

EUROPEAN CRISIS: Key Developments of the Past 48 Hours

November 20, 2015¹

POLITICS

GREECE/BALKANS

- Most nations along Europe's refugee corridor shut their borders Thursday to those not coming from war-torn countries such as Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq, leaving thousands of others seeking a better life in the continent stranded at Balkan border crossings.
- Tempers have flared at Greece's main border crossing with Macedonia, where riot police pushed back thousands of migrants jostling to cross over, after Macedonia blocked access to people deemed to be economic migrants and not refugees. Several hundred Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis were able to cross before police halted the flow again to ease congestion on the Macedonian side. About 3,000 people remain on the Greek side of the border near the village of Idomeni, including about 1,000 Iranians and North Africans whom Macedonia is not letting in.

¹ Contributions from OSIFE, OSEPI, IMI and news reports.

- Once across, migrants head for the nearby Gevgelija train station, to continue by rail north through Serbia toward wealthier northern European Union countries.
- Greek authorities have started supplementary identity checks on immigrants reaching Athens by ferry from the country's eastern islands, after breaking up a ring that sold fake identity documents to migrants arriving on Lesbos. 10 people were arrested, including Afghan, Pakistani and Iraqi nationals. About 1,500 refugees and other migrants who reached Athens' port of Piraeus early Friday were scrutinized as they disembarked from the Ariadni ferry. Dozens were taken aside and driven away in police buses for further checks.
- The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) on Friday said plunging temperatures are expected to chill Europe this weekend, putting the lives of thousands of refugees at risk. IFRC is calling on all governments to take steps to protect people seeking safety and ensure their suffering is not compounded as the weather deteriorates. IFRC also urges all organizations to meet their increasing needs. (G. Maniatis)

PARIS ATTACKS/Refugee Rhetoric

- France's Prime Minister Manuel Valls said Friday some of the Paris attackers, including the mastermind

Abdelhamid Abaaoud, exploited the Syrian refugee crisis to slip into the country unnoticed. "These individuals took advantage of the refugee crisis ... of the chaos, perhaps, for some of them to slip in" to France, he told French TV. "Others were in Belgium already. And others, I must remind you, were in France."

- Valls also warned that the passport-free Schengen zone is a risk of Europe fails to "take responsibility" over border controls, according to Sky News. European Union ministers are expected to meet in Brussels where they are expected to tighten border security in each of the 26-member nations.
- German prosecutors said on Friday that they have launched an investigation into claims that an Algerian man warned Syrian asylum seekers last week of an impending terrorist attack on Paris. Police detained the 39-year-old Algerian on Saturday following allegations that he told several Syrians at a refugee shelter in the western German town of Arnsberg about what would happen in the French capital several days before Friday's deadly attacks, a police spokesman said. (G. Maniatis)

SWEDEN

- Sweden has now reached the limit. With refugees pouring into the country at a rate of 10,000 a week,

the Migration Agency announced on Thursday that it would no longer offer accommodation for all asylum-seekers. "We have entered a new phase where the Migration Agency cannot provide everyone a roof over their heads. There aren't enough places," said chief operating officer Michael Ribbenvik.

- An extraordinary 190,000 refugees are now expected to arrive in Sweden this year—double what the agency expected at the start of the year, and more people than live in Uppsala, the country's fourth largest city.
- If the predictions are correct, Sweden will take 20,000 asylum applications per million people in 2015, double the rate even of Germany. On Wednesday, the Migration Agency was hopeful that the border controls were starting to bring numbers down, with about 600 coming a day, down from 1,200, or even up to 1,700, previously.
- Other refugees are bused elsewhere, with the agency's desperate search for rooms pushing it to send refugees nearly 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles) north to Riksgränsen, a ski resort 200 kilometers inside the Arctic Circle. (G. Maniatis)

TURKEY/EU

- The potential deal between the EU and Turkey to stem the migrant flow to Europe is floundering as

Ankara pushes Brussels to deliver on a multibillion-euro aid package and other elements of the bargain.

- Frans Timmermans, the commission's vice-president, went to Ankara on Thursday to try to rescue the plan with Feridun Sinirlioglu, Turkey's foreign minister. It was supposed to have been fleshed out and formally signed off at an EU-Turkey summit on November 29. Mr Juncker said the discussions with Mr Timmermans showed the will of "both sides to get closer together."
- According to people familiar with the talks, Mr Erdogan balked as Jean-Claude Juncker and Donald Tusk, the respective presidents of the European Commission and Council, pressed him for a timetable for measures intended to discourage migrants in Turkey from continuing their journey to Europe. These include tighter border controls and awarding work rights to 2m Syrian refugees.
- One official familiar with the discussion said the meeting turned "sour" as Mr Erdogan demanded that Europe move first on its pledges. Ankara is seeking €3bn in financial support, regular Turkey-EU summits, and a clear political path to open several chapters in stalled EU membership talks. There was also disagreement as to whether a planned EU assistance package covered one or two years. According to another European official briefed on the meeting, Mr Erdogan at one point referred to Mr

Juncker as the former premier of Luxembourg, “a country the size of a Turkish city”. On Thursday, Mr Juncker described the meeting as “sportive and exhausting”.

- President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey on November 19 criticized the growing backlash against refugees in the wake of the attacks in Paris, saying this will only deepen the humanitarian crisis unleashed by the war in Syria. “We have been condemning the Paris attacks with all sincerity. We have been sharing the grief of the French public. But we have started hearing [of] attacks on Muslims in several places,” Erdogan said in his keynote address at the opening session of the Atlantic Council’s seventh annual Energy and Economic Summit in Istanbul.
- In European countries where Muslims are a minority, an “increasingly prejudiced and exclusionist attitude has been increasing,” he said. Such a “hardening of the attitudes [toward] the migrants...would only deepen the human crisis,” he added.
- Describing Islam as a religion of peace and noting that Muslims are the primary victims of groups like Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram, the Turkish president

warned that “racism is merging with anti-Islamism,” and this poses a significant threat, especially to Europe. (G. Maniatis)

United States

- The US House of Representatives voted on Thursday to temporarily block refugees from Syria and Iraq from entering the US, though it's not clear whether President Obama will be able to veto the legislation. The Republican bill, which passed 289-137 with the help of some Democrats, would block Syrian and Iraqi refugees from entering the US unless four top US law-enforcement and national security officials affirm to Congress that each individual isn't a security threat. (G. Maniatis)

European Union

On Friday, EU Home Affairs ministers agreed on measures to reinforce the fight against terrorism in the EU including:

- A push to adopt legislation that would allow states and EU agencies to retain air passenger names records (PNR) also for intra-European flights and for a long time. Presently the EU is very protective of the personal data law enforcement agencies can retain;

- Strengthening of immigration control at the borders, including on EU citizens, with an explicit invite to adopt legislation that would allow for biometric controls on everyone (this legislation has been on hold forever due to data protection concerns). A new emphasis on fingerprinting all migrants trying to enter the EU without a visa—including asylum seekers—especially in Greece and Italy;
- Extending the competency of the EU’s border agency (FRONTEX) to the fight against terrorism and helping the exchange of information among various EU law enforcement agencies (border control and police mainly);
- Establish a European Counter Terrorist Center (ECTC) within EUROPOL staffed by national experts;
- A push to develop measures against the financing of terrorism;
- An effort to enhance the criminal justice measures to fight against homegrown terrorism (development of rehabilitation programs as well as risk assessment tools).

Most of these measures are about speeding up ideas that were suggested after Charlie Hebdo with the exception of the idea of a mini-Schengen, which five EU members—Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg—talked about outside of formal negotiation. Reportedly this idea was under development even before

Paris because the states in question do not think that bordering countries will be able to set up operating “migration hotspots” by the end of the month. (C. Hermanin)

FROM THE GROUND

(All reports below from Jordi Vaquer)

GREECE

Greece concerned about border closures after Paris attacks: Concerns over a domino effect from border closures after the Paris terrorist attacks dominate discussion in the Greek public sphere. This is in particular focus after the decision by the Macedonian Council for Security to build fences to limit the number of people crossing their borders. Regarding the Leros registered passport, the Minister for Migration Mouzalas has stated that Greece had followed the EU’s set procedures.

Housing refugees in Greece: Details of the UNHCR/EU plan of hosting in country were published. This prioritizes the rental of empty apartments with an NGO acting as an operational branch; the idea of a host family scheme is also under discussion.

Solidarity Now ready to open in Lesvos: Solidarity Now is working to submit the final draft plan for the joint venture with UNHCR over the transit temporary accommodation camp at Moria II (Lesvos). This is just

5kms from the port and will host up to 1,000 people on the move in an open camp.

REPORTS FROM ORGANIZATIONS MONITORING BORDERS

Eidomeni (Greek side of the Greece-Macedonia border)

- Up to 5,500 people were stranded in Eidomeni this morning (Friday) as the borders were completely shut between 10 pm and 10 am.
- The borders were shut due to a group of Iranians who were not allowed to cross into Macedonia staged a sit-in protest on the railway tracks, refusing to move unless admitted into Macedonia.
- *Sensitive:* There are reports that some people managed to cross through the fields while the borders were shut without being met by significant police resistance.
- The situation was tense at the Eidomeni transit camp which was over capacity yesterday.
- Vasilis Tsartsanis (an individual OSIFE grantee) is leading a visit by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the moment in Eidomeni. Local sources say that the Greek government is extremely worried about the situation, given that the area does not have the facilities to house people.
- Tsartsanis also got in touch with the German Consulate and has urged them to send a team to the

border to report back to the German government on the conditions. He is arguing that access should not be restricted by nationality due to the potential for a humanitarian crisis at Eidomeni with stranded people. The consulate team also went to the border to meet him.

- If screening for nationality and the blocking of non-Syrian/Afghan/Iraqi refugees continue, there will be an urgent need for increased shelter, food and relief items provision in the area as current facilities are designed to facilitate short-term stays. Monitors report that current flows are people of lower socioeconomic background than previously, which heightens the need for provisions.
- We are currently operating an extended-hours monitoring presence on both sides of the border through our grants to the Greek Council for Refugees and the Macedonian Helsinki Committee.

Gevgelija (Macedonian side of the Greek-Macedonian border)

- Only Afghans, Syrians and Iraqis are allowed into Macedonia at the moment.
- A group of Iranians, Moroccans and others are stranded between the border with Greece and the identification camp, the police are asking them to return to Greece.

- The situation is generally calm and people are issued with documents and allowed onward travel.

Tabanovce/Presevo crossing (Between Macedonia and Greece)

- Serbian police rejecting people even if they have documents from Greece or Macedonia that claim Afghan, Syrian or Iraqi nationality. A group of Bangladeshis with papers stating their nationality was Afghan were turned around in front of a MHC monitor because they didn't have passports.
- ***Sensitive:*** Reports that Macedonian authorities are issuing people with documents claiming to identify them as Syrian, Afghan or Iraqi in a bid to reduce the stress on the Kumanovo/Tabanovce camp.

SERBIA

Starting at 1800 hours Wednesday (November 18) Macedonian police near the south Serbian border began preventing refugees of nationalities other than Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis to advance towards the Serbian border. At the same time, the Serbian police in Šid (close to the Croatian border) are doing the same, so technically refugees are not pushed back at the border crossing. Although approximately 90 percent of refugees are from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, there are significant numbers coming from other war affected areas (Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Palestine for example). The Serbian

Commissioner for refugees and migrants said that 600 economic migrants “were returned”.

It seems that these pre-border actions to return some refugees are well coordinated regionally, with the aim to prevent formal pushbacks and violation of non-refoulement once the refugees arrive at border crossings.

CROATIA

The numbers of refugees coming into Croatia in the past week continued to be high. On November 18 exactly 6,104 persons entered the reception camp in Slavonski brod and 6,401 persons left onwards by train to Slovenia. The Head of the Reception Center in Slavonski brod said that there will be a gradual slow down in the refugee flow because of a strike of Slovenian police officers and because of an agreement among transit countries to slow down the reception center because of 'bottlenecks' in Austria. There is also evidence of a new practice of separating refugees coming from major war zones from all others.

For the first time in Croatia there is growing securitization of the public debate, something that is clearly a fall out of both the Paris attacks and the incident where a Wahabbi killed two Bosnian Army soldiers in the outskirts of Sarajevo with a machine gun (on November 18).

CZECH REPUBLIC

More detail on President's Islamophobic remarks: Tuesday is a national holiday in the Czech Republic, remembering the students movement in November 1989. It has always been a celebration of students as they were the engine of the events in 1989. This year however students were not allowed by the police and the president's security to enter the space beside the memorial. Only sympathizers of the president and members of the movement "We don't want Islam in the Czech Republic" could enter. During his speech, Zeman went as far as saying that the culture of migrants is "a culture of murderers and religious hatred."

HUNGARY

In terms of the migration crisis, the Hungarian government has fulfilled its task to protect its citizens, Viktor Orbán is quoted as saying by the governmental daily, Magyar Idők. He promised Hungary's assistance to all neighbors of Hungary in the Western Balkans, on the basis of reciprocity and friendship.

Earlier this week, the Hungarian Parliament agreed to sue the EU-Commission at the European Court because of mandatory migrant quotas.

END