

EU failing refugees

Pavlos Zafiropoulos, Athens 04/19/2016

EU member states are failing to live up to their promises to ease pressure on Greece and Italy at the forefront of the refugee crisis, with asylum seekers paying the price. Pavlos Zafiropoulos reports from Athens.



Image: Getty Images/AFP/A. Messinis

After having escaped war-torn Damascus, trekked through Turkey and made a hazardous sea-crossing in a smuggler's leaky rubber dinghy to the Greek island of Lesbos, Ali and Heta Barjas's future - and that of their four young children - now depends on the outcome of a Skype call.

"I tried 1,000 times but no one answers," Ali, who is currently living in a refugee camp in the [Peloponnese](#), told DW. It is not a relative in either Syria or northern Europe that Barjas has been attempting to contact, but the Greek government's own Asylum Service.

The Barjas family are among the over 50,000 refugees trapped in Greece since the effective closure of the Balkan route toward northern Europe over a month ago. While more recent arrivals have been contained on the eastern Aegean islands and are subject to returns to Turkey under the controversial EU-Turkey agreement to stem the flow of migrants, the vast majority arrived before that agreement came into effect and are scattered throughout the Greek mainland in the [bare-bones refugee camps](#) that have been hastily set up by the government in recent weeks.

For most, the only hope to escape economically ravaged Greece now lies with the EU's emergency relocation program, a scheme established last September according to which 160,000 asylum seekers would be relocated from frontline countries Greece and Italy to other member states over a period of two years.

In theory the scheme would provide a much-needed mechanism to ease the pressure on the Greek state which is increasingly struggling to keep a grip on the refugee crisis in the country. Yet so far the program has barely limped along, with promises of European solidarity increasingly looking like a farce. Of the 66,000 asylum seekers to be relocated from Greece over two years (an average of 2,750 per month), according to data released by the European Commission as of April 11 only 615 had actually been relocated since the scheme's launch six months ago.



A combination of EU bureaucracy and Greek ineptitude is leaving refugees increasingly in the lurch

Image: Reuters/A.Konstantinidis

Greek deficiencies

Part of the problem lies with the inadequacy of Greece's fledgling Asylum Service (which was only established in 2011) to meet the demands currently being placed on it. For a refugee in Greece to be eligible for the relocation program they must first apply for asylum in Greece with the Asylum Service. And in order to do that they must first contact the service via Skype to arrange an official appointment.

That is a challenge in and of itself as many refugees have only infrequent internet access at best. And even if they manage to gain access to Skype, the chances of actually getting through even after repeated tries are slim. 'I have tried and tried but there was no answer,' is a common refrain heard among the refugees.

Nikos Odubitan has experienced this frustration often. He is the founder of Generation 2.0, an Athens-based NGO that campaigns for the rights of immigrant families. The NGO sought to help refugees reach the Asylum Service by providing free access to the organization's computers and trusted Skype account. But they have recently been forced to discontinue the service as demand became overwhelming even as the success rate for calls dropped to almost zero.

"Before in the space of an hour we would have about 10 successful calls. Now if we have three we consider ourselves very lucky. And often we don't get through at all. People get disappointed and so do we." Odubitan told DW.

"We currently have the capacity to deal with about 80 to 100 interview requests per day," Zoe Nasika, a spokesperson for the Greek Asylum Service, admitted to DW. "Before the borders closed we had more than enough capacity to deal with the calls that we were getting." The sudden decision to close the Balkan route effectively caused the number of applications to skyrocket almost overnight, she says, as refugees realized that their only hope of reaching Europe was to apply for asylum in Greece.

European disunity

Nasika also argues that the bottleneck in Greece is not the main reason that more asylum seekers have not been relocated. According to the Asylum Service, 3,277 asylum seekers have currently been processed and deemed eligible for the relocation process. Yet in total there are only 2,943 places that have been pledged by member states. "So we already have more people registered than there are places." There are also additional delays as member states conduct background checks of their own on the asylum seekers put forward by the Greek authorities, with questionable efficiency.

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"We are continually seeking to increase our personnel which is not an easy task due to Greece's fiscal situation. But this must be accompanied by an increase in pledges from other EU countries," Nasika says.



The EU would be well advised to take sentiments like these seriously

Image: DW/R. Shirmohammadi

The latter is a position that was echoed to DW by spokespeople from both the European Asylum Support Office and the UNHCR. Meanwhile the European Commission has also expressed its frustration with the lack of progress with the Commissioner for Migration Dimitris Avramopoulos recently calling on member states to "urgently deliver on their political and legal commitment to relocate persons in need."

But ultimately that decision lies with national governments and many believe the foot dragging is likely to continue as sentiment against refugees hardens in many European capitals. Even in Germany which has played a leading role in handling the refugee crisis, out of the 17,209 places it has committed to providing under the relocation agreement it has formally pledged only 40.

"I don't think the European Commission has much leverage as the issue continues to be seen as a national issue rather than a European issue," says Angeliki Dimitriadi, a Visiting Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations and Research Fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy.

"I think that many countries are adopting a 'wait and see' approach, especially in light of the [EU-Turkey agreement](#). If the agreement doesn't work to stem the flows, the relocation program will likely fail as the member states will be frightened of a new influx."

Ultimately the EU's shoddy performance on its own relocation scheme reveals a [deeper lack of cohesion](#) when it comes to issues of immigration and the large flows of refugees on its external borders. While that raises questions about the nature of Europe as a whole, in the short term it is the refugees who will suffer the most as their makeshift camps begin to look more and more like the end of an already difficult road.