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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Journal of Liberty and International Affairs | **Vol. 1, Supp. 1, 2016 | Special Issue | eISSN 1857-9760**
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies – Bitola at www.e-jlia.com

Date of acceptance: March 11, 2016
Date of publication: May 20, 2016
Review article
UDC 325.244.4(4:569.1)

THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS IN EUROPE

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Abstract

The manuscript analyzes the current refugee's crisis in Europe and the situation of the Syrian refugees in Syria's neighboring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The presented comparative analysis between the first instance decisions in asylum policies of several European countries is accompanied by additional statistics of the refugee's influx. Several suggestions related to the necessary measures to be taken in short and long term in order to ensure more sustainable migration patterns are discussed in detail.

Key words: Syrian refugees; European Migration policy; Borders; Integration

INTRODUCTION

The refugees and migration crisis is one of the major challenges for Europe and the World after the Second World War. According to a recent report of IOM (IOM 2015b), there were about 19.5 million refugees worldwide at the end of 2014. An essential part of them, about 14.4 million, were under the mandate of UNHCR that is around 2.9 million more compared to the previous year (UNHCR 2015b). The Dublin Regulation was adopted when the EU did not expect strong arrivals of asylum seekers. However, in 2011, the so-called "Arab Spring" marked the beginning of a significant number of irregular travels across the Mediterranean from Tunisia and Libya towards Italy and Malta, that later increased in magnitude when the political conflict in Syria started. The war in Syria caused over 4 million refugees. The average of about 300.000 refugees per year in the EU during the period 1994-2002, has been replaced by a arrival of asylum seekers, reaching 663.000 in 2014 and almost 1.005.500 at 21 of December of 2015 (IOM 2015a, b). 970.000 refugees arrived in Europe by crossing the Mediterranean. The major part of them has reached Greece and Italy, while Spain, Cyprus and Malta have been less affected (Migration Policy Center 2015). Another 30.000 arrived in Bulgaria from Turkey by land (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Annual numbers of migrants smuggled at sea and land during 2015 (http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/migrant-crisis, December 2015).

THE SYRIAN CONFLICT AND THE ROLE OF THE NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

The conflict in Syria between the Government of Bashar al-Assad and other forces, which began in the spring of 2011, together with the appearance of the auto denominated Islamic State in the territories of Syria and Iraq, are the major causes of the massive migration within the countries, through the region and towards Europe. In late 2014, an estimated 7.6 million people were internally displaced and 3.7 million Syrians have left the country since the conflict began. During 2014, more than one million Syrians were registered as refugees in neighboring countries (Ayoub 2014, Oytun 2014). The Syrian conflict has put enormous pressure on neighboring Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey (Figure 2). In late 2014, Lebanon, with about 4.8 million of population hosted more than one million Syrian refugees. Similar is the situation in Turkey with more than one and a half million of registered refugees and in Jordan with more than five hundred thousands of registered refugees. More than 80% of registered Syrian refugees in the neighboring countries live in communities and cities instead of refugee camps. This arrival of refugees in the urban areas situated mainly in the northern part of Jordan and in Lebanon along the Syrian border has changed the demographics by creating problems of basic services such as water, sanitation, health care, housing, etc (UNDP 2014).

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the number of refugees in Lebanon has increased by around 25% that led to a collapse of the national health, education, and infrastructure services mainly in the areas of higher concentration of refugees. At the end of 2014, more than the half of the registered Syrian refugees lived in bad conditions without the necessary basic supplies. Similar is the situation in Jordan. Among the Syrian refugees in that

country, nearly the half lived in poor sanitary conditions. According to IOM data, in 2015 (IOM 2015a, b), 9 of every 10 Syrian refugees living in Jordan and Lebanon are below the poverty threshold and only half of the children go to school (Lebanon 2014).

In Egypt, initially there was a protection program for the Syrian refugees, in terms of health and education, but the later introduction of visa requirements for Syrians in 2013, has reduced significantly the arrivals into the country (Ayoub 2014). Similar was the situation in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, where in the fall of 2013, the authorities stop the issuance of residence permits for Syrian refugees. The situation in Turkey is also dramatic. At the end of 2014, more than 70% of the Syrian refugees live outside refugee camps offered by the government, thus struggling for basic needs such as housing, health care and education (UNHCR 2014). It is believed now that the financial aid from EU to Turkey from March 2016, will improve the living conditions and the access of the refugees to the labor market (EU-Turkey 2016).

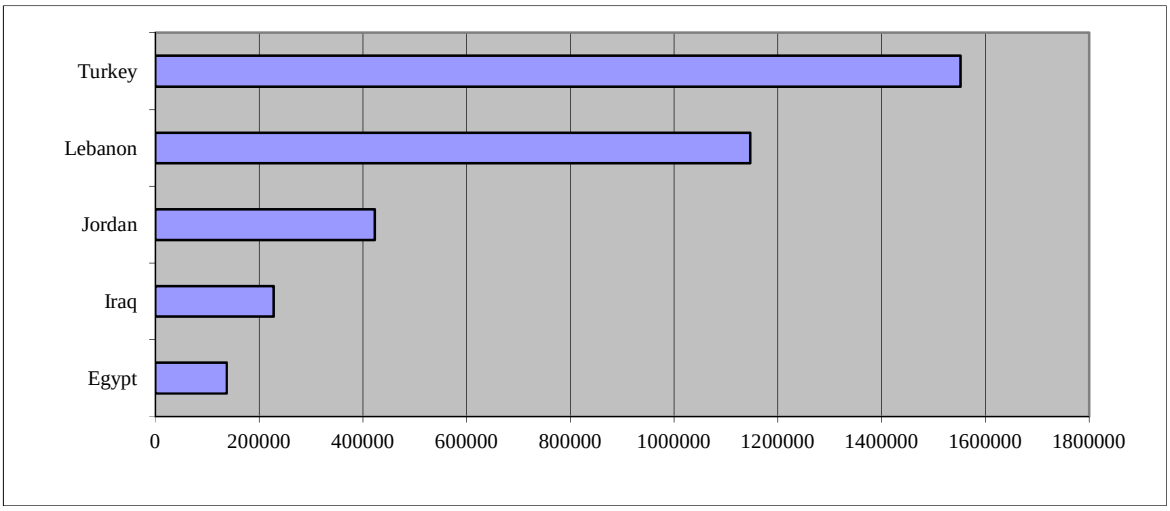

Figure 2: Registered Syrian refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey – 2014 (Bitoulas 2015, EUROSTAT). My own depiction.

THE ASYLUM SEEKERS IN EUROPE: THE SYRIAN REFUGEES

Along this paper, the migrants will be considered as people entering irregularly in the EU and not migrants in general. In these terms, the number of asylum applications received in 2014 in the Member States of the European Union was 25% higher compared to the same period in 2013 (Figure 3).

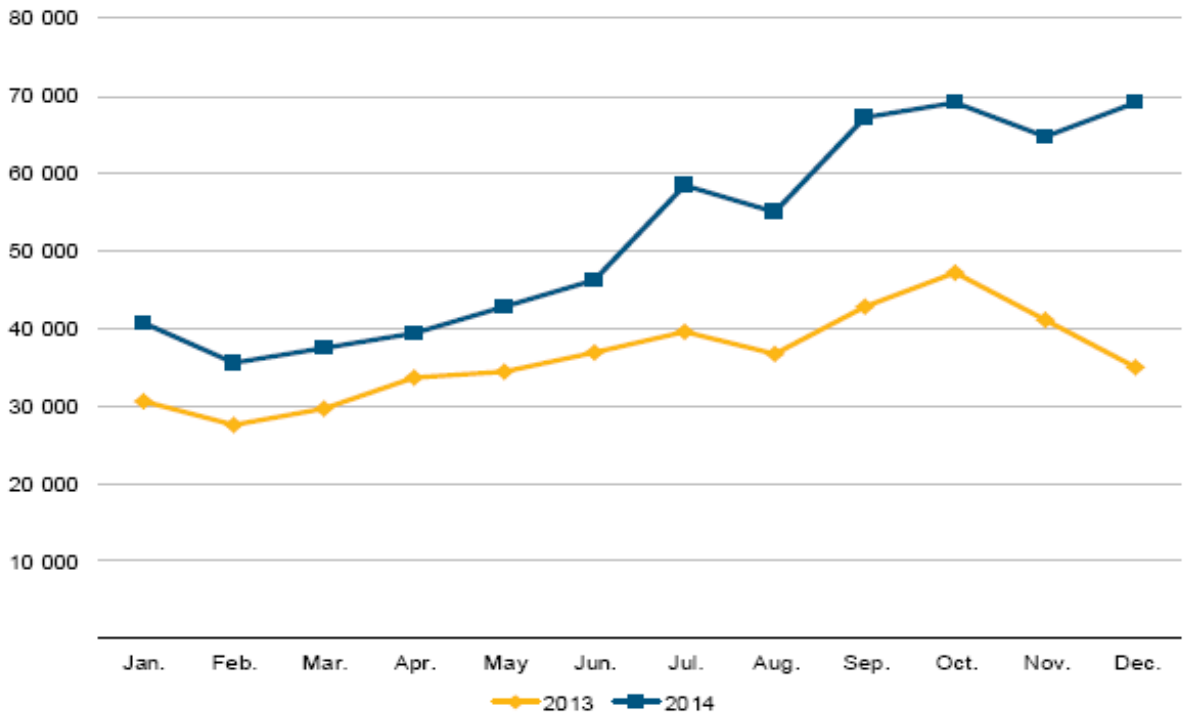

Figure 3: Asylum applicants in EU-28 during January 2013 – December 2014 (Bitoulas 2015, EUROSTAT).

More than a half million refugees have arrived in Greece and more than 643.000 people have managed to cross the Mediterranean this year. Thousands are finding their way to Germany, Austria and Sweden, with about 10.000 arriving daily in Germany (Figure 4). During December the number of the people who have arrived in Germany was around 125.000 (IOM 2015b, Bitoulas - Eurostat 2015). This means that the total number of refugee's arrivals in the country at the end of 2015 is of 1.1 million. In comparison, at the end of 2014, their number was 200.000. Hundreds of thousands of people are still waiting in Turkey. There are about 40,000 people in the path of the Western Balkans on their way from Greece to Macedonia, Croatia and Slovenia. According to recent UNHCR data, about 64% of the immigrants are Syrian, 22% are Afghans, and 7% are Iraqi. The number of male refugees,

which in summer stood at 80%, has also changed, being in November 2015 of 64%, with 14% of women and 22% of children (Figure 5) (Bitoulas - Eurostat 2015).

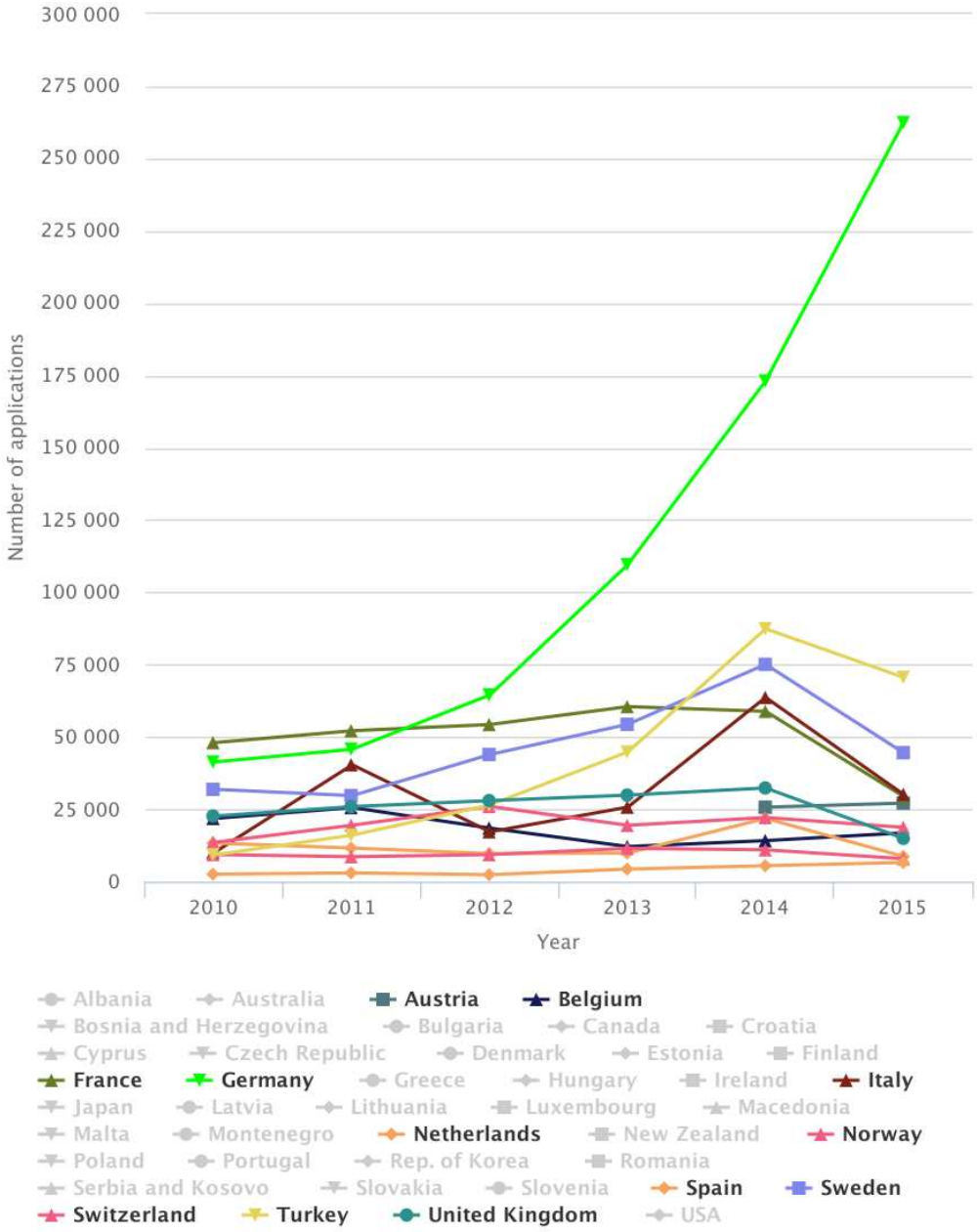

Figure 4: Number of first asylum applications by countries for the period 2010-2015 (http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/migrant-crisis/migrant-crisis-refugees, December 2015).

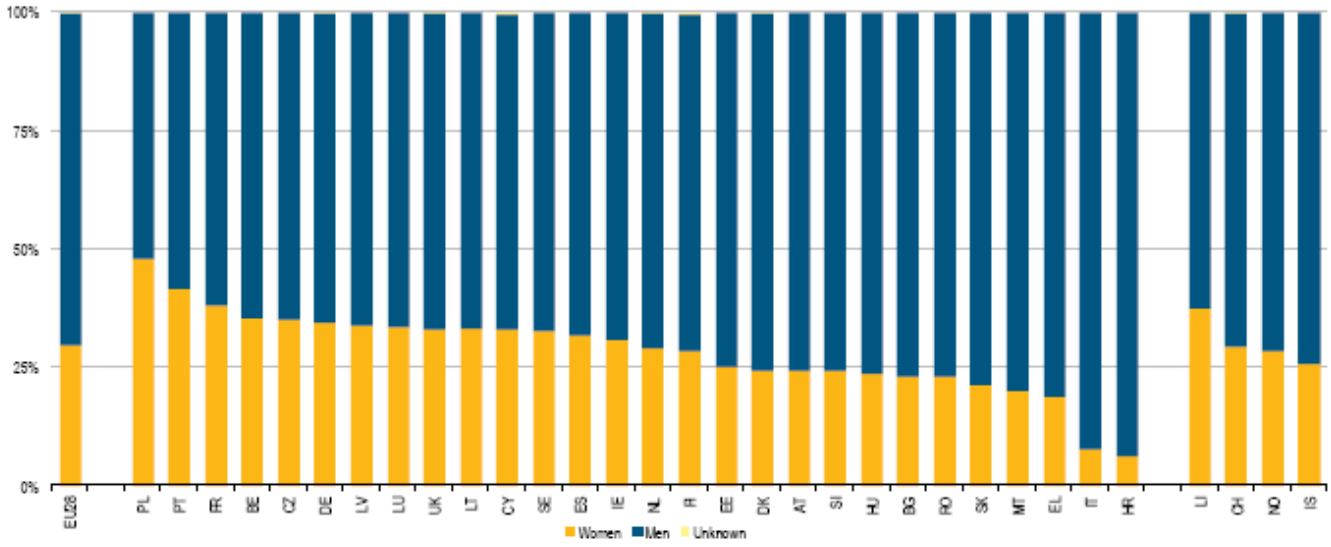

Figure 5: Asylum applicants in % by gender, 2014 (Bitoulas 2015, EUROSTAT).

In comparison with other European countries, Germany and Sweden received the largest number of asylum applications by Syrian nationals. Between 2012 and 2014, Germany received 61.885 applications for asylum from Syrians and Sweden received 55.210 (German Federal Ministry of the Interior 2014, Government of Sweden 2014). In contrast to Germany and Sweden, the number of Syrians seeking asylum in the United Kingdom and the United States was modest, being respectively 5.739 and 5.280. There are several reasons for the difference in the number of asylum seekers, mainly due to family ties, location, and administrative procedures. Sweden and Germany are generally considered among Syrian asylum seekers safe countries, giving opportunities for jobs and settlement for a long-time term. The refugees receive in these two countries housing maintenance and support for integration into the labor market. These opportunities are more reduced in countries like, for example, Greece, which is suffering important consequences of the current economic crisis. In addition, one could mention the Court of Justice of the European Unions (ECJ 2013) ruling which establishes that "asylum seekers should not be returned to that country as they risk being treated inhumanely there". According to Figure 6, the first instance decisions by outcome, corresponding to 2014, are mainly given by UK and Germany, followed by Belgium and Sweden (Bitoulas – Eurostat 2015).

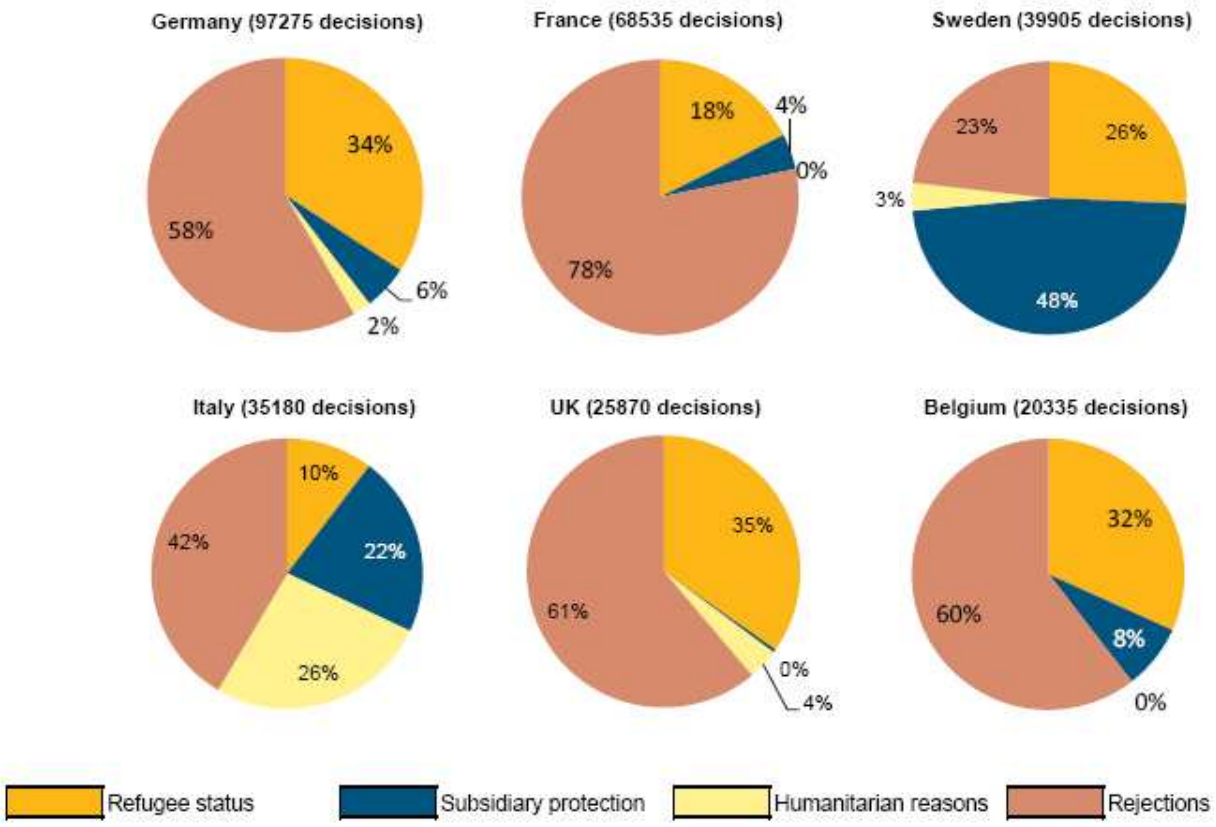

Figure 6: First instance decisions by outcome, Selected Member States, 2014 (Bitoulas 2015, EUROSTAT).

During November and December 2015, the approach of Germany and Sweden has changed towards migration as they reintroduced border checks, thus keeping to international and EU law, assessing asylum on a case by case basis. This was due to the disagreement among governments and public opinion because of the inability to achieve a sustainable migration policy. In 2015, Germany received 36% of all asylum applications in the EU, which is a rather disproportional compared to the rest of the Member States of the Union, where the average is being of 16% (IOM 2015b).

TOWARDS A MORE SUSTAINABLE EUROPEAN MIGRATION POLICY

In general trends, there were several missed opportunities by the European policy makers in order to make the migration influx more sustainable and manageable. Strong disproportions were observed not only in the most affected states such as Greece, Italy and the countries of the Western Balkans, but also in Germany and Sweden and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, who have taken a very reserved decision on the migration crisis, thus enhancing the difference between Western and Eastern European countries in terms of European migration policy. Although during the last several months of 2015, Greece showed

that the country was not enough able to strength its borders (being external of the EU), Athens rejected the plan of the European Commission for the emergency to create a European border rapid reaction force that can intervene, even against the will of the state. The same applies to governments in Madrid, Budapest and Warsaw, arguing it as an act of violation of their national sovereignty. The decision of the EU to initially distribute 160.000 asylum seekers across the EU for a period of two years appears to be useless after the arrival of nearly one million refugees and the redistribution of a modest number of only 200 refugees until the end of 2015 (UNHCR 2015a). In March 2016, just 660 refugees agreed to share and have been relocated, thus showing that "the relocation scheme is inadequate and will continue to fail" (The Guardian 2016a). At the end of 2015, Slovakia, with the support of the Czech Republic, started a trial in the European Court against this agreement, showing that the EU faced the biggest problem since it foundation.

The Schengen area can only maintain its internal borders open if the external borders are well managed. However, "if a state believes that the neighbor is not doing enough to control its external borders and it is encouraging the immigrants to leave their territory to reach the other state, the closure of internal borders may apply" (Schengen Border Code Article 26). This has been happening in the "Balkan route", where Hungary as well as Slovenia and Macedonia have put their own border fences in order to prevent the countries from the massive migration influx (UNHCR 2015b). However, the spirit of the Schengen Agreement is necessary for the normal functioning of tourism and trade and fences can only lead to major complications. Thus, new measures have to be taken. Among them are the following:

- Reduce the arrival of economic migrants in order to give better opportunities to the refugees fleeing from wars from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. The proposal of the European Commission to create centers of processing of applications is a way to manage the incoming migration flow.
- Strengthen the system for return of economic migrants. A step towards it has been seen in the recent Malta summit between the EU and Africa, which has set up a special fund of EUR 1.800 million for the Horn of Africa and North African countries, being the countries of main migration passage of economic migrants to Europe.
- Reduce the flow of refugee arrivals in order to provide better reception conditions and better integrate them, thus avoiding the growth of xenophobic parties and events due to the increasing presence of refugees. In this direction, at the end of December 2015, FRONTEX deployed 293 employees and 15 boats on the Greek islands with the goal to help the country in limiting the refugees' flow (FRONTEX 2015). According to the recent EU-Turkey agreement from March 2016, "all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as from 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey. For every Syrian being returned to Turkey from Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled from Turkey to the EU taking into account the UN Vulnerability Criteria. The fulfillment of the visa liberalization roadmap will be accelerated vis-à-vis all participating Member States with a view to lifting the visa requirements for Turkish citizens at the latest by the end of June 2016, provided that all benchmarks have been met" (EU-Turkey 2016).
- Strengthen the control on the refugee's registration. Only 10% of incoming refugees in Germany are controlled by border police. This number is too small in order to insure

state security as has been recently warned by the German Union of border police. Meanwhile the German police insist on viewing every single refugee claim for refugee status, particularly after the European Agency FRONTEX revealed that the majority of Syrian passports were false and especially after the Paris attacks of November 13th 2015, where at least one of the participants might have re-entered the EU through Greece, claiming to be an asylum seeker. Increase the mutual trust among the Member States, looking for a consensus on the migration policy. The Dublin regulation, requiring asylum seekers to apply for protection in the first European country in which they enter, must be adapted to the new conditions. Some proposals of the European commission are currently referring to redistribution around the EU bloc in times of crisis or to a "mandatory redistribution system for asylum seekers based on a country's wealth and ability to absorb newcomers" (The Guardian 2016b).

- Create a European Border and Coast Guard Agency to transfer additional sovereign power from Member States to the European Union (European Border-Coast Guard 2015).
- Improve the living conditions of the Syrian refugees in first-asylum states such as Turkey and Jordan and Lebanon.

The concern of the European population regarding the immigration has risen since 2013 thus becoming between the main ones. Countries like Germany, Italy, Hungary, Sweden, The Netherlands or Bulgaria share major concerns with regard to the refugee influx (Migration Policy Center 2015). Thus, it is necessary to work in a long-term perspective, bearing in mind that it is very unlikely to reach soon a solution for the Syrian conflict and that the arrival of economic migrants and refugees will continue to rise. Recent surveys have shown that "50% of the young people between 15 and 24 years in West Africa and 35% in North Africa are ready to emigrate immediately if they could" (Migration Policy Center 2015). An important point to think is how to adapt the labor markets to the increase of magnitude of the incoming refugees. If the host countries become permanent for settlement, the employment of the immigrants will be an important problem in a long-term perspective.

One has to think as well about how to manage a full social and cultural integration of the refugees. Europe is facing a specific problem of integrating the Muslim population. The way to reach a quick integration of the refugees is very important. The ways to do it could be, for example, the realization of common projects and exchange of cultural traditions, the obligatory participation in language courses as well as courses on history and social values. There are numerous actions in Germany and other countries that provide suitable integration and opportunities to the arrived refugees (Flüchtlinge 2016).

Among the most important points however might be the voluntary character of engagements from the immigrants and the residents' communities, and especially of those who are represented by the young people. This leads to a higher tolerance and acceptance of the new and the different being ethnicity, religion, age or education.

More steps towards this process are taken by the "German states that plan to spend about 17 billion Euros to deal with the refugee crisis in 2016. These are at least two billion Euros more than planned before by the government in Berlin". Most money will be invested in the integration of newly arrived immigrants (Die Welt 2015). A strengthening of the German asylum regulations with tighter laws on asylum has been recently approved. They

introduce asylum procedures, "making it easier to deport migrants whose claim to asylum has not been recognized by the German state" (DW 2016). There is no doubt that the longer the Syrian war lasts, the more serious will the consequences of it. Thus the International Community must intensively work to put an end as soon as possible of this severe political and humanitarian crisis in the Middle East and to give the opportunity to future generations to build again their home land and to live together by respecting differences in political, ethnical, religious, gender or age dimensions.

CONCLUSION

The current migration crisis requires the EU to rethink its asylum system and management with respect to the illegal migration and the sense of the Schengen Agreement. These actions become even more important after the terrorist attacks in France from November 2015 and in Belgium in March 2016 and the attempts of other attacks in different EU countries. For this aim a quick restoring of the trust among the Member States in order to take a common consensus in terms of migration policy is highly desirable. Giving priority to immigrants coming from war zones such as Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan before the economic immigrants, coming from many other poor countries is one of the necessary steps to be taken in order to introduce some criteria of differentiation. The Dublin regulation must be adapted to the new conditions, thus requiring the Member States to register who arrives on their territory, accompanied as well by the requirement of the migrants / asylum seekers to register. Additional mechanisms are absolutely necessary to ensure a stable and sustainable distribution of refugees among the states, thus avoiding excessive and unmanageable accumulation of refugees at some of the external borders of the EU.

It is also very important to reduce the strain on Syria neighboring countries by sharing responsibility with the international community, as well as to increase the refugee resettlement and increase of the role of private sponsorship and labor mobility schemes.

Finally, in the long term, the EU should envision mechanisms for the integration of refugees, especially in the labor market and look for perspective on how to adapt it to the refugees' influx by taking in mind the demographic crisis in Europe.

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