

■ International Conference in Athens

## Europe's Borders: Security, Migration and Human Rights

Organizers: Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSS) / Southeast Europe Association (SOG) / Konstantinos Karamanlis Institute for Democracy  
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□ For the second time within a year, the Southeast Europe Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft / SOG) organized an international, one-day conference in Greece on the twin issue of refugees and migration in Europe. Almost to the day a year ago, in May 2016, the third German-Greek Media Dialogue took place at the European Cultural Centre in Delphi, Greece. The workshop's title in 2016 was "Refugees in Greece and Germany – An Epochal Challenge". This challenge has lost nothing of its importance since then.

Thus, in cooperation with the Athens office of the Hanns Seidel Foundation (Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung / HSS), with its dedicated representative Jenny Kapellou, and Prof. Konstantina Botsiou from the Konstantinos Karamanlis Institute for Democracy, the SOG organised and participated in this year's international conference entitled "Europe's Borders: Security, Migration, Human Rights". Here was a Troika of international organisations working on the ground in Athens and delivering timely results on a hot-button issue for Greece, Germany and many of their neighbouring countries in Europe.

The one-day conference took place in Athens and was attended by over 150 participants as well as panellists from six different countries representing institutions in Brussels, Berlin, Sofia, Belgrade, the diplomatic community in Athens, Members of Parliament in Greece and Germany, the Orthodox Church of Greece, the Hellenic Coast Guard, Hellenic Air Force and the Firefighters Association of Greece. The financial assistance in organising the international conference by the Hanns Seidel Foundation representatives in Athens and Munich was duly noted and much appreciated by the other two co-organizers.

In comparison to the first conference in Delphi, the title of the second event in Athens underlined to what degree the policy challenges and public debate have shifted. In Delphi, the

focus remained on country-specific developments and policy tools. A year later, the geographical scope has been extended. Discussions on the continent are now seeking answers to questions such as security and public safety, human rights for refugees in host countries and appropriate requirements for the integration of migrants in receiving societies.

As *Gerald Knaus* from the European Stability Initiative (ESI) in Berlin underlined, developments during the past year suggest that refugees and migrants arriving on the shores of Greece and Italy from Turkey and Libya have declined, not least for reasons of the bilateral agreements between the European Commission and Turkey from March 2016. But this reduction in overall numbers does not imply that sustainable solutions have been found. While the Aegean Sea is calmer throughout 2016 and in early 2017 in terms of numbers of arriving refugees and migrants, Italy is heading towards a record number of arrivals in 2017. This points to a relocation of migration routes and human trafficking.

A key challenge remains in how to approach and reach agreements with 'failing societies' and 'falling' states such as Libya, Somalia, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen? In the fall of 2016 the European Commission and the Afghan government signed an agreement that enables the deportation of Afghan asylum seekers within the European Union back to Kabul. Likewise, EU decision-makers are seeking to stem the flow of migrants across the central Mediterranean route between Libya and Italy. This transit route has become the busiest – and deadliest – crossing for asylum seekers entering the EU, many of whom originate from sub-Saharan African countries with low rates of asylum acceptance in Europe.

The largest country group arriving in Italy in 2016 was from Nigeria, more than 40,000 people, followed by Niger, Congo and Sudan. Between January first and end-June 2017 more than 72,000 migrants arrived on Italian shores from Libya alone. This influx during the summer's warmer weather and calmer Mediterranean seas is straining the ability of Italian authorities to cope. The situation has reached such dimensions that the government of Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni in Rome threatened to block the country's ports to foreign-flagged ships carrying migrants.

Thus, any EU attempts to extend bilateral or multilateral agreements to an ever-rising number of countries and interlocutors face formidable numerical challenges. The rising numbers of refugees and migrants arriving in Italy and Greek islands in the course of 2017 makes the implementation and monitoring of such agreements all the more complex and controversial. By the same token, burden sharing among countries in Europe remains a work in progress, with some states willing participants while others reject this notion outright.

This situation leaves Italy and Greece as countries that have been turned into holding pens for migrants by the European Union's Dublin Regulation. By July 2017 fewer than 21,000 of the 160,000 people already in Italy and Greece whom EU member states agreed to relocate in 2015 had been transferred from these two countries to other locations on the continent. In fact, Germany and France have taken in more than 4,000 refugees and migrants. The smallest country participating in the European Schengen area – Lichtenstein – has accepted more refugees for relocation from Greece, namely ten, than the EU member states Poland, Hungary & Austria put together, namely zero!

As Italy and Greece rest at the European geographical fault lines of the mass movement of men, women and children from different territories, countries and continents, the European Union is faced with the urgent task of finding joint and sustainable solutions to asylum

processing, the legality and political appropriateness of deporting refugees back to high-risk war zones (see Afghanistan). Any chances of making progress in these vexing policy areas can only be made by joining forces – an issue repeatedly emphasized by members of the conference's first panel on "Migration and Refugees". If and how Italy, Malta, Greece and Spain can jointly push common initiatives to the European level of decision making remains to be seen, but the urgency of the task is without doubt.

The second panel of the conference sought to link the issue of solidarity and burden sharing with the security and integration challenges arising in the course of the past years from the number of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe. In September 2015, the European Council adopted a refugee relocation scheme, which would "redistribute" 160,000 refugees and asylum seekers from Italy and Greece to EU member states. The practical application of this scheme has been a complete implementation failure more than one year later. As *Stefan Lehne*, visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe in Brussels highlighted, the European asylum system was built for "fair weather conditions".

Two countries – the United Kingdom and Denmark – do not participate in the EU relocation programme because they have secured so-called "opt-out clauses". Denmark even introduced legislation to seize refugees' jewelry and cash. Other EU member states have established such high administrative thresholds (e.g. Finland and Bulgaria) that keep the numbers they accept very low. Panelists from Germany, e.g. *Hans-Peter Uhl* (member of the Bundestag for the Bavarian CSU) argued that it is not a case of increasing or adhering to any prescribed quotas from Brussels. Rather, the overall objective should be to reduce the number of arrivals and focus on the appropriate means to integrate those who have a legal status to remain in their host countries.

Such different points of view underscored the contrasting approaches among EU member states, e.g. the so-called Welcome culture vis-à-vis the hardline approach taken by the Visegrád countries, in particular Hungary, Slovakia and Poland. But instead of finger pointing or engaging in the blame game, what the situation illustrated during the panel's vibrant discussion was how member states are reverting to national solutions, propagating refugee ceilings, border controls, building walls and hard-wire fences (e.g. the 4-metre-high fence in Hungary along the 176-kilometre border with Serbia). Collective European approaches "are in high demand, but currently in low supply", as one discussant summarized, accordingly. Instead of focusing on burden sharing, the approach to migrant assistance is "too security-focused", noted another discussant.

Despite controversies over approaches, quotas and potential joint solutions, the conference repeatedly returned to one key conclusion: In the policy fields addressing refugees and migration the availability of a silver bullet remains a populist illusion. But it was also underlined that in various European countries a race to the bottom is currently taking place regarding the provision of services to refugees and migrants in areas such as accommodation, legal counseling or food distribution. The term "Fortress Europe" was occasionally articulated by panelists and discussants, the objective being to deter new arrivals from settling. But others warned that such means of policy making risk to backfire on those refugees and migrants who are already in European countries, have received legal status and seek to adhere to available integration programmes.

How such challenges are addressed at the local level of municipalities and by civil society representatives was the topic of the conference's third panel "Human Rights and Integration".

While major policy decisions are taken in Brussels, Berlin, Ankara or Athens, it is the administration of day-to-day affairs at the local level which has the most immediate impact and visibility for arriving refugees and citizens dealing with the newcomers. The mayor of the Greek island of Chios in the Aegean, *Manolis Vournous*, described how nobody in the municipality could have been prepared for the developments starting in 2015.

Elected as a first-time mayor in May 2014, his initial agenda was completely upended when he had to rapidly become a crisis manager and administrative expert in migration, asylum processing, transit capacity from the island to the mainland and the organization of integration policies with little financial assistance from the political authorities in Athens. The art of improvising became commonplace. Solving basic operational problems had to take precedence over the discussion of political priorities being considered in Athens or in the halls of the Commission in Brussels.

The coordination of policy responses between Chios and Athens has since improved, but much still remains to be done on the ground, all the more because the new order of the day is to develop and implement an integration policy on the island and in mainland Greece. Given the country's economic crisis and its social consequences, the availability of adequate funding resources and experienced personnel remains limited, e.g. in terms of asylum registration and processing, housing in facilities that are deemed insufficient, the provision of educational arrangements for school-age refugee children and medical care for families.

The concluding roundtable discussion of the conference focused on "The Future of Europe and its Borders". The ambitious title invited political representatives from Germany and Greece as well as from the European Commission to discuss the broader political and administrative outlines of the conference's three key elements – security, borders and human rights. As the late Zygmunt Bauman has argued in his seminal book from 2016, "Strangers at our Door", the policy decisions taken today in Brussels, Berlin or Athens may store up explosives for future detonation. As became abundantly clear from the concluding panel, there are no shortcut solutions to the existing challenges and problems.

*Simon Mordue* from the Commission's DG Home illustrated in a polished presentation, how 900 border guards from EU member states are currently assisting the Greek authorities. The European Commission has also decided to take Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to the European Court of Justice for non-compliance with recent EU regulations concerning refugee relocation and accommodation. – The politics of migration continue to occupy the minds of elected representatives from Greece and Germany. Their concerns are primarily time sensitive. In 2019 the next elections for the European Parliament are scheduled to take place. Members of Parliament from both countries argued that this leaves member states only two years' time to identify convincing solutions. Otherwise, anti-European, racist political forces risk being strengthened at the ballot box by a growing number of disenfranchised voters.

In conclusion, the international, tripartite conference in Athens provided a timely opportunity to elaborate on current challenges and future policy requirements linked to the state of play in the European refugee and migration debate. Paradoxes continue to confound policy makers, practitioners as well as panelists and discussants during the conference's deliberations. Those arriving in Europe since 2013-14 are frequently avant-garde nomads who can afford the risk to undertake the dangerous journeys. They are the "richest among the poor" as one participant explained. But those who stay behind in camps in Turkey, Lebanon, Libya, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, etc. "are sitting on packed luggage". They constantly remind us of those who have not [yet]

arrived. They are also a precursor to the fragility of assumed policy solutions in European capital cities. They illustrate the magnitude of the challenge that lies ahead.

Africa and Europe, the Middle East and Europe are neighbors. Not primarily through the prism of geography, but through the politics of maps, smartphones and social media. Europe as a continent and destination starts in Yarmouk, southern Damascus, Syria, in Mosul, Iraq, or in Benghazi, Libya. The movement of desperate people is a reality that is not going to go away by building walls, fences and raising administrative hurdles. These men and women, families with children and unaccompanied minors are at our door. Today they knock, seeking entry. Tomorrow their rising numbers may not seek passage, but could gate crash their way towards and into Europe, whatever the material costs of this permanent humanitarian crisis.