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The Refugee Debate in Central and Eastern Europe: Can the EU-Turkey Deal Survive Without Intra EU Convergence on Relocation and Resettlement?

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ABSTRACT

The Global Turkey in Europe (GTE) project aims at establishing a platform to discuss and analyse the rapid transformation of Turkey in a European and global context. In this phase, the project focuses on the refugee crisis and its impact on EU-Turkey relations, as well as on the EU's migration and asylum policies. Public discourse on the issue is polarized and often confused: GTE aims to provide a forum for people with different professional backgrounds, experiences and opinions to meet and discuss various facets of the refugee crisis, alongside field trips designed to better inform the dialogue between participants. The fourth event in this series took place in Budapest on 23-24 February 2017. The workshop focused on the refugee debate in Central and Eastern Europe and in particular on the Visegrad countries' resistance to the relocation and resettlement schemes put forward by the European Commission.

European Union | Migration | Refugees | Hungary

keywords



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Introduction

The Global Turkey in Europe (GTE) project aims at establishing a platform to discuss and analyse the rapid transformation of Turkey in a European and global context. Launched by the Istituto Affari Internazionali, in collaboration with the Istanbul Policy Centre (IPC) and Stiftung Mercator in 2012, in its fourth year the Foundation for European Progress Studies (FEPS) joined the team.¹ In this phase, the project focuses on the refugee crisis and its impact on EU-Turkey relations, as well as on the EU's migration and asylum policies. Public discourse on the issue is polarized and often confused: GTE aims to provide a forum for people with different professional backgrounds, experiences and opinions to meet and discuss various facets of the refugee crisis, alongside field trips designed to better inform the dialogue between participants.

The fourth event in this series² took place in Budapest on 23-24 February 2017. The workshop focused on the refugee debate in Central and Eastern Europe and in particular on the Visegrad countries' resistance to the relocation and resettlement schemes put forward by the European Commission. Participants discussed whether the EU-Turkey deal could survive without intra EU convergence on relocation and

¹ For more details, see <http://www.iai.it/en/node/4194>.

² For details about the previous three events, see: *The Humanitarian Dimension of the Refugee Crisis in Turkey: Challenges and Prospects*, Istanbul, 22 July 2016, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/6636>. *The EU-Turkey Deal and its Implications for the Asylum Capacities of EU Border Countries*, Athens, 4 November 2016, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/6922>. *Does the EU-Turkey Migration Deal Represent a Model to be Replicated in Other Contexts?*, Catania, 16 December 2016, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/7226>.

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· Report from the field trip and seminar held in Budapest on 23-24 February 2017 and organized by Stiftung Mercator, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Istanbul Policy Center (IPC), and Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) within the framework of the project "Turkey, Europe and the World: Political, Economic and Foreign Policy Dimensions of Turkey's Evolving Relationship with the EU" (Global Turkey in Europe).

resettlement. All events encompassed field trips to key locations to understand the impact of the migration crisis in the four countries, followed by an interactive workshop.

The IAI would like to extend a special thanks to the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and in particular Anikó Bakonyi for their cooperation and support, essential to the success of the event.

23 February: Field trip

In 2015, Hungary was a key transit country on the Balkan route: according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 411,515 migrants irregularly crossed its borders in that year.³ In September and October 2015, the Hungarian government decided to build a barbed-wire fence at the border with Serbia and Croatia,⁴ lowering the number of daily arrivals in the country. Since then, the border of Hungary, and in particular the one between Hungary and Serbia, has witnessed deteriorating conditions for migrants and asylum seekers trying to cross, with an ever-growing number of migrants continuing to gather in dire conditions in the "pre-transit zones".⁵

Attempts were made to visit the Röszke transit zone and the Vámosszabadi open facility, to give participants a first hand impression of the situation of migrants trying to cross and that of migrants who made it into Hungary and are waiting for their asylum claims to be assessed. The Istituto Affari Internazionali filed an official request to the Directorate for Refugee Affairs, International Cooperation Department, seeking the authorization of the Hungarian institutions' to enter the transit zone and the open facility. A month later, a positive response was received for the Vámosszabadi camp, but the request to enter the Röszke transit zone was rejected. However, at the last minute, after receiving the official list of participants, the authorities withdrew the authorization to visit the camp. This account is provided not only to document the evolution of the project, but also because the rejection, in and of itself, speaks volumes about the migration debate and situation in Hungary. GTE has not faced such problems in organizing its field trips in any other country.

Instead, participants met with a representative of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, who briefed the group about the situation of migrants in Hungary.

³ See the International Organization for Migration (IOM) website: *Migration Issues in Hungary*, last updated on 15 June 2016, <http://www.iom.hu/migration-issues-hungary>.

⁴ Andrew Rettman, "Hungary's Anti-Migrant Fence Draws Rebuke", in *EUobserver*, 18 June 2015 <https://euobserver.com/justice/129176>.

⁵ Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC), *Destitute, But Waiting. Report on the visit to the Tompa and Röszke "Pre-Transit Zone" Area on the Serbian Hungarian Border*, 22 April 2016, http://www.helsinki.hu/wp-content/uploads/HHC_Röszke_Tompa_pre_transit_zone_22April2016.pdf.

Meeting with the Hungarian Helsinki Committee

Anikó Bakonyi, Project Manager at the Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC), met the participants and briefed them on the situation of asylum seekers in Hungary. She reported that a very strict asylum law, combined with the physical barriers at the borders with Serbia and Croatia, has resulted in dire conditions for migrants in the country.

HHC had monitored the situation at the Hungarian-Serbian border, defining it as “unregulated”. By the end of 2015, Hungary had declared Serbia a “safe third country”; because of this decision, all requests from Serbia are now declared inadmissible. Additionally, the Hungarian government passed the so-called “8 kilometres law”, also known as the “push backs law”, which allows the police to deport migrants caught in Hungarian territory within 8 kilometres of the Serbian border back to Serbia. Currently, there are approximately 800 people in the pre-transit zone, waiting to be authorized to access Hungary. Only 10 people are allowed in per day; entry is regulated according to a list, managed by a so-called community leader or list manager, chosen by the people waiting for authorization, who communicates with both the Serbian and Hungarian authorities. HHC reported corruption at the border, in particular when it comes to deciding who is allowed to cross. According to official border police statistics, 90,000 people have been denied access to file an asylum request and have been pushed back to Serbia. In 2016, 29,000 applied for asylum in Hungary but the vast majority have been denied protection. Mrs Bakonyi further detailed cases of abuse and violence at the border.



After promptly answering all questions from the group, Mrs Bakonyi reported that the Hungarian government has spent approximately 56 million euros campaigning against migration, often linking it to terrorism. This has polarized the debate in the country, creating an unfriendly environment for migrants as well as for organizations working to promote migrants' rights.⁶

24 February: Workshop

The workshop convened approximately 30 participants from 12 different countries. The group composition was also diverse with regards to professional backgrounds:

⁶ See Asylum Information Database (AIDA) Country Reports: Hungary, last updated 2 March 2017, <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/hungary>.

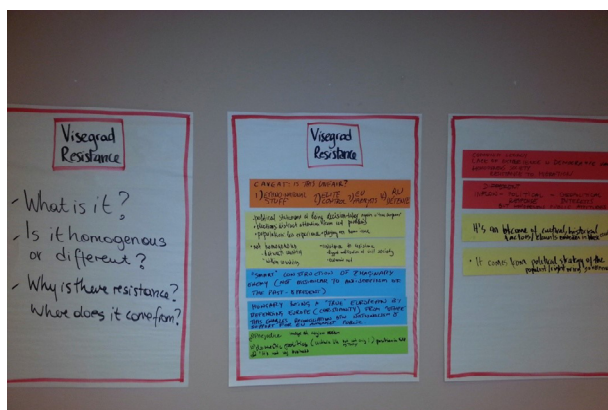
academics, researchers, members of think tanks, journalists and professionals from international NGOs joined together with representatives of local organizations. Mia Forbes Pirie moderated this interactive workshop, that addressed the issue of relocation, and in particular how crucial it is for the EU-Turkey deal to work.

The first session focused precisely on the extent to which relocation is central for deals like the EU-Turkey deal. Professor Boldizsár Nagy gave a brief introduction to this issue, presenting a paper prepared for the workshop. Professor Nagy put forward two open questions to be discussed. First, he considered the possibility that EU member states are themselves responsible for the migration impasse, since they established a visa system imposing boundaries on freedom of movement. In fact, the cheapest and easiest way to process asylum applications would be to allow them to freely travel to the country in which they would want to seek asylum. In other words, the issue of resettlement and relocation is a man-made challenge. If a different EU visa policy were in place, relocation and resettlement would be non-issues. Secondly, he encouraged the participants to take into consideration the possibility that there might be no solution to this impasse. We are usually led to believe that problems have "solutions". What if in this case a solution simply doesn't exist? Following this brief presentation, there was a lively debate on whether to consider the refugee crisis a European issue or not. Accepting that there might not be a perfect solution, participants agreed that this is a management problem, caused by the fact that member states consider their national interests rather than the EU's. Participants then discussed two questions in small groups of five: whether the relocation mechanism is central for deals such as the EU-Turkey deal, and whether it is necessary to deal with the current refugee crisis. Some participants noted that the real meaning of "working" and particularly for whom, is a matter that should be further discussed; a critical approach to the concept of "working" was therefore proposed, as many also noted that the EU-Turkey deal is not an example to follow. In addition, some pointed out that one of the reasons member states strengthened the EU externalization policy is that they could not agree on a way to distribute migrants in the EU territory. The externalization policy would thus be less important if the EU elaborated a better functioning migration and asylum system.



In the second session, we analysed the Visegrad countries' resistance to the relocation system. Professor Nagy introduced the topic, underlining that the four countries in the Visegrad group – Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia – have different positions on the refugee crisis and there is political division among the four, with Poland and Hungary being more resistant and the Czech Republic and Slovakia more open to the Commission's proposals. The Hungarian position is

particularly paradoxical, as it was initially foreseen as a beneficiary of the relocation mechanism but instead decided to reject it.⁷ The Hungarian government's approach towards migration follows its overall political strategy: constructing enemies in order then to defeat them, so as to harness domestic support.



After this brief introduction, participants discussed the root causes of Visegrad countries' resistance. All groups agreed that there are diverse and parallel causes for the Visegrad group's opposition to the relocation system. First, there are cultural issues, particularly the fact that all four countries are rather homogeneous in their ethnic composition. Second, one needs to take into account historical factors and the communist

legacy, which has created strong resistance to the notion of rules being imposed from outside. Thirdly, there are some political factors, particularly domestic ones: as mentioned above, the construction of an imaginary enemy (migrants in this case) is part of a longer trend, and has been widely used by weak governments to gain consensus and support. Additionally, the Visegrad countries, while rejecting the EU's decisions (which in their view did not take into account their opposition to the scheme) have portrayed their resistance as "European": as a defence of the borders of a European (Christian) space. Local participants underlined the role of civil society in generating a "resistance to the resistance" movement, with a mobilization to welcome refugees.

In the third and final session, participants discussed the path forward, proposing concrete steps to overcome the Visegrad group's resistance. According to Professor Nagy, there is a need to reinstate a genuine mutual trust among member states, as a precondition for finding a shared solution to the relocation impasse and then to the migration challenge. Participants agreed on the need to reformulate the debate at EU level, while acknowledging that this is very hard to do: one way could be by establishing different forms of participation and increase efficiency by agreeing on a minimum participation from all member states. Another approach to the "solution" is that of adopting a clearer "carrot and stick" approach: if member states want to enjoy the benefits of the Schengen system, they also need to accept the responsibilities of formulating a common migration and asylum policy.

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⁷ According to the Council decision, 54,000 of 120,000 applicants should have been relocated from Hungary to other member states. See Council of the European Union, *Council Decision (EU) 2015/1601 of 22 September 2015 establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and Greece*, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legalcontent/en/TXT/?uri=celex:32015D1601>.

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economy and international security. A non-profit organisation, the IAI aims to further and disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are: European institutions and policies; Italian foreign policy; trends in the global economy and internationalisation processes in Italy; the Mediterranean and the Middle East; defence economy and policy; and transatlantic relations. The IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffariInternazionali*), two series of research papers (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Papers*) and other papers' series related to IAI research projects.

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