

# The Refugee Crisis - A Challenge for Europe and the World

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## Introduction

Since 2010, the European Union (EU) had to deal mainly with the debt crisis in some of its member states, especially in Greece. The European leaders concentrated their energy on keeping Greece in the euro as the German chancellor Angela Merkel pointed out: "If the euro fails, Europe fails". In order to avoid this scenario, many aid programs were adopted to give Greece a chance to recover. In 2015 and probably in 2016, Europe is again under pressure and it looks like that the new challenge is a larger risk for the future of the EU than the debt crisis ever was. I am talking about the recent refugee crisis and the difficulty to find common and durable solutions. This crisis is a result mainly of the Syrian civil war and the outbreak of armed conflicts or deterioration of on-going ones, among others, in Afghanistan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan, and Ukraine.

## The Situation

In a recently published report covering the period from January to end June 2015, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) [1] for the first time counts over 60 million refugees worldwide as a result of war, conflict, persecution, generalized violence, or human rights violations. This is the highest number of refugees since the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war. Among them, the largest group (38 million) are the so called "internally displaced persons" (IDPs), who have been forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence without passing borders. The second smaller group (20 million) is composed of persons, who left their home and fled to neighbouring countries or to Europe. By mid-2015 most of the refugees come from the Syrian Arab Republic (4.2 million), after the Syrian head of state, Bashar al-Assad, waged a war against the opposition almost five years ago, in which more than 250.000 civilians were killed. This conflict was triggered by demonstrations in the wake of the Arabic spring 2011, as the opposition demanded democratic reforms and a fall of the Assad regime. In addition, a lot of Syrians left their homeland to escape the terror of the Islamic State (IS).

The second highest number of refugees come from Afghanistan (2.6 million), followed by Somalia (1.1 million), South-Sudan (744.000), Sudan (640.000), Democratic Republic of the Congo (535.000), the Central African Republic (470.600), Myanmar (458.400), Eritrea (383.900) and Iraq (377.700). The largest refugee-hosting country worldwide is Turkey with 1.84 million, followed by Pakistan (1.5 million), Lebanon (1.2 million – Lebanon, meanwhile hosts more refugees compared to its population size than any other country, with 209 refugees per 1000 inhabitants), the Islamic Republic of Iran (982.000), Ethiopia (702.500) and Jordan (664.100). Within Europe, Germany hosts the largest number of refugees - at the end of 2015 round about 1.0 million. But in relation to population, Sweden is at the front, followed by Hungary. If we look at the newest European figures (third quarter 2015), the highest rate of registered first time applicants compared to the population of each member state was recorded in Hungary (10.974 first time applicants per million inhabitants), ahead of Sweden (4.362), Austria (3.215), Finland (2.765), Germany (1.334), Belgium (1.301) and Luxembourg (1.108) [2].

Since the media show almost every day refugees coming via either

the Mediterranean Sea or over the Balkans route to Europe and the number of 2.0 million refugees in Europe for the year 2015 is predicted, the EU is getting nervous, if it will manage this enormous challenge. In December 2015, Sweden announced to finish its liberal refugee policy and the German Chancellor Merkel is getting under pressure even in her own party as it seems impossible to integrate more than the one million refugees which have already entered the country.

## Europe's Challenge

The EU is deeply divided, how to deal with the refugee crisis. The Dublin Regulation, which determines that asylum has to be applied in this European country where the asylum seeker first entered the EU, has failed, because most of the refugees entered the EU through Greece, Italy and Hungary and these countries are not able to carry out the prescribed asylum procedures. The result is that a huge number of refugees are not registered and travel on especially to Germany and Sweden to apply for asylum. In order to relieve these countries, the EU decided to distribute 160.000 asylum-seekers to other EU member states in September 2015. Indeed, several East European states, among them Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, voted against this obligation. Slovakia even lodged a complaint at the European Court of Justice. This shows that there is no solidarity among the member states in view of the refugee crisis. In the face of this resistance, a firm rate regulation after which refugees are distributed on the basis of population figures, economic power and the rate of unemployment in the EU states seems highly unlikely at the present time.

In November 2015 the EU and Turkey agreed on a plan to dam the refugee's stream to Europe. Turkey commits itself to improving the living conditions of the mainly Syrian refugees in Turkey and ensures that fewer refugees will come to Europe in the future. In return the EU supports Turkey with 3.0 billion Euros, promises that Turks can enter the EU without a visa and intensifies negotiations on EU accession of Turkey.

Another instrument to reduce the number of refugees will be the planned installation of a new "European Border and Coast Guard" with 1.000 firm employees and a reserve of 1.500 border custodians to support the work of Frontex, the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the EU member states. In case member states are not willing or not able to guard their borders properly, the new force will take over this task in order to stop illegal border crossing in the EU. But on the summit of the European

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leaders in Brussels on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2015 some countries clearly emphasized their reservations on this idea, because they fear a loss of their sovereignty. As a result, the final decision is pushed upon the end of June 2016. Already decided indeed is the establishment of “hot spots” in Greece and Italy. These centres for registration have the task to distinguish between refugees which left their country because of war and prosecution and those who come to Europe just out of economic reasons. The latter have no right to asylum and should not only be prevented to travel on to Europe, but should be sent back to their home countries.

### The World’s Challenge

The responsibility of the international community is twofold: First of all, measures have to be taken immediately to care for those millions of refugees who live in the largest refugee-hosting countries such as Turkey, Pakistan and Lebanon in order to allow them a human life. Therefore, the money flow to the UNHCR and the WFP (World Food Programme) and private organizations, such as Doctors without Borders, must be increased. Secondly, and this is rather a medium-term to long-term job, the reasons of the large number of refugees must be approached. This statement gives us an understanding what has to be done: Primarily the Syrian conflict has to be solved, because most of the refugees come from this country. Subsequently, terrorism and its causes must be combated.

After years of disillusionment, we now could find a small sign of hope for a peaceful solution for the Syrian crisis: On December 18<sup>th</sup>, the UN Security Council adopted unanimously resolution No. 2254, which for the first time focuses on ending Syria’s five-year-long war. Under the auspices of UN General-Secretary Ban Ki-moon the resolution includes talks between the Assad regime and the opposition in January 2016 with the aim to work on a new constitution and free and fair elections. At the same time a nationwide cease-fire should enter into force. This important resolution was possible because both, the United States and Russia, want to end this terrible war and the future of Assad was excluded from the negotiations which is very important for the Russian government as Assad has been an ally for many years.

The situation in Syria brings us right to the problem of terrorism, because in the course of the civil war in Syria the IS has conquered several areas and committed many crimes against humanity. Since months a coalition of Americans, the British, French and other allies conduct air strikes against military positions of the IS. In December 2015, Germany joint this coalition by the provision of reconnaissance

aircrafts to help its good neighbour France after the terrorist attacks in Paris on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2015 where 130 people died. As Russia also fights against the IS in Syria and Saudi Arabia recently tries to compose a coalition of Arabian and African states against terrorism, the IS may be defeated in the near future.

### Conclusion: The European Answer

The recent refugee crisis is a big challenge for the international community, but first and foremost, it is probably the biggest challenge Europe has had to face since the beginning of European integration 60 years ago. Now, the EU must demonstrate that the content of the Lisbon Treaty is not only written on paper, but is taken seriously by the governments of its member states. Solidarity is one of the core principles of the EU (Art. 3 para. 3 Treaty on EU). But some member states must be reminded of the fact that solidarity is no one-way road. Especially the Eastern European states enjoyed solidarity after the end of the cold war, when they were supported to establish democratic regimes and a market economy. Just deny housing refugees and simply hope that Germany and a few other states will manage the problem is a very nationalistic view and very selfish. We need a common European answer for this extraordinary challenge!

This European answer could be as follows: (a) The EU and its 28 member states agree on a fair distribution of refugees. In the case that a member state denies solidarity, money e.g., from the structural funds, should not be paid out to this country. (b) The EU should strengthen its neighbourhood policy and increase its support for democratic reforms and a strong economy for those countries where the refugees mainly come from. (c) The EU should support all efforts of the international community to end wars and armed conflicts as the main reasons for displacement. (d) The EU should take measures to protect its borders. The planned establishment of the new “European Border and Coast Guard” is a step in the right direction. (e) The EU should regulate migration. Therefore, it would be necessary to establish not only “hot spots” in Greece and Italy, but also in Africa and the Near East. And the EU should, more importantly, set an upper limit regarding how many refugees can come to Europe each year, so that the member states are not overburdened and integration can still work.

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