

Trade with Greece

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The Migration Issue: Another Priority of the Greek Presidency

How the Lampedusa tragedy galvanizes the countries of the European South into joint action

By Alexandra Voudouri

Photos: Iakovos Hatzistavrou

In early October 2013, 356 African immigrants drowned trying to reach the European Union shores, when their boat capsized shortly before approaching the island of Lampedusa, near Sicily. It was one of the worst tragedies involving immigrants that have ever been recorded. At the time, many people demanded a stop to be put to such crimes.

However, many similar incidents have since occurred and, indeed, in the same frequency. A few days later, a boat laden with immigrants keeled over near Malta, causing the death of 27 more people. On

the same day, at least 12 immigrants drowned near the port of Alexandria, Egypt. In mid-November, Greece was also shocked by a shipwreck at the island of Lefkada, which left 12 dead, including four children; they were all refugees





from Syria, bound for Italy.

The Mediterranean has, for quite some time, become a watery grave for people who try to escape from war, poverty and despair. These tragedies are forcing the political leaderships of the countries of the European South to consider ways of joint action, to take initiatives for the creation of a common front against a common problem: irregular migration.

On the occasion of the Greek presidency of the EU, which will be followed by the Italian presidency –a fortunate occurrence for the further advancement of joint action on irregular migration–, the year 2014 has already been proclaimed “Year of the Mediterranean” by the prime ministers of Greece and Italy.

The Greek presidency considers the migration issue to be one of its key priorities, along with the issues of safeguarding the borders, as well as mobility. According to diplomatic sources, in this semester Greece will seek to highlight the positive effects from a comprehensive, European-level management of immigration that will serve the goals of growth. As stated by the same sources, the efforts will focus on highlighting all migration policy dimensions, with parallel measures for reducing the impact of irregular migration on the economic, social and political levels.

Special emphasis will be placed on measures for fighting irregular migration, which are focused on readmission, fighting smuggling and the trafficking of human beings, as well as capacity building





for border management. One of the main goals of the Greek presidency will be to enhance all prevention measures in third countries of illegal immigrant origin and transit. In this context, the Greek presidency will forward the implementation of the Common European Asylum System, placing special emphasis on measures aimed at enhancing solidarity towards member states that are under particular strain as a result of immigration flows. The key is to “evenly allocate burdens and responsibilities” between the countries of the European North and South.

How has the EU been handling the immigration issue up to now and with what tools?

Given the objectives of the Greek presidency, we will seek, with the invaluable assistance of Dr. Angeliki Dimitriadis, a researcher at the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), answers to certain key points that explain the EU’s immigration policy up to now, as well as the “open issues”/“challenges” for this semester.

How does the EU respond to the immigration problem?

The EU has committed itself to establishing a

Common European Asylum System, which will be based on the comprehensive and faithful implementation of the Geneva Convention of 1951, whose guardian is the High Commissioner of the UN. That said, making law is one thing and enforcing it on a group of 28 EU member states –each one of which also has its own national legislation– is another. Overall, the main rationale of the “Dublin II” regulation remains: interested persons can seek asylum only in the first “country of entry” in the EU, which is entrusted with the duty of considering and reviewing the applications of all asylum seekers. However, countries like Greece protest that, owing to their geopolitical position, they are the ones that get overwhelmed by thousands of asylum applications. The Commission urges EU member-state governments to expand inspections all over the Mediterranean, from Cyprus to Spain, in order to avoid tragedies like the recent one at Lampedusa.

What is the situation in the Mediterranean, compared to other points of entry in the EU?

In 2012, the east Mediterranean route –via Greece– was used for the largest number of recorded illegal refugee entries; that is 37,214 cases (51% of the total number of recorded illegal entries). Nonetheless, this number has been



reduced since August 2012, when the Greek government, in cooperation with the border guard teams of Frontex, beefed up security measures along the border with Turkey. The central Mediterranean route –via Italy– is now most widely used, and this is where 10,379 illegal refugee entries were recorded in 2012 (14% of the total). In the west Mediterranean route –via Spain– 6,397 illegal immigrant entries were recorded in 2012, owing to the fact that Spain has intensified its border controls, as part of a bilateral cooperation with Morocco.

Which are the main tools Europe has been up to now using to handle its immigration problem?

At the EU border, the main tool has been Frontex, while Eurosur took over in December 2013. At the same time, several readmission agreements have been signed, as part of the EU's Global Approach to Migration and Mobility, says Dr. Aggeliki Dimitriadis. In other words, third countries are called to sign readmission agreements regarding both their citizens and all persons who have passed through their territory, to enhance their border protection measures by signing agreements with Frontex, to build further integrated border management (IBM) capacity, such as document control, combating the trafficking of humans etc. Moreover, as already mentioned, the EU will try to complete and implement the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which officially comes into force in 2015 with the activation of all recast Directives.

How can Frontex be strengthened? Is it sufficient for dealing with irregular migration?

The European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (Frontex) maintains an office in Piraeus, whose operation has been extended till the end of 2013, and is implementing one of the most long-lived operations (Poseidon) in an EU member state. "Its presence may not be impressive in terms of manpower", stresses Dr. Aggeliki Dimitriadis, "but it brought with it technical means that Greece did not possess and also helped a lot with organizational matters and equipment."

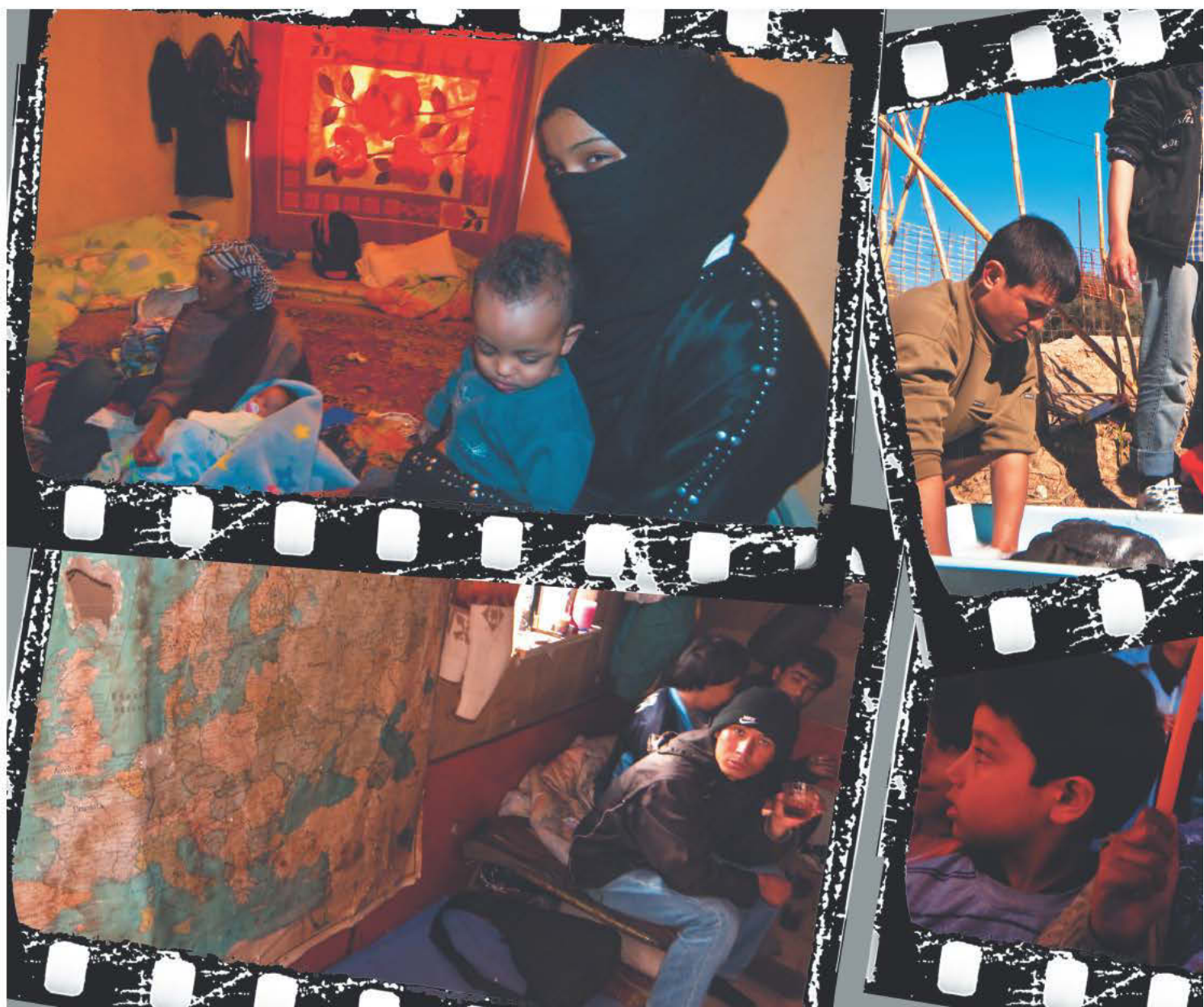
At the same time, though, Dr. Dimitriadis points out that "there is genuine concern regarding the exact role of the agency, its activity and whether it is, after all, under control, because this is an agency that evolved rapidly and, from a purely operational role, is now involved in capacity building, readmissions, border supervisions and joint operations with third countries. It places too much emphasis on deterrence – both through Eurosur



and the All Eyes programme, and, despite having incorporated the Charter of Fundamental Rights, it does not accept that any human rights violations in its area of operation are its own responsibility, claiming instead that they are the responsibility of the member states. In 2013 it had a budget of almost 86 million euros, which, although supposed to be 'reduced', is actually one of the largest that exist, comparable to that of EUROPOL. At the same time, though, it depends fully on the member states' contribution and support, in other words it doesn't possess its own technical equipment, means of transportation etc. – it just 'borrows' those made available by the member states."

According to Dr. Dimitriadis, Frontex is not a suf-





ficient tool for dealing with irregular migration, “because it focuses on deterrence and readmission – it does not aim at dealing with the problem, but only at temporarily fixing it”.

What is the deal with Readmission Protocols? Why are they ineffective in practice?

In 2002 Greece signed a Readmission Protocol with Turkey; however, despite the constant pressures put by our country, as well as the EU, on Turkey, the vast majority of readmission applications submitted by the Greek authorities, on the basis of the Protocol's provisions, is still being rejected.

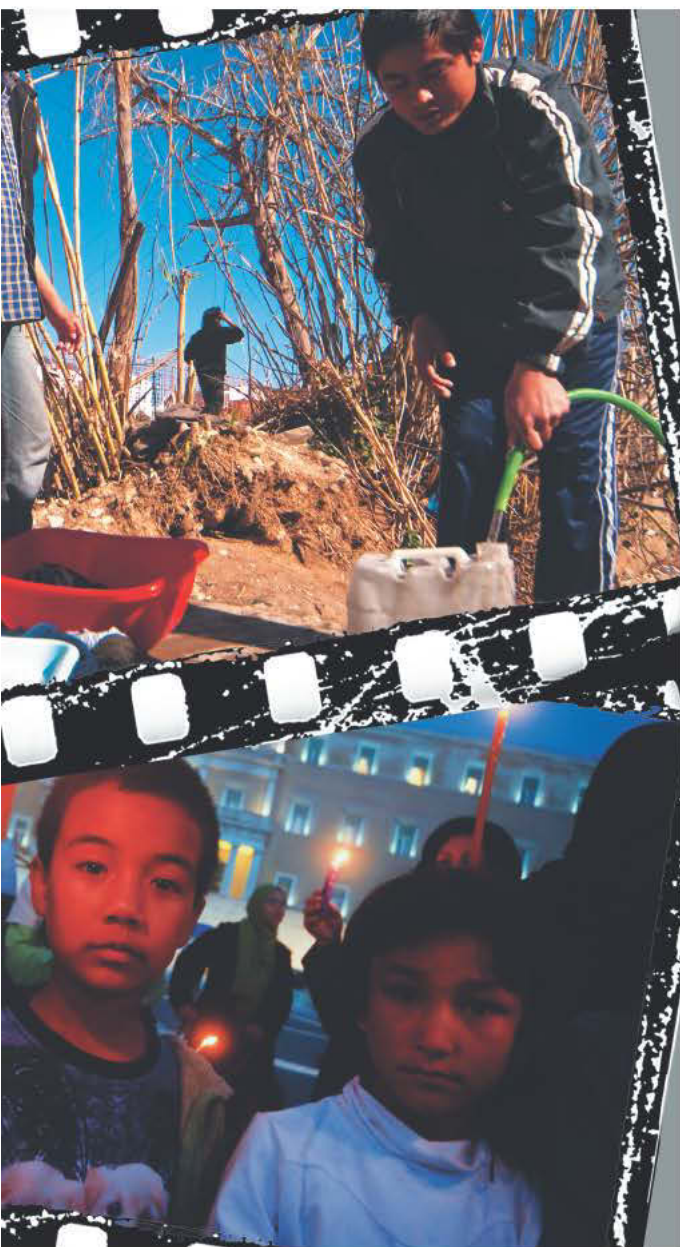
Despite the fact that cooperation between the two countries has improved, Dr. Dimitriadis notes that “Turkey does not, anyway, accept the return of citizens from third countries it does not share borders with, and only approves a limited number of

applications. As a result, the number of third country citizens that have been returned to Turkey remains low.”

The EU has also signed Readmission Agreements with Pakistan (1/12/2010), Georgia (1/3/2011), Hong-Kong, Sri Lanka, Macao, Albania, Montenegro, FYROM, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Russia, Moldova and Ukraine.

As stated by Dr. Dimitriadis “unquestionably, the only agreement of actual importance that has not been reached is that with Turkey. Nonetheless, it has to be noted that, at the same time, Greece receives irregular inflows mainly from Afghanistan, Syria (although their status is humanitarian, and they are not readmitted), Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, Somalia; and, as far as these countries are concerned, readmission is not always possible, there are not cooperation agreements and, most importantly, the





immigrant population is mixed – that is, comprises both economic migrants and persons in need of protection.”

Which is the main problem caused by Dublin II?

In June 2013 the Dublin II treaty was recast; however Greece, Malta and certain Italian MEPs voted against it.

As stressed by Dr. Dimitriadis, “the recast mechanism shall come into force on July 21, 2015, along with the recast Reception Conditions Directive and the recast Asylum Procedures Directive. The recast Qualifications Directive comes into force in December 2013. Together with EURO-DAC, they comprise the well-known CEAS, which is now being implemented gradually, until it is finally ratified by the Parliaments of the EU member states.”

The main problem with Dublin II was, and still is,

that it transfers the burden to the external borders of the EU, in other words to the countries of the South, which are the first point of entry.

The rationale of the recast directive is that it preserves the initial rule of return to the country of entry, extending, at the same time, the mandate of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), which is now in charge of supervising the early warning and crisis management mechanism. The purpose of this mechanism is to assess the operation of national asylum systems in practice, to provide assistance to struggling member states and to prevent asylum crises. It is a positive step towards the right direction, but, in practice, it does not change the role of Dublin II, which remains an uneven and, to a great extent, unjust system for dealing with irregular arrivals,” says Dr. Dimitriadis.

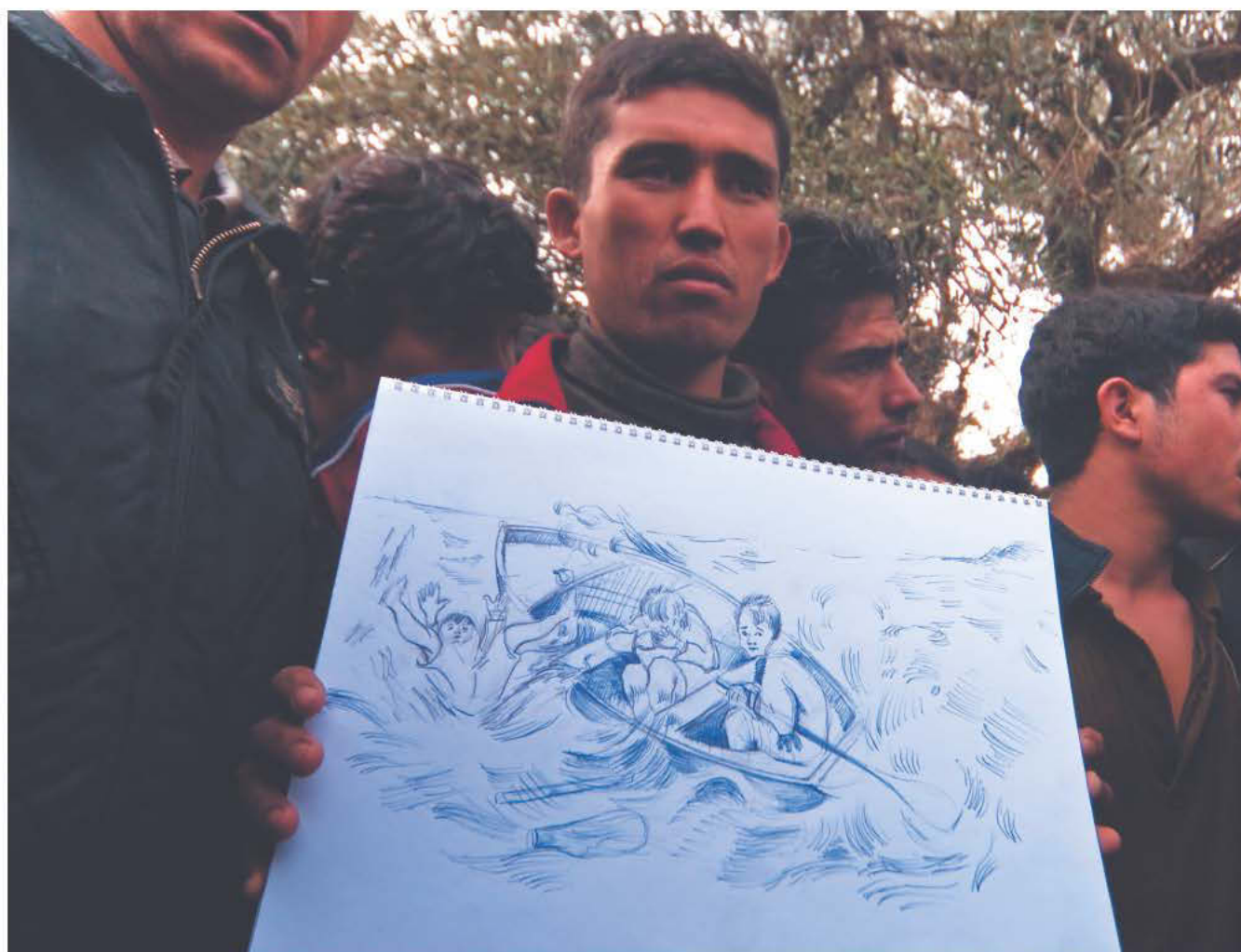
Which measures could Greece promote during the EU presidency, in order to achieve a comprehensive migration policy?

Greece, which is currently going through an unprecedented economic crisis, needs, as do other countries of the European South, financial support in order to sufficiently handle migration flows. It also suffers from the lack of infrastructure (e.g. detention centres, centres for hosting unaccompanied minors), properly trained personnel, as well as equipment.

Moreover, as noted by Dr. Dimitriadis, Greece must apply new pressures for the full implementation of the redistribution clause, which will provide for the relocation of asylum seekers within the EU, depending on each country’s GDP, structure and distinguishing characteristics. In this effort Greece may find support from Malta, Italy and maybe Spain. It is a matter of fact that a few countries are currently bearing the brunt of handling the issue: some Central and North European countries that receive large number of asylum applications, but also have high asylum seeker recognition rates (Germany, Sweden, Austria, Norway) and countries that are points of entry (Greece, Malta, Italy and now Bulgaria). Therefore, there is no equal sharing of the burden in the EU-28.”

According to Dr. Dimitriadis, “we are given a chance to shift the debate towards the creation of legal migration opportunities. Even if arrivals to Greece stopped tomorrow, inflows would increase at other points throughout the EU – the problem remains a European one, and concerns both us and the other partners. Therefore, the debate should be focused on the needs that we have as Europe, on where and how we can cover them by offering opportunities to third country citizens within a framework that protects human





rights and is beneficial for us and them. At the same time, and given that we are receiving mixed migration flows, the debate should include the issue of asylum and securing access to it.

"Europe is delaying the adoption and implementation of a comprehensive migration policy, but the most important problem is that it remains divided between the need (and international obligation) to respect and protect human rights and the need to reduce the number of persons irregularly entering its territory. In practice, this controversy remains evident in the policies that are being adopted, quite often at the cost of human lives."

The other dimension of the migration issue...

Europe's immigration problem has another dimension, which becomes even topical than ever in view of the European elections of 2014 and the effort to rally far right parties under a single alliance. The common ground of Marine Le Pen's National Front and like-minded parties in the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium and the Scandinavian countries is the creation of an "anti-

immigration platform".

Therefore, it is a great challenge for pro-European political forces to prevent the prevalence of far right parties and the emergence of the most anti-European parliament the Brussels will have ever seen, through a decisive response to the immigration issue. Both the Italian prime minister, Enrico Letta, and the Social Democrat candidate for the European Commission, the current president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, have raised the alarm, saying the dealing with the immigration issues should not include half-measures, because in this case Europe will "simply lose the election to the populists and the far right". Senior diplomatic sources in Greece also point out that "when the EU fails to deal with such problems in a comprehensive manner, it is losing any credibility with the citizens".

During "the Year of the Mediterranean 2014", the successive presidencies of Greece and Italy offer a great opportunity for taking various joint actions and promoting a comprehensive European policy on immigration, since this is not a mere matter of policy, but also a matter of safeguarding the principles of the European Union itself. 