



Asylum flows to the EU: blip or norm?

by Roderick Parkes

The numbers of irregular arrivals at the EU's outer border and mass asylum claims are growing. In May 2015, the EU-28, Switzerland and Norway received the highest number of asylum applications on record: 74,000 in a single month. This headline figure may yet prove to be somewhat inflated: Afghans and Kosovans in particular tend to claim asylum on arrival at the EU's border, only to then abscond and claim again at their target destination. Nevertheless, the pressures – particularly on the EU's southern and south-eastern border-states – are real.

The burden is exacerbated by the diverse origins of asylum-seekers: in May most applicants came from Syria (13,000), Eritrea (5,000), Afghanistan (9,000) and the Western Balkans (13,000). Of these, Syrians and Eritreans have the strongest chance of gaining asylum in any EU member state. They can therefore be transferred away from 'frontline states' to have their claim heard. But it is worth noting that one reason for their uniform treatment across the EU is due to a lack of knowledge on the part of immigration officials. National authorities were caught unawares by Syria's quick descent into civil war, and they still struggle to understand the arbitrary regime in Eritrea.

Afghan asylum-seekers have seen their acceptance rates in the EU vary as national authorities learn more about their individual reasons for fleeing. Their overall degree of success across the EU

remains quite high, but rates differ significantly depending on the member state. As this makes it hard to transfer Afghans between countries, the EU focuses instead on expelling failed claimants. This is no easy matter either. Many are unaccompanied minors who fall outside the scope of expulsion agreements. Others are turned away by Kabul, which complains that expellees create instability by settling in overpopulated cities instead of returning to their rural homelands.

The EU faces fewer obstacles when returning failed asylum-seekers to the Western Balkans. But the problem is the sheer volume of unfounded applications. Young workers from Serbia view the EU asylum system as a means to gain seasonal employment. At the end of the summer they return home again, drawn back by the very factors that make the region's labour markets so inefficient – patriarchal family ties and opportunities in the bloated public sector. Kosovans, by contrast, may seek to stay on a more permanent basis. Public spending is low in Kosovo (and in Albania, a growing source country), something which leaves many households financially dependent on family members abroad.

Channels, routes and paths

In 2013, the central Mediterranean became a principal route to the EU from across Africa and the Middle East. Even today, refugees and migrants from West Africa and the Horn undertake this

dangerous voyage in large numbers. However, Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans and North Africans are increasingly taking alternative paths through Turkey, the Aegean and the Western Balkans. Asylum-seekers from Kosovo and Albania only intensify the pressure at the EU's south-eastern border: although Kosovans have, since 2012, been able to travel with greater ease within Serbia, they do not enjoy visa-free travel in the EU, and so claim asylum in order to secure entry.

The well-known channel through Morocco and Algeria to the Iberian peninsula is likely to see an uptick in numbers. This is largely due to three factors. West African countries which feed this route are unstable; Libya's labour market – which usually absorbs large numbers of Africans who work construction and household jobs – is volatile; and European efforts to stem the flow of people across the central Mediterranean may well push migrants westwards into Tunisia and Algeria. For their part, Algeria and Tunisia may come to view migrants and refugees as unwelcome vectors of instability and radicalism which need to be moved on.

The route through Ukraine remains strangely quiet. Ukrainians displaced by fighting in the Donbas have either headed eastwards or been absorbed into the EU's seasonal labour market. Russians themselves applied for around one million fewer Schengen visas in 2014 than the year before. Yet, the recent violent stand-off near Lviv between Ukrainian government forces and right-wing militias raises the spectre of the consequences of disorderly migration. As do the tensions between Moscow and Kiev over access to Transnistria, the breakaway region of Moldova.

Still, it is the route through Turkey which probably warrants most attention. Turkey maintains a web of visa-free relationships with Arab states, has forged new air-links to Algiers and Mogadishu for reasons of trade diplomacy, and has turned down offers of support from Western refugee organisations on ideological grounds. This leaves it exposed to the 10-12 million individuals in need of humanitarian support in Syria, not to mention the further millions displaced across the Middle East. Turkey's minister for Europe has intimated that any new wave of refugees may exceed his country's capacities and could well end up in the EU.

A disorderly future

It remains difficult to predict why, when and how individuals will travel to the EU to claim asylum.

In the near term, it is safe to say only that the EU cannot bank on a respite this winter. There are three reasons for this: fuel shortages may force Ukrainians to seek refuge elsewhere during cold months; middle-class Kosovans tend to come to the EU even when there is no demand for seasonal agricultural work; and Syrian, Iraqi and North African refugees are taking new land routes to the Europe which are accessible even in winter.

In the medium term, people-smuggling networks will continue to foster unpredictability. Last year's spike in asylum claims by Palestinians showed that even displaced populations who have sat tight for years in their home region will grasp the opportunity to move on to Europe. And the flows from Eritrea prove that even a small, isolated country can become a major source of migration if such networks are in place. Smugglers offer migrants highly-accurate information about administrative procedures in destination countries alongside false promises about life there.

The EU is taking steps to improve its knowledge base. A Mediterranean naval operation will collect information about smuggling networks – so too will a team operated by Europol, the EU's policing agency. Frontex, the EU borders agency, will shortly post an official to Ankara to increase the flow of information. Meanwhile EASO, the EU asylum agency, will have access to four new sets of indicators charting asylum-seekers' paths through the EU. The agency is also set to begin a project to examine the reasons why asylum-seekers choose to come to the EU.

The big question remains open: are these refugee pressures permanent? Twice before, in the early 1990s and 2000s, the EU experienced a refugee crisis. On both occasions, this proved to be temporary – a by-product first of the end of the Cold War and then the US's unipolar moment. The present refugee crisis is clearly connected with a new shift of power, this time from west to east. But this time the signs indicate that refugee flows are no fleeting phenomenon. If disorder is set to become a permanent feature of world affairs, high numbers of refugees will accompany it.

Roderick Parkes is a Research Fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

