

The Refugee Crisis and “Free Movement of People across the EU”: While Schengen Shatters, Greece Is The Scapegoat

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The free movement of people throughout Europe, which was one of the most important gains of European integration, is now threatened by the ‘refugee crisis’. The Schengen area has been riddled with problems since the outbreak of the refugee crisis. This is due to the EU’s use of short-term policies rather than comprehensive solutions, and Greece will be the one to pay the price by potentially being removed from the Schengen area.

According to the European Council’s decision in February, Greece has three months to register asylum seekers and provide full control of its land and sea borders. However, there is no real possibility that this solution will solve the EU’s political threats against Greece, and furthermore that it would deter the EU from expelling the country from the Schengen area. Additionally Greece is experiencing cash insolvency due to its recent financial crisis, which is why the country is still having trouble implementing the EU’s demands on border security and refugee registration. Overall, it is speculated that in theory this formula may fix the latter’s overall problems, however, in practice this solution will not be able to control irregular entrances into Schengen area.

The gateway: Greece

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 80,000 refugees and migrants have entered Europe via sea routes throughout the first 6 weeks of 2016, despite winter conditions. When this number is compared to the first four months of 2015, the current rates are significantly higher. Over one million migrants, including asylum seekers, reached Europe via sea routes between April and December 2015. By the beginning of 2016 the death toll has already surpassed 400 as an estimated 2,000 refugees and their families try to reach Europe on daily basis.

91% of the migrants arriving in Greece come from 10 countries, with Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan being the highest refugee sending countries. As of 11 February 2016, 77,309 refugees out of 80,000 entered the EU through Greece. Overall, the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) recent data states that more than 857,000 out of 1,000,000 refugees entered the EU through Greece.

Consequently, the EU is applying extreme pressure on Greece to regulate its borders seeing that it is the main gateway for asylum seeking migrants from conflict zones. EU officials have urged Greece to take serious precautions in regards to the tense situation. According to the EU, Greece does not provide sufficient regulations in security measures for incoming

refugees. Important factors that need to be implemented and enforced are measures such as identification and registration of refugees, request of individual fingerprints, proof of legitimate travel documents and thorough checks of European security databases. In this context, the EU accuses Greece of not properly taking responsibility of the refugee and migrant influx.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the EU was well aware of Greece's incapacity to control its borders when the country was accepted into the Schengen area in 2000. Even in 2010, in a Schengen area report, Greece's "serious insufficiencies" in ensuring border security were highly emphasized. In this sense, Hugo Brady from the Centre for European Reform stated that between 2009 and 2011 this was actually a "very well-known secret" of Greek migrant policy. Seeing that Greece was technically part of the attempts to create a mutual asylum system in the EU, it had actually not developed a competent registration system for asylum seekers. By ignoring past realities and by asking Greece to create a new migrant and asylum system within such a short amount of time despite its own difficulties in coping with the Euro crisis, the EU is employing an unrealistic approach.

The refugee crisis has become one of the most important topics on the EU's domestic political agenda and thus it triggers harsh debates within its member countries individual political environments. Simultaneously, EU government representatives prefer to implement short-term, "cheap" policies, such as increasing border security, to avoid the effects that long-term policies may have on their own political futures. In this way, political elites are also trying to satisfy their own electoral concerns.

Therefore, the problem of mass migration flows has become a humanitarian crisis ever since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. The EU underestimates the problem as a migration and security complication, thus undermining the need to find a comprehensive and smooth solution. Instead, the EU has made Greece a scapegoat rather than finding an efficient solution. Also, the EU suggested policies to decrease the pressure on its borders, whether by proposing the creation of safe countries bordering Greece or freezing the Schengen system of visa free travel as a result of perceived security risks.

However, it has been repeatedly stated that an efficient solution can be found if the root causes of the refugee flow are addressed, and to do so the EU should strongly cooperate with international institutions and other actors in its neighbouring region. Moreover, expelling Greece from or freezing the Schengen area will not present a solution. In addition to this, the EU underestimates the reality that the Schengen area stands for much more than border security and the free movement of people.

More than free movement of people

The Schengen area and its regulations were created in 1985 among five EU member states. It currently includes 26 countries and encompasses a population of around 400 million, thereby allowing for free movement between the countries party to the Schengen agreement, effectively annulling domestic or 'internal' borders. Yet the Schengen Area's 'external' borders have nonetheless been strengthened overtime through the implementation of joint action plans and precautions. Along with the creation of the common market within the EU, the Schengen area provides for the free movement of 'people, goods, services and capital' as the four fundamental rights and freedoms guaranteed by the EU.

While the call for high security measures to be taken within the borders of the Schengen Area amid the massive migration flows limits the free movement of people, more importantly, it threatens the future of the common market, which is the most important gain of EU integration. Harming the Schengen Area may result in the loss of the free movement of workers and a serious decreases in incoming tourism revenue, foreign direct investment and foreign capital. In this context, the solution is to strengthen the Schengen Area rather than to destroy it.

Additionally, the harsh internal political debates and individual countries' implementation of security measures along their borders within the Schengen Area push the EU into a serious paradox. Focusing on the migration-security aspects of the weakness of the current system legitimizes popular approaches such as those expressed in anti-EU views, and moreover it gives ground to extreme right and xenophobic arguments. In 2011, in his speech to the European Parliament, then President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso indicated the importance of reforms of the Schengen Area, emphasizing that the current reality gives legitimacy to populist standpoints.

In brief, the EU faces a set of paradoxes regarding its migration management and migration control. State sanctioned proposals such as freezing the Schengen area and/or its regulations, and the EU's threats of expelling Greece from the Area by making it a scapegoat and erecting fences on its borders, demonstrate that nation-states are still the most effective actors when it comes to policy making regarding migration control. Through these heated debates, it can be understood that no nation-state within the EU can be rescued from the potential risks emanating from Schengen issues.

As Ulrich Beck stated, many of the achievements of EU integration are taken for granted in such a way that they will probably only be appreciated once they disappear. It seems that the EU cannot postpone the inevitable: a discussion on the future architecture of EU integration.

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