

## Europe's Double Refugee Crisis

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Europe feels under siege. Every day brings disturbing new images of desperate refugees trying to get onto EU territory by any means. But the EU seems incapable of providing a unified reaction. Tensions among member states seem to increase because the problem is so different from one country to another. On a per capita basis, Sweden receives 15 times more asylum applications than the UK (where official policy remains extremely hostile), and Germany has now become the main target overall, receiving 40% of the EU's total applications. Even on a per capita basis, this is several times more than the EU average.

In theory, it should not be this way since Europe has clear rules on who should deal with refugees: The member state in which the refugee first entered EU territory should identify him or her to avoid repeated demands for asylum; and that member state should then be responsible for processing the asylum application.

This so-called 'Dublin system' dates from the 1990s. At the time, it seemed the natural solution given that member states wanted to keep the matter to themselves and besides, the problem seemed manageable with only 300,000 applications received annually. But this year the number might be three times larger.

The Dublin system never made any sense. It put the entire burden on the frontier states. The smaller ones (like Hungary or Greece) simply do not have the capacity to register and house hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers. But even the larger ones, like Italy, have a natural incentive to look the other way when large numbers enter their territory, since they know that many of them are headed elsewhere (mainly to Northern Europe).

Germany has now recognised that this system does not work in practice and has decided to process all asylum applications from Syrians, irrespective of whether they arrive via Italy, Hungary or some other EU member state. One reason was practicality: de facto the borders have become so porous that it has become difficult to determine where a person crossed into EU territory. Moreover, a 2013 ruling by the Court of Justice of the European Union that Germany could not return an Iranian refugee to Greece (where the applicant was found "to face a real risk of being subjected to

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inhuman or degrading treatment”) probably heightened Germany’s sense of responsibility on this issue.

Germany is the strongest member state, but it accounts for less than one-fifth of the population and less than one-quarter of the economy of the EU. No single country can take in all the refugees heading for Europe.

In short, the present system is broke. This is why, a few months ago, the European Commission made a courageous proposal to distribute refugees across member states according to a simple key based on population and GDP. But this proposal was rejected on grounds that it represented undue interference in domestic affairs. Predictably, the rejection was especially strong by those countries that have the fewest refugees.

This dilemma has put the EU in its usual quandary: everyone recognises that there is a problem, but a solution would require unanimity, which cannot be found since every country defends its own interests. The only way forward is to form a group of countries that are willing to share the burden.

The fate of refugees from true disaster areas like Syria has attracted the most attention, but there are also many coming for purely economic reasons. The asylum system is not made for them since they are not fleeing war or dictatorships.

During the first quarter of 2015, Kosovars constituted the most important country of origin of refugees seeking asylum in the EU, although that country is now largely peaceful and not subject to an oppressive regime. The vast majority of asylum claims from Kosovo are indeed rejected, but this did not deter 50,000 from coming to the EU earlier this year. The inflow over the last year amounts to 80,000, or about 4% of the entire population of Kosovo. For other Balkans countries, the numbers are not as high in relation to the population, but taken together, these source countries constitute a sizeable fraction of the overall applications for asylum (close to one-half in Germany) and pose a serious political problem.

But a key question that is too seldom asked is why the numbers from Kosovo (and the rest of the Balkans) have increased so much recently. Only a few years ago, the number of applicants from Kosovo and the rest of the Balkans was between 5 to 10 times lower than it is today. There is no clear reason for this explosion. The attractiveness of Northern Europe has not changed much over this period of time and the economic conditions in the Balkans are not noticeably worse today than they were a few years ago.

The huge increase in the number of refugees from the Balkans can be explained by a self-reinforcing feed-back loop between the number of applications for asylum and the time it takes to process them. This is key since the main benefit from bogus applications for asylum (i.e. those with clearly no chance of being accepted) is the waiting time for the application to be processed. During this period, the applicant receives basic housing and social services (including healthcare) as well as some pocket money. The latter can be substantial compared to wages in the country of origin, say the poorer parts of the Balkans. For example, €500 over a few months might appear little to survive in Germany, but it is a lot compared to the average wage in many Balkan countries and many hope for a temporary job, even if it is illegal. Spending a few

months in northern Europe while an asylum application is processed is far more attractive than going home to a job that pays barely a living wage, or to no job at all.

As the number of asylum-seekers increases, so does the time it takes to process their applications, making the system all the more tempting for economic migrants. And, indeed, close to half of all asylum-seekers in Germany now come from safe countries, like Serbia, Albania or Macedonia. When Europe's populists use such cases of 'welfare tourism' to sow fear and anger among the European public, reaching an agreement to accommodate actual refugees becomes increasingly difficult.

Against this background, the EU needs to take action on two fronts. First, member countries must urgently boost their capacity to deal with asylum applications, so that they can quickly identify those who truly deserve protection. Second, the EU needs to improve burden-sharing – ideally among all countries, but perhaps among a smaller group at first – in providing shelter for those who gain asylum. International law – and basic morality – demands nothing less.