Introduction

This article aims to identify central elements of the European asylum system and link them to the most recent experiences from the southeastern part of this system. During the recent mass influx of asylum seekers to Europe in 2015 and 2016, Greece and the other states in the region played the central role as transit countries for hundreds of thousands of prospective asylum seekers in Western Europe. After the closure of the Balkan migration corridor, a process more or less completed in the spring of 2016, the number of asylum seekers transiting via Southeastern Europe has dropped markedly.

With the closure of the Balkan corridor, Greece became a hub for stranded asylum seekers, while some new countries emerged as new transit countries and new buffer zones. Yet, Greece and its regional neighbours still constitute an important part of the European asylum system. The closure of those migration channels meant that these countries once again became part of the buffer zone whose function it is to hinder would-be asylum seekers in approaching the Schengen borders of the European Union.

In this article, we discuss the local experiences that these countries have had with the changing dynamics of the asylum migrations in the region. Three interrelated questions are explored: (i) Which restrictive tools do member states in the European Union use in order to deter and deflect asylum seekers? (ii) How have Greece and other countries in Southeast Europe positioned themselves within this system? (iii) What consequences do the interactions between the countries in the system have on the migration dynamic in the region?

The discussion is based on an analysis of available statistics, relevant reports and qualitative data gathered in the region. Between 2012 and 2017, we were involved in several projects in Greece as well as in other countries in the region.[1] This included extensive fieldwork

[1] We have interviewed asylum seekers in Greece and Croatia and representatives for migration authorities and NGOs in Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. For more see author (2015, 2017, 2018).

in refugee camps in Greece and Croatia and interviews with asylum seekers, local experts and representatives of authorities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).[2]

This article is divided into several interrelated parts. We identify first the lines of deterrence and interactions among the elements in the migration system. Thereafter, we outline the reactions of the countries in Southeastern Europe to the influx of asylum seekers, and we discuss how these responses affected subsequent migration trends in the region. The discussion combines relevant theory, previous research and data from the above-mentioned sources.

Fortress Europe: lines of deterrence and interactions in the system

Theorists on international migration policies and migrations systems propose that the migration system should be defined by: (i) a set of interacting elements (flows of people, strategies of migrants, various institutions and migration policies of governments, etc.), and (ii) the dynamics governing the way in which the system and the elements develop and change through various feedback mechanisms (Bakewell 2014: 310). Drawing from these perspectives, we argue that the European asylum system contains several interacting dimensions and elements. As for dimensions, different countries in Europe may be categorised based on their position in the hierarchy of European cooperation as well as according to their geographic locations and their position in the international migration system. Furthermore, a distinction can be made among different lines of deterrence that demotivate and deflect refugees. Figure 1 illustrates the central dimensions and elements in this system.

Figure 1: Here

As the figure indicates, the above-mentioned dimensions contain several elements. At the level of nation-states, and within the broader European cooperation, we may distinguish between members and non-members of the European Union; and among EU member states, we may further differentiate between those EU member states that are part of the Schengen Area and

[2] For a more elaborate review of the methods used, see author (2015, 2017, 2018).

those that are not. In Southeastern Europe, the former Yugoslav Republic (FYR) of Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia are not EU members. Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania are EU members but are not in the Schengen Area, whereas Greece, Hungary and Slovenia are both part of the EU and the Schengen Zone. Furthermore, with respect to the European countries' geographic positions, we may distinguish between countries in the periphery and at the core of the EU, as well as between buffer zones in Europe and Africa. With regards to the countries' placing in the international migration system, we can separate between sending, receiving and transit countries. In Southeastern Europe, several former Yugoslav republics were large transit as well as sending and receiving countries in the 1990s, while Greece from the mid-90's was both a receiving and a transit country for asylum seekers. Turkey is the largest receiver of refugees from neighbouring Syria, and during 2015 and 2016 it was also the largest transit country for asylum seekers heading to Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom and other destination countries in Western Europe.

It may be argued that several interacting lines of the EU's deterrence mechanism are placed at the nexus of the asylum-system dimensions outlined above. Three such lines can be identified: (i) deterrence measures meant to prevent migrants from reaching the EU's Schengen borders, (ii) those that operate at the Schengen borders, and (iii) measures of deterrence within the Schengen Zone (Triandafyllidou and Dimitriadi 2014; author). As we will explicate below, some of the most important tools of deterrence have been constructed and developed since 2015 by political actors in different nation-states. These tools constitute a *de facto* deflection mechanism, but they operate on the level of nation-states rather than as a part of any carefully designed EU policy.

The first line of deterrence measures that prevents migrants from reaching the EU is often associated with the practices of externalising Europe's migration policy (Triandafyllidou and Dimitriadi 2014; Skleparis 2017; Tudoroiu 2017). These measures include agreements with the EU, or between a single EU member state and countries outside the EU, where the

countries in buffer zones both in Europe and Africa are induced by EU states, through both political and economic means, to hinder or intercept migrants on their way to the European Union (Bialasiewicz 2012; Triandafyllidou and Dimitriadi 2014; Author).

Another part of the externalisation of EU policy is related to return agreements with countries outside the EU. Border-control agreements and cooperation, as well as readmission agreements between the European Union and its neighbours – such as the Western Balkan countries, Turkey, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova – are part of such externalisation policy. States positioned at the borders of the EU have also, at times, reached bilateral readmission agreements; examples include Greece and Turkey, Spain and Morocco and Italy and Libya (Bialasiewicz 2012; author). Some of these measures and agreements were established prior to the large influx of asylum seekers in 2015, while others were deployed during the influx or after the closure of the West Balkan corridor (Skleparis 2017; Tudoroiu 2017). The most recent such agreements – the one reached in 2016 between the EU and Turkey, as well as those in 2017 between EU countries and several African states such as Libya, Niger and Chad – are the most evident examples of such externalisation policy (Rogelj 2017; author).[3]

The second line of deterrence includes border controls and obstacles that operate at the Schengen borders. The most controversial and visible hindrances are barbed-wire fences erected by EU countries on the Schengen borders, such as the fences between Greece and Turkey, Slovenia and Croatia, and the one stretching along Hungary's border with Serbia and Croatia (UNHCR 2017a; author). During the recent mass influx of migrants, the latter, erected by Hungary in 2015, worked to deflect hundreds of thousands of migrants from Hungary to Croatia, completely altering the direction of the flow of people from the autumn of 2015. In addition to these obstacles, several countries deploy police and military forces. Border patrols,

[3] For more, see: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/28/emmanuel-macron-hosts-summit-to-tackle-migration-crisis.

pushbacks, movement detectors, radars and other such military-technological devices are also used as parts of deterrence strategies (Bigo 2014; Rogelj 2017; author 2018).

Yet, there are also other, more subtle tools available. The Dublin Regulation is one prominent example. According to this EU law, asylum seekers can only apply for asylum once in the EU, and it has to occur in the country of first registration. Thus, many migrants seeking asylum actually end up as reluctant asylum seekers; they are left stranded in transit countries as they are intercepted, apprehended and registered by authorities in the European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database (EURODAC). Due to the Dublin Regulation, therefore, the southern periphery of the EU functions as a *de facto* buffer zone for the countries at the EU's core (author; Triandafyllidou and Dimitriadi 2014; Skleparis 2017; Tudoroiu 2017).

In addition to the above-mentioned lines of deterrence, there are also other tools that in sum make up a third line of migration deterrence in the EU – one that operates at the level of nation-states. EU member states may, for example, lower reception standards, increase rejection rates and use accelerated asylum procedures, detention and deportation in order to deter and deflect would-be asylum seekers. Furthermore, if the countries at the core of the European Union experience a large influx of asylum seekers, they may reintroduce controls at their national borders. This has indeed been done by France, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and several other countries as a response to the recent major increase in the arrival of asylum seekers (UNHCR 2017a).

In what follows we discuss how Greece and other countries in Southeastern Europe have recently positioned themselves within the system described heretofore. We also consider what consequences this has had for asylum seekers and for the migrations in the region.

Malfunctions in the Southeastern European buffer zone

During the recent large-scale migrations to Europe, the biggest sending countries were Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2015 and 2016, most people on the move from these countries

transited Turkey. With an unprecedented increase in arrivals from Turkey to Greece in the autumn of 2015, it was evident that Turkey was not fulfilling its intended function as a buffer zone for the EU. Facing the mass influx of migrants in this period, several EU and non-EU countries in Southeastern Europe also reinvented their role and stopped acting as buffer zones for the core countries of the European Union (Tudoroiu 2017). One notable example is Greece, which put aside some of the deterrent tools reinforced before the mass influx and proceeded to transport migrants from the Greek islands to the mainland, wherefrom they could continue their transit journey to the border of FYR Macedonia (Skleparis 2017; Tudoroiu 2017). Several EU member states in Southern Europe, such as Greece and Croatia, also refrained from registering new arrivals according to the EURODAC/Dublin systems. Furthermore, they tolerated and sometimes even overtly facilitated migrants' transit movement further north in the migration corridor. Confronting such a substantial influx, non-EU members FYR Macedonia and Serbia proclaimed that they were transit countries and issued 72-hour temporary permits to arriving migrants, which enabled onward movement and contributed to the establishment of the so-called Balkan corridor (Greider 2017; Tudoroiu 2017).

What effects did these policies have on the dynamic of migrations and the distribution of asylum seekers in the system? In sum, they resulted in large-scale migration through the Balkan corridor (author; Greider 2017; Rogelj 2017). The numbers of asylum seekers were also rising in the EU prior to the large influx in 2015; still, after the above-mentioned responses by countries in Southeastern Europe, the numbers more than doubled in several countries at the EU's core. Table 1 shows changes in the numbers of asylum seekers (first-time applicants) in selected countries.

Table 1. Here

At the very peak of the refugee crisis in 2015, hundreds of thousands of people entered Greece and the other countries in the region, but very few of them applied for asylum in the region.

The countries in Southeastern Europe, such as Greece, FYR Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia, have traditionally functioned as transit countries because of their relatively lower levels of economic development and inadequate reception facilities. Moreover, their underdeveloped asylum systems have also had high rejection rates, and the respective countries have long offered grim integration prospects to asylum seekers and refugees. Consequently, the emergence of the Balkan corridor resulted in a large increase of asylum seekers further up in the same migration corridor – primarily in Austria, Germany and Sweden.

The emergence of the semi-legal migration corridor in the Balkans reduced the costs of migration and gave migrants a window of opportunity to reach preferable destination countries at the core of the EU with greater ease (Greider 2017; Rogelj 2017). The peak in arrivals occurred in 2015. All of the lines of deterrence described above were, however, deployed in 2016, which ultimately resulted in the closure of the Balkan corridor.

The Balkan corridor was eventually shut in the spring of 2016 as a result of the EU–Turkey deal and the coordinated border closures by Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and FYR Macedonia (author). Through these actions, this group of countries avoided becoming the hubs or hotspots for a large number of stranded migrants when Austria and other countries further up in the migration corridor started to close their borders (author). The number of asylum seekers soon began to decline in Germany, Austria and Sweden. However, parallel to this, the number of asylum seekers in South and Southeastern Europe *increased* after the closure of the corridor (see table 1). Yet, most of the Southeastern European countries along the corridor that in 2015 and 2016 had allowed and facilitated the transit movements of hundreds of thousands of would-be asylum seekers – such as FYR Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia – did not in fact end up as large receiving countries. There were nevertheless some exceptions from this

main trend. As table 1 shows, the largest such exception was Greece, where the number of asylum seekers increased after the closure of the Western Balkan corridor. [4]

Stranded asylum seekers in Greece

In 2015, an estimated 856,723 people arrived in Greece across the Aegean Sea; in 2016, arrivals concerned 173,450 people; and in 2017, the number had decreased to 29,718 people (UNHCR 2018). An overwhelming majority of arrivals – 84 per cent in 2015 – concerned nationals from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (UNHCR 2016). The closure of the Western Balkan corridor and Greece's border with FYR Macedonia led to more than fifty thousand people becoming stranded in Greece, thus becoming part of a growing group of reluctant asylum seekers. Since the border closure, arrivals and onward movement from Greece have been drastically reduced and the focus has been on returns to Turkey.[5]

Several recent reports focus on the state of asylum seekers in Greece, a situation often marked by lengthy asylum and family-reunification processes, difficult living conditions and low recognition rates amongst some groups (HRW 2017; GCR 2018). Many asylum seekers lived under difficult conditions also before the refugee crisis and the closure of the Balkan corridor (Author 2015; Tudoroiu 2017). In 2011, returns to Greece under the Dublin Regulation were suspended after the European Court of Human Rights ruled that returns would result in a breach of the European Convention on Human Rights' Articles 3 and 13. These concern the prohibition of "inhumane or degrading treatment" and the right to "an effective remedy",[6] respectively, and they were invoked due to the widespread use of detention, the poor living

[4] Several countries in Southeastern Europe, such as Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina, were not a part of the West Balkan route during the large-scale influx in 2015 and 2016. Yet, after the closure, they too became transit countries as well as a new buffer zone. The numbers of irregular migrants and stranded asylum seekers have subsequently increased, particularly in Bosnia.

[5] Between the entry into force of the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016 and the end of December 2017, 1,484 individuals have been returned according to this deal, 42 percent of whom originate from Pakistan (UNHCR 2017b).

[6] See the European Convention of Human Rights: http://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf.

conditions asylum-seekers were offered and, more generally, deficiencies in the asylum system.[7]

During the recent refugee crisis, and continuing after the border closures in spring 2016, the reception system in Greece experienced additional capacity problems. The Eidomeni transit camp at the border with FYR Macedonia became the symbol of the border closure in March 2016 when around 14,000 people became stranded in a camp originally made to accommodate 1,100 individuals (Ma 2016; MSF 2015). As of January 2018, there were 1,530 places of accommodation, including short-term ones, across 58 reception facilities within the referral network of the National Centre for Social Solidarity, the official reception system in Greece; 1,101 were reserved for unaccompanied and separated children (E.K.K.A. 2017; GCR 2018).

Several temporary emergency camps have also been set up in order to respond to growing needs. Conditions do not meet adequate standards, though. Furthermore, the legal status of most of these facilities have been unclear. They are also inadequate for long-term residence. Hotspots for the reception of asylum seekers have also been established on the Greek islands, initially as closed detention facilities after the EU-Turkey deal in the spring of 2016, but most have since been turned into open centres. However, new arrivals have to reside at the facilities and are not allowed to leave the island itself, which has led to significant overcrowding (GCR 2018). These practices also indicate that Greece has resumed its erstwhile function in the EU's asylum system, again becoming an important place for deterrence in the EU's southeastern buffer zone (Skleparis 2017; Tudoroiu 2017). In December 2017, 13,500 people remained on the islands, where conditions have been described as a humanitarian crisis. In line with this, thirteen human rights and humanitarian aid organisations launched a campaign for people to be transferred to the mainland in order to provide them with better reception conditions (HRW 2017).

[7] In December 2016, the European Commission suggested a resumption of returns under the Dublin III Regulation from March 2017.

Conclusion

This article has focused on recent developments in asylum migrations to Europe and how they interact with restrictive and deterring measures deployed by different EU member states. Furthermore, we have discussed the role of countries in Southeastern Europe during the mass influx of irregular migrants and asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016. We have distinguished among three main lines of deterrence meant to curb such migration: (i) those that operate at the Schengen borders, (ii) deterrence measures meant to prevent irregular migrants and would-be asylum seekers from reaching the Schengen borders, and (iii) measures of deterrence within the Schengen Zone. During the recent mass migrations to Europe, most irregular migrants and would-be asylum entered the European Union through Greece and the Balkan corridor. It is maintained that Greece and the other countries at the southern borders of the EU constitute a buffer zone. However, their positioning during the recent large-scale influx temporarily undermined their role as a buffer zone, which resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of asylum seekers at the EU's core. After the closure of the Balkan corridor in the spring of 2016, though, the countries in Southeastern Europe have resumed their previous role as a buffer zone that hinders large numbers of would-be asylum seekers from entering the EU. The result has been twofold. On the one hand, newly imposed and reinforced lines of deterrence have contributed to a drastic reduction in the number of asylum seekers in the EU's core. On the other hand, the development and reinforcement of deterrence measures have contributed to increasing the number of asylum seekers in the region, especially in Greece. It has also had clear and regrettable humanitarian consequences: tens of thousands of people from Syria, Afghanistan and other countries ridden by armed conflict remain stranded in Greece and other countries in the region under severe living conditions. [8]

[8] Deterrence measures have also deflected the migrants to other countries in the region. After the closure of the corridor, Bosnia emerged as a new transit country and a new buffer zone. Bosnia is among the poorest and most

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politically unstable countries in the region, and the increase in numbers of irregular migrants and asylum seekers have created additional strains on and tensions in the country.

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Figure 1: Dimensions and elements in the asylum system

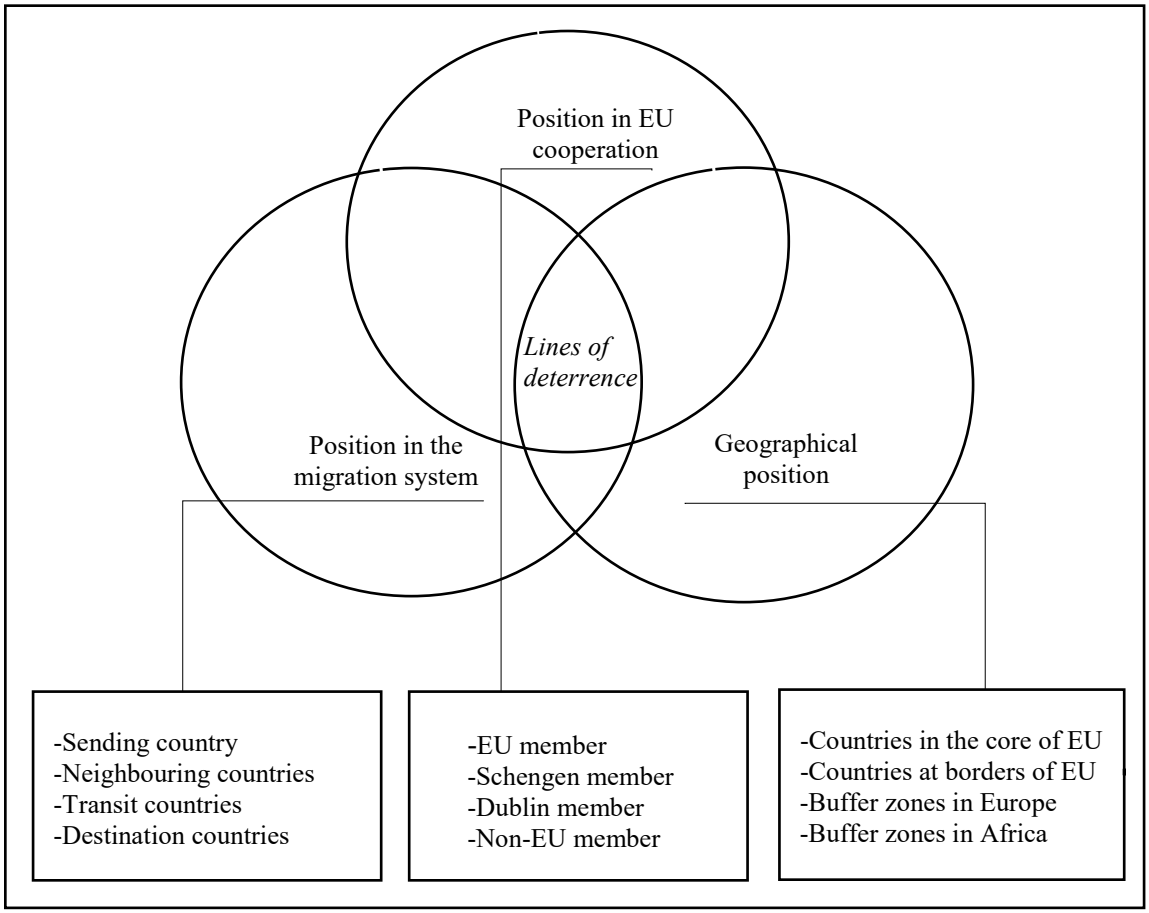

Table 1. Selected ten largest receivers of asylum seekers in Europe (2011-2017)[9]

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Germany	53 235	77 485	126 705	202 645	476 510	745 155	222 560
Italy	40 315	17 335	26 620	64 625	83 540	122 960	128 850

[9] Own compilation based on Eurostat's database.

France	57 330	61 440	66 265	64 310	76 165	84 270	99 330
Greece	9 310	9 575	8 225	9 430	13 205	51 110	58 650
Austria	14 420	17 415	17 500	28 035	88 160	42 255	24 715
United K.	26 915	28 800	30 585	32 785	40 160	38 785	33 780
Hungary	1 690	2 155	18 895	42 775	177 135	29 430	3 390
Sweden	29 650	43 855	54 270	81 180	162 450	28 790	26 325
Netherl.	14 590	13 095	13 060	24 495	44 970	20 945	18 210
Bulgaria	890	1 384	7145	11 080	20 365	19 420	3 695