

## **Antonios Galanopoulos**

### **It is Our Duty to Help the Refugees**

These days it is not easy to write an article about the refugee issue since the conditions change every day. Still, in my view we can identify three main tendencies, which have surfaced recently: 1) the return of borders: the re-introduction of border controls and even the construction of walls and fences, 2) a shift from securitisation to militarisation and 3) an unethical 'political game'.

In 2015 more than 3.500 people lost their lives in the Mediterranean in an effort to reach Europe<sup>1</sup>. Greece found itself at the centre of what is called the 'refugee crisis'. Of the approximately one million people who arrived in Europe in 2015, 850.000 crossed the Aegean Sea and arrived in Greece<sup>2</sup>. The vast majority of the people that arrived in Greece and Europe in general, come from war zones. More than half of them fled Syria, where a bloody war has been raging for five years now.

The influx of refugees remains extremely high even nowadays. Currently, approximately 2.000 people arrive in Greece every day. According to the last updated data (22/02/2016) 94.000 people have arrived by sea in Europe, mainly in Greece, in 2016.<sup>3</sup> 90% of them come from the world's top 10 refugee-producing countries, half of them from Syria. Already more than 400 people lost their lives trying to arrive on European soil in the first days of 2016.<sup>4</sup>

### **The return of borders**

Back in 2015, the initially awkward stance of Europe was quickly followed by a hostile reaction. Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, France and Austria reintroduced controls on their internal borders, putting into danger a major European acquis, the Schengen agreement. This list of countries will probably continue to grow: on February 23 even Belgium reintroduced border controls with France to halt the arrival of migrants from the Calais camp.

New fences were added to those already existing. All in all, the EU Member States have raised fences at their borders of a total length of 235 km costing 175 million euros.<sup>5</sup> The most striking examples – for different reasons – are Hungary and Austria. And if we may have expected this attitude from politicians like Victor Orbán, the stance of the Austrian government, with a Social Democratic Chancellor, is thoroughly frustrating. We are witnessing incredible scenes, like Hungary and Austria, two Member states of the EU, urging and helping FYROM to construct a fence at its borders with Greece and the Austrian government announcing its intention to send military troops to FYROM to guard its borders.

### **A shift from securitisation to militarisation**

As if things were not bad enough already, on February 11 a very important decision was taken. NATO Ministers of Defence agreed to provide support to assist with the refugee and migrant crisis, based on a joint request by Germany, Greece and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unhcr.gr/nea/artikel/1eef1bb87c343d5d227815b6ce8de38a/ena-ekatommyriopr.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://xydakias.gr/?p=7353>

<sup>3</sup> <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unhcr.gr/nea/artikel/873401e2da97f6edda7bab04712bae4c/i-ya-anisychei-gia-t.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.amnesty.gr/news/press/article/16091/prosfyges-antimetopoi-me-ton-kindyno-kai-thanato-exaitias-tis-eyropaikis>

Turkey. Two days later, the Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2) arrived in the Aegean Sea to begin its patrols. The mission of the SNMG2 is to conduct surveillance, reconnaissance and monitoring of migrant crossings in the Aegean Sea. What we are witnessing here is a clear shift from securitisation to militarisation. It is worth noticing that this is the first time that NATO undertakes a similar mission, and it is also the first time that NATO takes action within the alliance, as both Greece and Turkey are members of NATO.

### **Political game**

Now I'd like come to my third point, the one that I called 'political game'. The EU has agreed on a refugee relocation programme. This programme foresees the relocation of in total 160.000 refugees from Greece and Italy to other EU countries. Until now only 481 refugees have been relocated to other countries. Most EU countries continue to deny hosting refugees while others set criteria (national, religious) regarding the people they wish to accommodate. As Silvia Merler wrote on the blog of the Bruegel Institute, 'this means that if relocation continues at the current speed, it will take 47 years to relocate 39,600 people from Italy and more than 100 years to achieve the planned relocation from Greece.'<sup>6</sup> This is the first aspect of the political game. The second is the isolation of Greece, namely the ring-fencing of Greece and the threat of expelling the country from the Schengen zone in order to stop the migrant and refugee flows. The pretext for this threat is the assessment that Greece did not effectively guard its borders, which are at the same time the external borders of the EU. But, as the Alternate Minister of Migration Policy Yannis Mouzalas pointed out 'In practice what lies behind the accusation is the desire to repel the migrants. Our job when they are in our territorial sea is to rescue them, not let them drown or repel them.'<sup>7</sup> The third and final aspect is a disgraceful idea which has been promoted recently from media like *Financial Times* and *The Economist*. They called it 'debt-for-refugees deal'. In the beginning of the year Gideon Rachman wrote in the *Financial Times* that 'If the Greeks were seen to be doing the Germans a massive favour by stemming the flow of refugees, it would become much easier for Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, to make the case for debt relief for Greece to her voters. And once the Germans moved, the rest of Greece's creditors could be expected to fall in line. The deal could also be very attractive for Greece. It would get permanent relief from unpayable debts, in return for a temporary role as the EU's main reception centre for refugees'<sup>8</sup>, while in the main article of *The Economist* (in the issue of February 6) we read that 'Dealmaking is possible. In exchange for hosting large refugee hotspots and camps on its soil, Greece should get help with its debt and budgets which it has long sought to ease its economic crisis.'<sup>9</sup>

It is evident that Europe does not rise to the occasion. I will conclude with some obvious observations which paradoxically many politicians across Europe tend to forget, so that we are obliged to repeat them again and again. Instead of trying to create barriers and obstacles, European countries must create safe legal passages towards Europe. The only way to stop people from risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea is to offer them a legal and safe way to reach Europe and request asylum. At the same time, the EU has to help and assist in any way possible

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<sup>6</sup> <http://bruegel.org/2016/02/eu-migration-crisis-facts-figures-and-disappointments/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.wsj.com/articles/greek-minister-rejects-criticism-over-allowing-transit-of-migrants-1445772236>

<sup>8</sup> <http://gulfnnews.com/opinion/thinkers/greek-debt-is-the-key-to-the-refugee-crisis-1.1661298>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21690028-european-problem-demands-common-coherent-eu-policy-let-refugees-regulate>

countries like Jordan and Lebanon which actually have taken on a disproportionate responsibility. Furthermore, not only the existing relocation programme must be put into effect urgently but a new one must be introduced, an international relocation programme for refugees who live in camps in Jordan and Lebanon.

Finally, the one and only solution is to stop the war in Syria. This should be the absolute priority of the European Union. Until peace has been re-established, it is our duty to help, protect and accommodate all those who are fleeing from war. Letting them drown in our seas is a crime that will be a stain on our common history. In the meantime – as we cannot expect that European leaders will change their views and actions from one day to another – it is essential to strengthen the existing refugee solidarity movements (and create new ones where needed) across the whole continent.