afford Turkey and Russia an opportunity to undermine Europe's liberal consensus, which they have both come to detest in recent years. Ultimately, the crisis threatened to lead to the fragmentation of the EU with the nationalization of refugee policies and the adoption of a beggar-my-neighbour attitude towards the problem. In certain quarters, Greece was vilified for its inability to control its borders, process the influx in an orderly fashion and provide its EU partners with reliable security data. The crisis reconfirmed Greece's image as the sick man of Europe, the weakest of the weak links, a perennial problem that needed constant supervision if not amputation.

Greece, however, found two unexpected 'allies' in its efforts at climbing back to some international respectability. The first was Victor Orban, his rhetoric as well as his policies. The other was Tayip Erdogan who agreed to the EU-Turkey deal.

Orban's policies of fence building trickled down to Hungary's southern neighbours who got scared they might got stuck with thousands of unwanted refugees. This forced others to build their own fences effectively sealing off the Balkan corridor. In the age of social media, news travel fast. Prospective travellers in Turkey soon learned that crossing into Greece would probably mean their confinement in a hotspot on a Greek island where living conditions were bad. However, it should be noted that fences can only work if and for as long as they are heavily patrolled; otherwise, loopholes are soon found and the flow trickles in as is currently the case.

Furthermore, Orban's aggressive rhetoric, specifically targeted towards a resentful domestic audience, frustrated by the ever elusive convergence of its standards of living with Western Europe after thirty years of reform, highlighted the perils of anti-European populism for the European elites. In juxtaposition, the Greek stand appeared less frightening and more liberal, rational, serious and pro-European. While the euro crisis had divided Europe between North and South, the refugee crisis divided Europe between East and West, reopened the wounds of the Cold War division but put, at least for a moment, Greece on the right side of history, together with Germany and its other old west European allies.

However, the main reason for Greece's come back, away from the grave risks the crisis initially posed, had to do with Turkey. The big question here is why did Erdogan offer his help and agreed to a deal with the EU? Some reasons are obvious: money and some rewards for Turkish citizens. Turkey was promised more than 3 billion of euros in aid for its refugee problem and an acceleration of the visa-free travel into Schengen for its people.[20] Currently, Turks are the only people west of Russia, together with the Kosovars, who need a visa to enter Schengen.

Two other reasons have not received a lot of attention but they did play a role. The one had to do with the declining desire of refugees to leave Turkey in the first place, as they preferred to remain close to Syria, where things started to get a bit more stable in 2016, and the Balkan route was closed. The

19 *Balkan Human Corridor, Essays on the Refugee and Migrant Crisis from Scholars and Opinion Leaders in Southeast Europe*, The Institute for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University, New York, June 2016.

20 *On solid ground? Twelve facts about the EU-Turkey agreement in 2016*, Report, European Stability Initiative, January 2016.

other had to do with Erdogan's ambition to be recognized as a powerful player on a par with Merkel, who together can shape Europe's future. The EU-Turkey deal reaffirmed this belief and created some space for the rapprochement of the two on an equal footing. Rather than begging for EU accession from a position of weakness, Erdogan struck a deal with Germany from a position of strength.

However, the most important reason for Turkey not only agreeing to but, actually, championing the deal had to do with Turkey's own growing sense of destabilization caused by being turned into a global magnet attracting hundreds of thousands of people wishing to cross illegally into Europe. The more people boarded the boats heading towards the Greek islands the more people arrived in Turkey or planned to make the trip to Turkey. By the fall of 2015 the situation in Turkey was getting out of hand and Ankara understood this simple dynamic that escaped most liberal media reporting on the crisis.

The deal itself has pulled Greece out of the refugee conundrum, allowed for some EU aid (monetary as well as in personnel and technical advice) to flow to Greece as an EU front-line state while it drastically reduced the human flows that had threatened to overwhelm the Aegean islands. Moreover, the deal has provided the breathing space for the rethinking of Europe's asylum and immigration policy.

However, the EU leaders remain short-sighted. Relieved at managing to control the immediate crisis, they currently seem uninterested in dealing with its underlying causes and, thus, they make sure that the crisis, in one form or another, will return. One statistic is particularly disheartening: the total number of people returned from Greece to Turkey after the signing of the deal is only a few hundreds and it remains smaller than the corresponding number before the signing of the deal. In other words, although repatriation is at the core of the EU-Turkey deal, it is not working due to the inability of processing the asylum cases currently piled up in Greece. While asylum cases in the Netherlands are decided within two months, in Greece and elsewhere it might take years, cancelling both premises of Macron's vision for effectiveness and humanity.[21]

Schengen has exhibited some of the same flaws found in the monetary union and the euro. It was designed as a technical solution to facilitate travel and trade among the core European countries without much consideration of the politics involved. It worked as long as there was no crisis. When the crisis erupted, its political weakness came to the fore and threatened to unravel it. And, just as was the case with the crisis of the euro, the refugee crisis has led to strengthening its provisions and to increasing coordination among its member-states but not to the resolution of its genetic flaws.

In the case of the euro, the main flaw has to do with the asymmetry between the surpluses of the north and the deficits of the south. In the case of the Schengen, that main flaw has to do with the attraction of Germany as an immigration destination and the asymmetry in the administrative capacity of the EU member states in dealing with the resulting flow in an efficient and humane way.

For all the difficulties involved, the stakes have been raised and failure is not an easy option. The unravelling of Schengen would have had dramatic consequences for inter-European trade and traveling. Most European economies are extremely open and interlinked with their neighbours. Reintroducing border controls would have deducted billions of euros from Europe's GDP. For all the appeal of the populist argument against immigration and in favour of renationalizing immigration policy, it is this inescapable economic logic that has proved integration's most important ally.

21 *Amsterdam in the Mediterranean*, Report, European Stability Initiative, January 2018.

The irony in all this is the fact that Greece is the country that benefits the least from Schengen and, consequently, would have lost the least from its dismantling. The reason is that the Greek economy is fairly closed, the value and volume of goods traded with the Schengen area is a miniscule fraction of the total inter-Schengen trade and Greece shares no land border with any other Schengen member-state. So, for Greece Schengen is only about air-travel which mostly concerns the tourist industry and not the trading of goods. And, air-travel is already fairly restricted due to heightened security checks before boarding a plane.

Inescapably, for Greece the political effects of the 2015 refugee crisis were cumulative, as it occurred on the footstep of an economic depression. Despite some initial hesitation, Greece reaffirmed its devotion to Europe, as an unshakeable national strategic priority and put its trust on a European solution to the problem. The defeat of the anti-European option is to be welcomed to the extent that a Grexit (from the eurozone, the Schengen or the EU itself) could have exposed Greece to unmitigated geostrategic disasters. But it has to be admitted that the victory of the European option had more to do with the Greeks' lack of confidence in their own power rather than the strength of the EU.

The EU reality remains deeply problematic as it involves forces and dynamics that, left unchecked, might further contribute to Greece's marginalization into an unfavourable European periphery. It is high time for the Greek elites to realize the dangers involved in their unquestionable Europhilia that often leads to a policy inertia or policy dependency on Brussels. They must find the courage, imagination and competency to work for the reform of the EU architecture, while understanding that EU membership is not a panacea but, on the contrary, it can, depending on national choices, accentuate problems and pathologies. In that regard, a good start for Athens would be to work together with other front-line states, such as Italy, for a new robust EU immigration and refugee policy. This policy will not only strengthen EU integration but it will also rebalance the costs of this integration in favour of southern Europe, that, without discounting its own responsibility, has paid the heaviest price for the flaws of the euro and the Schengen in recent years.