

THE CHALLENGE FOR EUROPE: CREATING A MORE BALANCED ASYLUM SYSTEM

Laurent MUSCHEL | *Director for Migration and Protection, Schengen Area, DG HOME (Brussels)*

The migration issue is complex. The stakes – in terms of both human lives and numbers – are extremely high. There is often a dichotomy between individual people facing tragedies, and the figures.

Let's start with the figures, which are the European Union's technocratic response as it were. They show that the crisis is largely behind us; however, that is not necessarily what politicians are telling us. Since the EU-Turkey agreement in March 2016 and the closure of the Balkan route, the number of people arriving on the Greek islands has averaged between 50 and 60 a day. In October 2015, there were 10,000 new arrivals every day. Last year, the numbers travelling from Turkey to Greece fell by 79% compared with 2015. On the other hand, the influx from Libya is growing; it reached 180,000 last year, which is manageable for an EU with 500 million inhabitants. The figures for 2017 show that arrivals on Greek islands have dropped 95% compared with 2016. The flow of Syrians and Afghans into Turkey is therefore under control. Conversely, Italy is still grappling with large numbers of incoming migrants (+20%), despite a slight drop in May and early June because of interceptions by the Libyan coastguard.

100 000 REQUESTS IN FRANCE

At its outset, the crisis was driven by very large numbers of Syrians (who were fleeing the war at home) and Afghans. Now, however, economic migrants from West Africa (Nigeria, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, etc.) and Bangladesh account for much of the influx into Europe.

Another factor to consider is the substantial difference in flows from one Member State to another. Germany and Sweden, which have a stronger tradition of receiving immigrants than other Member States, have been the two main countries of destination. Conversely, Central and Eastern European countries have taken in very few. France has also been relatively unaffected: this year, it has received approximately 100,000 asylum applications.

How has Brussels responded to the situation? Firstly, by organising rescue operations at sea. Thanks to Frontex operations Triton and Poseidon, we have tripled the number of successful sea

rescues. Then we created 'hotspots', which are reception facilities run jointly by the European agencies and Member States that register incoming migrants, sort out asylum seekers from other migrants and carry out security checks. Although a little chaotic at first, things are running more smoothly now despite occasional tensions. Thirdly, border controls have been stepped up, the Balkan route has been closed, and Frontex (now the European Border and Coastguard Agency) has been given more money and will see its staff grow to 1,000 by 2020. We have also created a rapid reaction force of 1,500 European border guards, who can be deployed at any moment in response to pressure on Europe's external borders.

Actions taken by Brussels of course include the agreement with Turkey in Spring 2016, under which the Turks pledged to keep the Syrians and to take any arriving in the Greek islands back. In return, Europe is basically required to assist Turkey with their integration, and to improve their living conditions through significant funding. The idea being that in a war context people should remain in the region to be able to return to their country of origin when the conflict ends, to take part in its reconstruction. We therefore prefer to support their integration in neighbouring countries and to open legal channels of access in Europe when necessary, notably through resettlement. Public opinion focuses a great deal on the differences between Member States, but this agreement with Turkey was approved by the European Council, which is pretty much unanimous on the subject.

We have also reformed Schengen, with the introduction of new measures including the systematic control of European citizens entering and leaving the Schengen Area, following the terrorist attacks and Europeans' use of migration routes on returning from Syria (foreign fighters).

We have also strengthened our return policy. About 60% of asylum applications are accepted, which means 40% of people are denied the



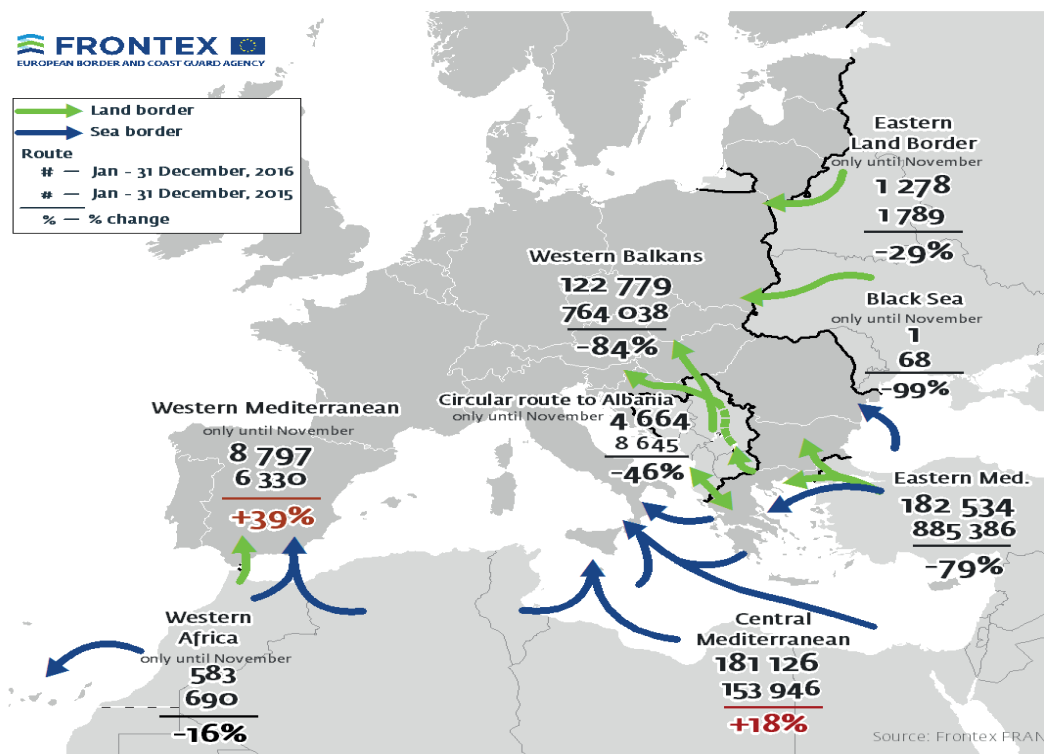
right of asylum. The difficulty lies in ensuring these migrants can return to what can be difficult countries in good conditions. The EU has negotiated several agreements with the third countries at the origin of these migratory flows, to ensure migrants return and are reintegrated.

INABILITY TO AGREE ON THE EU ASYLUM LAW REFORM

Finally, there is the asylum law. The European Commission has made proposals to reform this law, which are still on the Council and Parliament table. This inability to agree on the EU asylum law reform is currently the subject of fierce debate. Most crucial is the reform of the Dublin Regulation, which requires that migrants apply for asylum in the country where they first arrive, putting most of the weight on the shoulders of Greece and Italy. It is for this reason that we wanted to create a solidarity mechanism, but it has not been accepted by some countries, in particular those of Central and Eastern Europe. During the crisis, a resettlement mechanism was implemented that has proved effective, since 14,000 people in Greece and 7,000 in Italy have

been resettled in just over a year. But some Member States have refused to receive them, for example Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, which is why the Commission has launched infringement procedures.

The challenge today therefore lies in reaching an agreement on a new fairer and more balanced asylum system. There are two proposals on the table: on the one hand a stronger European asylum office, and on the other measures to improve asylum procedures and to facilitate and accelerate the decision-making process. A significant challenge will involve converging our systems, to ensure recognition rates are roughly equivalent and that the same refugee has the same chances of being granted asylum in each Member State. We are working with the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) on performing joint analyses of countries of origin, to decide whether citizens should benefit from the right of asylum. This constitutes the last major task. In terms of border security, hotspots and controlling flows, Europe has come a long way. We must now make the same progress with respect to solidarity. ●



Detection of illegal border crossings (January - December 2016)

Source : Frontex