

Will a Quota Plan for Asylum Seekers Work —and Why Not?

Peter Seeberg

News

In mid-June 2015 the number of migrants landing by sea in Europe in 2015 passed 100.000. The news was brought forward at the International Organization for Migration homepage. The number is higher than the number at the same time last year and is an expression of the growing sea-borne migration across the Mediterranean.¹ Almost 55.000 migrants have reached Italy, while a somewhat smaller number has arrived in Greece, a little more than 46.000. The news comes after the EU in May 2015 launched a new plan for dealing with the phenomenon, and one of the recommendations proposed by the European Commission is an EU-wide redistribution scheme, according to which a number of the arriving asylum seekers should be distributed more fairly across the 28 EU member states. The proposal has been met with criticism from several EU states, which have suggested that taking part in the plan should be voluntary.

Summary

The article describes the recent situation in the Mediterranean, where the number of asylum seekers arriving from countries south and east of the Mediterranean Sea is increasing significantly. The European Commission has suggested a plan, "A European Agenda on Migration", which will redistribute the migrants arriving mainly in Italy and Greece, so that all 28 EU member states will take their part of the responsibility. The plan should – according to the EU-Commission – be mandatory and this has resulted in criticism from several member states, not least the UK. The article claims that the idea from the EU-Commission of a mandatory quota plan for asylum seekers will not work, because too many states will pretend, that the problem does not really belong to them. They fear that accepting a system according to which each state has to accept a fixed quota of asylum seekers in a recent context might later on lead to a common EU migration policy, which are beyond national control and would make it difficult to avoid responsibilities for internal crisis situations emerging in other parts of the Middle East or North Africa in the future.

Analysis

Introduction

The European Commission in May 2015 published a plan for dealing with migration called “A European Agenda for Migration”.¹ The document is introduced by historical thoughts on the universality of migration as human phenomenon and the fact that people come to Europe for many different reasons. It is also, normatively, stated that “Europe should continue to be a safe haven for those fleeing persecution as well as an attractive destination for the talent and entrepreneurship of students, researchers and workers.”² However, the main reason for the launching of the document is that the EU over the last years has experienced a hitherto unseen migration pressure, not least as a result of thousands of asylum seekers arriving mainly in Italy and Greece, having left Libya and Turkey, respectively.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has documented that the main nationalities of the migrants coming to Italy are Eritrean, Somali, Nigerian, Syrian, Gambian, and Senegalese, while the migrants leaving Turkey for Greece, mainly are from Syria and Afghanistan. The growth in the arrivals to Italy represent a slight increase compared to the same period in 2014, whereas the numbers of migrants arriving to Greece is increasing dramatically – in 2014 as a whole 34.000 arrived in Greece, this year after only five months already more than 46.000 asylum seekers have come to Greece.

The document calls for immediate action for handling the challenge of what is described as a human tragedy in the whole of the Mediterranean, by, to mention the main measures lined up in the document, saving lives at the sea, targeting criminal smuggling networks, responding to high-volumes of arrivals within the EU by relocation, and to develop a common approach to granting protection to displaced persons in need of protection involving resettlement on European ground. It is hardly surprising that the issue is somewhat controversial and that the “esprit de corps” among the EU member states has been put to the test. A significant expression of this is that according to IOM estimates the Italian coastguards and other Italian entities dealing with the migrants in the course of the first five months of 2015 have rescued over 28.500, while vessels from other EU member states (among which Germany, Ireland, Spain, Sweden

¹ EU-Commission, “A European Agenda on Migration, 13.5.2015. Com(2015) 240 Final,” (Brussels: European Commission, 2015).

² Ibid., p. 2.

and the UK) and commercial vessels together have rescued a little more than 10.000 migrants, out of which 3.500 were saved through the EU's Frontex and Triton programmes.

Mandatory or Voluntary – that's the Question!

The ideas of relocation and resettlement are meant to relieve the pressure on the “front-line states”, first of all Italy and Greece. But added to that it is also the ambition to establish an emergency system, which can lighten the weight of taking care of the many asylum seekers and refugees. A redistribution key has been calculated, so that the distribution of the migrants can take place based on factors like the GDP of the given receiving state, its population size, the recent unemployment rate and the number of migrants already received. Later on it is the plan to work out a more permanent system to deal with the challenges of large numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in possible future crisis situations. The idea is that the measures automatically should be triggered when or if a mass influx emerges.

The EU Commission has furthermore argued that the system should be mandatory. The recent system is seen as insufficient, both when it comes to handling the general migration pressure on Europe and more specifically when it comes to the question of refugees produced for instance by the war in Syria. The whole issue has furthermore evident human rights dimensions. The issue is therefore putting pressure on the EU, as a result of the fact that probably around 2.000 people already this year have lost their lives attempting to reach European shores, but also because the migrants, who actually reaches Europe often are severely traumatized by their experiences while attempting to get here, not least the brutality imposed on them by the gangster-like behavior of the human smugglers.³

The arguments for establishing the system are thus strong – both from a human and a logistical point of view. As part of the ambitions on behalf of the Commission a programme aiming at bringing 20.000 refugees to Europe should be launched at a cost of € 50 million over two years. The programme should be organized in cooperation with the UNHCR, recognizing that the refugees have a right to asylum in Europe, if they can claim that they are fleeing from persecution of life-threatening violence. Added to that the Commission wants to acknowledge the burdens some member states have shouldered as a result of the fact that many economic migrants have managed to

³ BBC, "Will Eu Commission's Quota Plan for Migrants Work?," (2015), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32693737>.

stay in the EU states – and that there is a need to increase the work tightening the cooperation together with the sending countries in Africa and the Middle East. It should be emphasized, that realistically speaking the idea of bringing 20.000 refugees to Europe via a new EU programme will not solve the fundamental problems related to a continued migration pressure on Europe.

New Internal EU Conflicts Concerning Migration

These complex realities call for cooperation, not least among the EU member states. Nevertheless it has been very difficult to establish a consensus around this necessity. This is partly a result of the lack of a legal framework for the EU, which includes all member states. Denmark, Ireland and the UK have opt-out clauses from parts of the EU legal structures. The UK has made it clear that she is not interested in being part of a new system, according to which they could be forced to accept larger amounts of migrants – and to give up on practices of expulsions of illegal migrants and failed asylum seekers. For Germany it is a different matter. Almost 250.000 people have applied for asylum over the last year – a number far beyond any other EU member state. Another “good guy” is Sweden, which has accepted large numbers of refugees, in relative as well as absolute numbers. The UK is, together with for instance Italy and Austria, among the states wanting to avoid a mandatory system. Migration issues are among the items, which the UK wants to keep on the list of items for negotiation.

Migration has traditionally been an issue with a potential to create internal divisions within the EU. It is difficult to identify any logical explanations for or systematic patterns in the different behavior of the individual EU member states, but irrespective of this the divisions are very real. Earlier the dividing line went across Europe along the latitudes passing through Spain, southern France, Italy and Greece due to the fact that the Southern European states, exposed to migration pressure mostly from the Arab Mediterranean states, insisted that migration should be taken seriously as item on the European agenda. Recent developments have made things much more complicated. The migration pressure is still there and the shape of the traditional migration conflicts internally in Europe as well, but the migration crisis in Syria and Libya has created new conflicts between the EU member states.

Given this reality it seems that the idea from the EU-Commission of a mandatory quota plan for asylum seekers will not work. The fear of entering into serious negotiations of sharing responsibilities among the EU member states is too strong. Too many states will prefer to keep on pretending that the problem does not really belong to them. Accepting a system according to which each state has to accept a fixed quota of

asylum seekers might later on lead to a common EU migration policy, which could force all member states to accept not only a small amount of refugees in a recent context, but could force them *for good* to accept to be part of a European crisis resolution system, if or when other parts of the Middle East or North Africa break down into internal crisis, if not war.

All over the EU it has become common knowledge that a local crisis in the countries in geographic proximity of Europe can escalate into wars with spill-over effects hitting Europe. It is becoming a common experience that it is more than difficult to send migrants back, once they are behind your borders – and finally: the European countries are still not out of the international economic crisis, and therefore left without an urgent need for replacement of an ageing European labour force.

About the author

Peter Seeberg is Associate Professor at Centre for Contemporary Middle East Studies, University of Denmark and Director of Danish Jordanian University Cooperation (www.DJUCO.org), an academic partnership-project in Amman, funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

References

BBC. "Will EU Commission's Quota Plan for Migrants Work?" (2015). Available at:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32693737>.

EU-Commission. "A European Agenda on Migration, 13.5.2015. Com(2015) 240 Final."

Brussels: European Commission (2015). Available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/communication_on_the_european_agenda_on_migration_en.pdf

IOM. "Number of Migrants Landing in Europe in 2015 Passes 100.000." *IOM*

International News (2015). Available at: <http://www.iom.int/news/number-migrants-landing-europe-2015-passes-100000>.