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*Immigration in the Eastern Mediterranean as a European
Challenge: The Role of Greece and the Necessity for a Common
European Immigration and Foreign Policy*

ABSTRACT

Immigration and refugee flows in the Eastern Mediterranean migration path have been increased since 2015, thus, creating the need for coordinated political reaction from the European Union. Some actions have been achieved, such as the EU-Turkey agreement but their effectiveness is contested, while the burden is mainly shared by the Mediterranean EU member states. At the same time, the challenges for all European countries in terms of refugees integration is becoming more and more eminent, due to the continuing immigration flows to the EU. This article analyses two basic parameters on the necessity of coordinated European policy both in the fields of immigration policy and foreign policy towards the stabilization in the Eastern Mediterranean, mainly by focusing on the role of Greece.

Keywords: immigration, refugees, European Union, Eastern Mediterranean

INTRODUCTION

There are various reasons that cause immigration of third-country nationals to the European Union (EU). Among them, the war conflicts, mainly in Syria and Libya, as well as famine in the underdeveloped countries of Asia (such as Afghanistan and Pakistan) and in the sub-Saharan countries are two crucial reasons. No less important is the fact that Turkey uses illegal immigration in order to blackmail Europe and get more funds, and increases political pressure on Greece due to the well-known Aegean dispute. Undoubtedly, the uncontrolled immigration has caused serious problems to many European countries, mainly Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain, which are the main “gates” of illegal entry. The main problems are the lack of integration, high criminality among immigrants (due to marginalization issues), overloading of the health care system and generally, fragility of the welfare system in most European countries that make their integration process more difficult. The solutions to these problems include the creation of a common European policy which should be focused on the reduction of the number of immigrants coming to the EU, providing protection to refugees outside Europe through cooperation programs with the Maghreb and Mashreq countries, a comprehensive effort to integrate third-country nationals already living in the EU as well as a more coordinated European foreign policy in order to ease the regional tensions.

APPROACHES AND RESULTS

A brief analysis of the main reasons that should be taken under consideration is needed in order to understand the crucial aspects of the immigration/refugee problem. The study aims to highlight: the interaction issues related to refugees’ integration; the issues related to foreign policy and coordination between Greece and Turkey. Both categories are based on relevant research conducted in Greece, including primary research about refugees and the Greek-Turkish relations. Consequently, the efficient European coordinated and comprehensive policy addresses the immigration/refugee issues.

THE NECESSITY FOR A EUROPEAN RELOCATION SYSTEM AND INTEGRATION POLICY FOR REFUGEES

As already stated, the South European countries have suffered most due to the huge refugee inflows over the last 5 years. The Dublin Agreement on immigration and asylum policy, which is an intergovernmental – but not European (i.e. at the European Union level) – agreement, created even more pressure on entrance countries, such as Greece and, thus, a large number of refugees and immigrants are still living

in refugee camps under difficult conditions [*Report to the Greek...* 2019]. Therefore, as long as several of these people stay in the entrance countries, the challenge for national, but most importantly European authorities, will be to offer solutions in terms of social and economic integration. However, recent research conducted by the Centre for Human Rights (KEADIK) of the Department of Political Science of the University of Crete [Kotoyannos et al. 2019: 1–14] indicated that in countries such as Greece, there is a lack of classification and categorization of the refugees' skills, competences, knowledge and needs in order to form an empirically based integration policy. This lack of information, along with the increased needs for education and language learning has exacerbated the difficulties with their social integration and has limited the chances of finding out which regions and economic-labor sectors have available vacancies that the refugees could fill.

As a result, the lack of a coordinated European immigration policy increases the difficulties for social integration of refugees in the entrance countries, such as Greece, either based on relevant measures or the plan for their allocation in other European countries. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), among the Eastern Mediterranean European countries, Greece has received the highest number of refugees as a percentage of total population [Displacement Tracking Matrix 2020]. Therefore, the implementation of a common European policy is necessary. It will enhance the allocation of refugees in all European countries according to their demographic characteristics and based on local labor market needs and refugees' skills. Meanwhile, such a plan should include parameters such as quota on allocation (even in neighborhoods) in order to avoid the danger of creating something of a ghetto. Furthermore, the European strategy should also include measures in order to foster social integration of refugees in the countries which have been most affected by the migration crisis, such as Greece, not only with direct funding but also with research (needs assessment) and documentation implemented by European authorities (instead of NGOs, which could have an assisting but not the supervisory role, as has been the case since 2015).

THE NECESSITY FOR A EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS TURKEY AND BEYOND

Recently, it has become clear that Turkey is trying to force illegal immigration towards Europe. The provocative statements of the Turkish president towards Greece and the European Union have become a daily fact. In other words, Turkey is using human tragedies, considering immigrants and refugees as a weapon in an “asymmetric war” with Greece and as a blackmail instrument against the European Union in order to receive financial support. Unfortunately, due to Turkey's attitude, hundreds of people died (among them many children) attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea and enter Europe.

Furthermore, Greece aims to protect human lives, guarding jointly with Frontex both sea and land borders, as any modern European state should do, with determination and great number of personnel and resources. However, it would be crucial for Greece to establish a contiguous zone to deal with illegal (and Turkish-led) immigration. When a ship with illegal immigrants enters the coastal zone, Greece is obliged to examine whether it is responsible for their repatriation, otherwise it would be a violation of Art. 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. In the face of such a possibility, Greece usually decides to accept them and transfer them to overcrowded refugee camps on the Aegean islands. The creation of the contiguous zone could provide Greece with the opportunity to control the illegal (and frequently Turkish-led) immigration and the opportunity to consider alternatives, without being under pressure that would be caused by the fact that illegal immigrants are in the coastal zone.

The fundamental source of tension between Turkey and Greece is the long-lasting Aegean dispute. The Turkish Coast Guard Command (TCGC) (*Sahil Güvenlik Komutanlığı*) has published alleged official maps and documents claiming that half of the Aegean Sea belongs to Turkey. In this sense, Ankara claims to gain dozens of Greek islands, the entire eastern Aegean from the island of Samothraki in the north to the island of Kastellorizo in the south. The maps and claims have been uploaded on the website of the TCGC as part of a 60-page report about the activities of the TCGC in 2016. On page 7 and 13 of the report, the maps allegedly show Turkey's Search and Rescue (SAR) responsibility area. The maps show half of the Aegean Sea and also a large part of the Black Sea, where Turkey's SAR area coincides with the Turkish Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). It should be noted that Turkey has not signed the International Convention for the Law of the Sea of 1982, which delimits the boundaries of the EEZs. However, Turkey claims an EEZ of more than 200 nautical miles (Map 1).



Map 1. Turkish claim in the Aegean

Source: Turkish Coast Guard Command, www.sahilguvenlik.gov.tr (access: 25.09.2019).

Turkey is taking advantage of the fact that Greece has not yet designated the contiguous zone in order to control illegal immigration and to perform rescue operations at high seas. Therefore, Turkey is using the immigrants and refugees as a way to question Greece's sovereignty over several islands of the Aegean and its EEZ as well as the right to extend its territorial waters width to 12 nautical miles [United Nations Convention... 1982].

According to Art. 33 of the 1982 Law of the Sea, the contiguous zone of a coastal state is the zone bordering its territorial sea. The contiguous zone cannot extend beyond the 24 nautical miles of the baseline from which the width of the territorial sea is measured. Within the contiguous zone, the coastal state may exercise the control necessary to:

- prevent the violation of customs, fiscal, immigration or health laws and regulations within its territory or territorial sea,
- punish violations of the above laws and regulations committed within its territory or territorial sea [Papadakis 2018: 36–46].

Moreover, Greece is obliged to prevent the illegal immigration according to EU law. In particular, Regulation 2016/399 of the European Parliament of 9 March 2016 states: “The control of borders is not only in the interest of the Member States on whose external borders it is exercised but in the interest of all Member States that have abolished control at their internal borders. Control should help combat illegal immigration and human trafficking, as well as prevent any threat to internal security, public order, public health and international relations between Member States” [Regulation (EU) 2016/399...]. It turns out that for all the above-mentioned reasons, immigration has been used as a weapon for exerting political pressure on particular EU countries and, thus, European coordination in foreign policy, in order to ease these regional tensions and enhance constructive partnership and stability, is more than crucial.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The refugee problem stresses the necessity for more coordination at the European level both in terms of immigration and foreign policy. It turns out that without a common asylum policy in European countries it is not possible to effectively help the East European Mediterranean countries, such as Greece. Verification of refugees' skills and competences as well as an analysis of local labor market needs are more than necessary.

It is also true that no matter how hard Greece tries to deal with illegal immigration, there will be no permanent solution to regional tensions with Greece and Turkey unless there is a common policy and a decisive stance of the European Union. Undoubtedly, it should become clear that the European states of the Mediterranean (Greece, Italy, Spain and Malta) are not just protecting their national borders but

also the outer borders of the Union. Therefore, the latter needs to strongly support those countries in terms of personnel, resources and, of course, to provide political support, especially in Greece or Turkey, in order to ease tensions and to construct more fruitful partnerships between the two countries.

In order to solve the problem of illegal immigration in the Eastern Mediterranean, it is necessary for the EU to implement a common immigration and foreign policy. Thus, the distribution of refugees in all EU member states is crucial both in terms of supporting countries of first arrival and enhancing social and economic integration. At the same time, the implementation of the European coordinated action, aimed both at guarding sea borders in the Mediterranean and at creating refugee camps in the North African Mediterranean countries, could be a solution. Finally, the European Union needs to implement a more comprehensive foreign policy towards countries such as Turkey in order to build constructive partnerships and ease regional tensions.

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