

Unite in Order to Float: Finding Solutions to the Refugee Crisis



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Introduction

It was September 2018 and Marios Andriotis Konstantios, Senior Advisor to the municipality of Lesbos in Greece, received a phone call from Martijn Vroom, the Mayor of Krimpen aan den IJssel in the Netherlands. The two had been in contact since the refugee crisis in 2015. Both had experience hosting refugees: Krimpen was one of the first Dutch municipalities to offer emergency shelter to refugees arriving in the Netherlands, while Konstantios dealt with thousands of refugees arriving in his municipality in Lesbos. But it seemed like the crisis was not over yet (**Appendix A**).

Overcrowded to breaking point and with a shocking rise in violent incidents, the refugees in Camp Moria in Lesbos felt constantly unsafe (**Appendix B**). Doctors without Borders reported an “unprecedented health and mental health emergency” in the camp, and said that child refugees in particular “are increasingly attempting suicide, self-harming or having suicidal thoughts”². The constant fear, combined with the experience of traumas and sexual abuse, accelerated mental health deterioration, said medical experts. Some people had been living in the camp for two years.³ For 9000 migrants in Moria, the Greek health ministry had provided only one physician.⁴ Although 1350 refugees were transferred to the Greek mainland in August, some 115 new refugees arrived every day, compared to 85 in July 2017.⁵

On the phone to his counterpart Konstantios, Vroom got to the point: “Look, I know Lesbos is really struggling, trying to house thousands of refugees on the island. I get that you have to deal with structural problems – international, European, national and local. The circumstances are difficult. But Mario, can you explain the crux of the story so that we can do something? I mean, what do we need for a viable and positive solution? And how we can we prevent a similar safety and security crisis in the future? Winter is approaching fast, and the lack of sanitation is appalling. So how can we offer short-term relief on one hand; and on the other hand, as I imagine we’ll have to deal with forced replacement crises in the future, let’s think in solutions”.⁶

Konstantios hesitated before coming up with an answer to Vroom’s almost impassioned appeal because he knew all too well how complex the situation was. So many parties were involved – the EU, the Greek government, NGOs – and each with its own priorities and obstacles. What one party did would have consequences for the other, all trickling down to impact the life of people fleeing their countries. But it was worth a try...

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This case is part of the RSM Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) case series. It is based on field research and is written to provide material for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a management situation. Copyright © 2020 RSM Case Development Centre, Erasmus University. No part of this publication may be copied, stored, transmitted, reproduced or distributed in any form or medium whatsoever without the permission of the copyright owner. Please address all correspondence to cdc@rsm.nl.

Background of European Migrant Crisis

In 2015, Europe was surprised by a large influx of people from Northern African and Middle-Eastern countries who sought refuge from war, incredibly unstable regimes or unsafe living conditions in their home country. The war in Syria especially led to an influx of Syrians seeking refuge and safety in neighbouring countries and in Europe ([The Refugee Project](#)), but large numbers of refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan also tried to reach Europe.⁷

Although refugees were by no means a new phenomenon in Europe and global refugee crises occur more often ([EarthTime](#)), the crisis seemed to be loaded on Greece's shoulders (with boatloads arriving in a constant stream), and got too big for Greece to handle. Lesbos, a Greek island near Turkey, became a hotspot^a for the refugees arriving in Europe; it was simply overwhelmed. In 2015, the island had 20,000 refugees waiting to be rehoused.⁸

A number of significant events and issues influenced the influx of refugees into Europe and Lesbos specifically from 2015 onwards (**Appendix C**):

- **2015:** In 2015, more than a million people in total crossed Greece, moving from the Aegean islands to mainland Greece, and from there, to other northern and central European countries.⁹ Their preferred route was the so-called Balkan Route.^b Then Hungary built a razor-wire fence at their Serbian border to stop them.^c A photo of a drowned Syrian boy on a Turkey beach shocked Europe and became a symbol of a human plea for European countries to help. Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, announced that Germany would have an open-border policy for the refugees. Many European countries suspended the Schengen system^d by setting up border controls.¹⁰
- **2016:** The Balkan route was officially closed. Because of that, many migrants got stranded in Greece. More than 5000 people lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea in the hope to reach a safe haven. In March 2016, the EU-Turkey deal was signed to decrease the influx of refugees.^e

^a Read more about the 'hotspot approach' in the section about the European Union.

^b See the following link to explore how the different migrant routes to Europe have changed from 2009 onwards: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/18/the-most-common-mediterranean-migration-paths-into-europe-have-changed-since-2009/>

^c Three main routes (western, central, eastern) in which the Eastern Mediterranean Route through the Greek islands experienced a peak of almost 200,000 people arriving in September 2015 (**Appendix G**).

^d The Schengen system enables free movement of people without border controls within the internal borders of the Schengen zone, and first came into being after the Schengen Conventions in 1985. In 2018, 22 EU member states plus Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein were part of the Schengen zone.

^e For a summarised explanation on the deal, check out the section about the European Union.

- **2017:** Italy struck a deal with Libya for returning migrants and criticised NGOs for picking up boat refugees from the sea. Populist and anti-immigrant parties in Europe consolidated their position in some EU member states, while migrants were sold off at slave auctions in Libya.
- **2018:** Fewer people arrived in Italy whereas the Western Mediterranean Route saw a threefold increase. Refugee camps on Greek islands started becoming overcrowded, and squalor and violence reached breaking point.

What was in Stake for the Stakeholders?

International organisations

Two main international organisations that were involved in the refugee crisis: the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). IOM is funded by the European Commission and has supported the Greek government with, for instance, a hosting programme for 6,000 people for 6 months.¹¹

The role of global organisation UNHCR in migration and forced displacement issues is to protect the rights of refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people; to save their lives, and to improve their future.¹² Based on the 1951 Refugee Convention, states are expected to cooperate with UNHCR making sure that the rights of refugees are protected and respected. This right also ensures that refugees may not be returned to a country “where they face serious threats to their life or freedom” (non-refoulement).¹³

In Lesbos, the UNHCR took on the role of information provider for the refugees on arrival (e.g. their rights, obligations, asylum procedure, and legal counselling).¹⁴ Also, in 2018 the UNHCR assisted in transporting people from and to sea ports in Greece and organised ferry tickets with funding from the European Commission (EC).¹⁵ Greece as well as UNHCR housed refugees in reception sites and hotels on the mainland (approximately 54 asylum seekers’ hosting facilities outside urban centres).¹⁶

But in August 2018, the UNHCR sounded the alarm about the situation in Moria camp on Lesbos and other refugee camps on neighbouring islands that were overcrowded. UNHCR expressed grave concerns about the physical and sexual violence that was happening on a daily basis in the camps, as well as the appalling sanitary conditions. The UNHCR reported that Moria camp was hosting some 6500 refugees while it only had space for 2000.¹⁷

European Union (EU) and EU member states

The role of the European Union (EU) in the issue is as follows: working to provide legislation and funding to relieve and protect European member states since 1999, while needing to ensure the fundamental rights of the asylum seekers.¹⁸ In April 2016,

the EU decided on a holistic EU approach towards migration,^f acknowledging the need to improve its return systems' effectiveness. New EU readmission agreements for refugees should take preference over bilateral agreements with third countries, and member states that push back migrants from their own country without a proper asylum procedure can expect appropriate action from the EU. With regards to funding, the EU projected it would need €300 million for crisis emergency support in Greece and other EU member states in 2016, and €200 in 2017 and 2018 respectively. In 2017, €500 million was set aside to "support member states' resettlement efforts".¹⁹

EU decisions that influenced the refugee situation in Lesbos:

1. *Hotspot Approach*: The 'hotspot approach' was introduced by the European Commission in March 2015. The goal was to provide assistance to the EU member states that experienced high migratory pressure. The goal of the hotspots was twofold: 1) Make it easier to distribute EU aid in areas where many refugees arrived. 2) Channel the flows of people arriving and their procedures of international protection and/or return. Both Italy and Greece had five hotspots (**Appendix D**).
2. *EU-Turkey Statement* March 2016: This deal included a 'swap-agreement' where for every Syrian being returned to Turkey from Greek islands, another Syrian would be resettled from Turkey to the EU. Also, every new irregular migrant crossing from Turkey to Greece should be returned to Turkey.²⁰ In addition, the refugees on Lesbos received a geographical restriction at the island.²¹
3. *Results*: The number of refugees arriving in Greece decreased after 2015, and, based on this target, the EU concluded that the agreement was a success. But while pressure on Greece was reduced, migrants still continued to cross to the Greek islands from Turkey.²² The rate of deaths in the Mediterranean versus the people arriving increased (**Appendix E**).

Below, you can see some relevant EU organisations, tools, and stakeholders highlighted in respect of the migrant issue in Lesbos:

- *Frontex*: the European Border and Coastguard Security, with an aim to support member states in fighting cross-border crimes, search and rescue operations, as well as migration management. From 2016 onwards, Frontex has had a role in returning migrants to their home countries.²³
- *Europol*: the EU supports their member states in combatting smuggling. In 2015, estimates said that more than 90% of irregular migrants in the EU used some form of facilitation services (e.g. smuggling). The EU had set out measures against migrant smuggling, which fell under information gathering and sharing, seeking stronger collaboration with third countries, preventing smuggling and assisting vulnerable migrants, and enhancing judicial and police

^f The holistic approach states that the migrant's fundamental rights should fully be respected; thus making sure that their home country is safe to return to.

response. Europol founded the [European Migrant Smuggling Centre \(EMSC\)](#) to help dismantle smugglers and their networks in February 2016.²⁴

- *Individual EU member states:* Since 2015, EU countries can voluntarily decide how many refugees they want to take for a temporary stay, although there is a legal obligation on relocation. With non-compliance the EU can take them to the Court of Justice (e.g. Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic).²⁵ In general, there has been a reluctance by European Union member states to share the burden of hosting refugees, which increased the pressure on Greek camps next to a slow asylum process, according to the EU.²⁶
- *Relocation of Refugees:* The European Parliament has expressed its disappointment with regards to the member states' unfulfilled promises of solidarity and the sharing of responsibility for the refugees arriving (**Appendix F**). In September 2016, roughly 5,651 migrants were relocated from the hotspots²⁷ and this increased to almost 22,000 in March 2018.²⁸ A new European resettlement scheme was adopted and offers protection to the most vulnerable migrants; it aimed to relocate 50,000 people. In order to improve interoperability between EU member states, a High-Level Expert Group set up before was advised by the European Commission to create a European search portal, a shared biometric matching service, and a common identity repository, all of which should become fully operational by 2020.²⁹

Greek government

With regards to the refugees, the main role of the Greek government has been to lead the operation in Greece (e.g. providing suitable accommodation on land for vulnerable refugees while asylum applications are being processed).³⁰ The main concern for the Greek government with regards to the refugees was a smooth integration of the refugees in the European environment, as well as providing safety to their lives.³¹ Therefore, the Greek government might be seen as the stakeholder directly responsible for the conditions for the refugees in Greece.³²

Since 2009, Greece has been in an economic recession – the longest recession an advanced capitalist economy had ever experienced – resulting in political unrest, increased social exclusion and large amounts of well-educated Greeks leaving the country.³³ The unemployment rates decreased from its high of 27 percent in 2013 to approximately 20 percent in 2018. Between 2010 and 2017, the Greek government had introduced 14 rounds of austerity measures, increasing tax, and cutbacks. However, these efforts were not enough to avoid bailout loans from the European Central Bank (ECB), Eurogroup, and the international Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2010, 2012, and 2015, as well as negotiating €100 billion debt relief owed to private banks in 2011.³⁴

In September 2018, the Greek government was blamed for misuse of EU funds with regards to Moria camp.³⁵ From the €561 million pledged by the EU, only €153 million was actually spent. Most likely this had to do with the requirements (e.g. strategic

planning) that Greece so far could not meet for the funds to be released. From the funding that reached Greece, large percentages were wasted or spent unevenly according to some officials.³⁶ Meanwhile, Greece entered a new phase of integration of refugees in their own country, where gradual social inclusion was opted for. Approximately 12,000 refugee children attended lessons in special or regular classes, although educating refugee children in Greek schools had been a great struggle.³⁷

Lesbos municipality

The stake of the Lesbos municipality was in the local inhabitants of the island, and were therefore leading and collaborating with different authorities who also had a stake in the issue, like the NGOs and governmental organisations. The people in Lesbos were generally concerned with the fate of the refugees on their island.³⁸ However, the tolerance was growing thin.³⁹ Two of the main issues that the Lesbos municipality had to deal with on an everyday basis:

- *Local tourism*: In 2016, Lesbos experienced of up to 70% loss in tourism while this had been the usual main source of income. In 2018, tourism increased with by 43%.⁴⁰ However, the mayor of Lesbos specifically, Spyros Galinos, blamed the Greek government for having created major open prison camps.⁴¹ He mentioned that Lesbos "is trapped in a vicious circle of crises and risks returning to zero every time it tries to recover".⁴²
- *Protection*: Lesbos, as well as other Greek municipalities, had difficulties hosting refugees and migrants, mainly because the facilities used have been constructed quickly and only meant for temporary residence. Although negative circumstances resulted in long-term stays, these buildings or shelters did not function as long-term structures.⁴³ In addition, several court cases were known for refugees who joined a protest or peaceful strike, which showed ongoing criminalisation of refugees.⁴⁴

In 2015 and 2016, the municipality in Lesbos was overwhelmed by the number of refugees arriving. By 2018 there had been a strong need for creating learning opportunities for Lesbos' municipality.

NGOs

In Lesbos, there were many non-profit organisations (NGOs) active. While these NGOs might be diverse, they all shared the same aspiration – the assurance that people were treated in a humane and dignified way ([Video](#)). Three main factors influenced the well-being of the refugees in the camps negatively⁴⁵:

1. Lack of protection
2. Lack of support by the authorities who are legally obliged to support them⁴⁶
3. Lack of any certainty about the future

Many NGOs offered medical and psychological support or educational support either inside Moria camp in Lesbos or in the surrounding areas. Generally, the NGOs in Lesbos witnessed “convoluted and ever changing rules and procedures, and a shortage of qualified staff, resulting in a process that has often failed to identify and assist the most vulnerable people”.⁴⁷ NGOs carried out a range of activities depending on the changing circumstances at hand. The [Boat Refugee Foundation](#), for instance, originally rescued boat refugees along the Greek coast but evolved to help in the refugee camps with longer-term medical and psychosocial support due to the changing Greek political situation.⁴⁸

A large variety of NGOs, including [Oxfam Novib](#) and [Doctors without Borders](#) (MSF), has stopped working at the refugee camps as a protest against deteriorating conditions and the continuous detention of refugees since March 2016.⁴⁹ Only [EuroRelief](#), an NGO providing assistance in shelter, sanitation and clothing⁵⁰, decided to stay and keeps posts occupied for 24-hours a day. Also, the Boat Refugee Foundation was present to provide medical care in collaboration with Greek organisations every day from 5pm to 12am.⁵¹ The Greek police was present at the camps from 8am to 8pm.⁵²

Although NGOs such as Doctors without Borders (MSF) and Oxfam Novib left Moria camp, some NGOs like MSF were active in the surrounding areas of the Moria camp, the co-called ‘Olive Garden’.⁵³ Also, other NGOs were present here, such as the Boat Refugee Foundation, [Movement on the Ground](#), and [Because we Carry](#). In September 2018, MSF (e.g. medical and psychological help) was overwhelmed by the number of people in need of help and the intensity of their medical and psychological needs, and lacked capacity to treat.⁵⁴

Private sector

The role of the private sector in the refugee issue in Lesbos is twofold. On the one hand, there was a material economic factor stemming from the decline in tourism on the Greek islands. Many local businesses were closed and tourist numbers were half of what they were at peak years.⁵⁵ This impacted Greek businesses and other tourist organisations (e.g. hotels, airlines). At the same time, these same businesses helped with providing shelter and necessities for refugees.

On the other hand, businesses could also profit from refugees entering the European market in EU countries, namely by integrating refugees into the labour market. In the Netherlands, the following initiative served as an example: [Refugees Forward](#) provided a training for refugee entrepreneurs and connected them with existing businesses who wanted to be involved.

A Simple Solution?

The stakeholders involved in the refugee issue on Lesbos all had different incentives, backgrounds and goals in this issue. Because of the different levels of politics, organisations, and people involved (e.g. international, national, local) the situation was complex and there might not be an obvious solution, at least this was what many people on different levels vocalised. However, the safety and security of the refugees in Lesbos, first and foremost, was at stake. What needed to be done to alleviate the situation in Lesbos and the ripple effects related to it? And who was going to pay for it?

Below is what the small Dutch municipality Krimpen aan den IJssel experienced on hosting refugees:

Looking back – A Local Dutch Perspective on Hosting Refugees

A range of organisations around Krimpen aan den IJssel were involved with crisis hosting of refugees from the fall of 2015 onwards. The Central Organisation for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) asked the Dutch municipalities, safety regions, and board of provinces, for help. In this case, the Safety Region Rotterdam^a had to act fast when refugees arrived in the Rotterdam area and emergency shelters needed to be organised. Main challenges were, for instance, the civil society donating too much, the crux between rights and regulation, and regulations in general that needed to be maintained.^a Regional crisis structures and the collaboration with municipalities and other crucial parties had ensured that the logistics chain ran smoothly and that a structured start could be made with housing refugees temporarily.^a

Many municipalities hosted refugees in gyms or other short stay accommodations, and although the refugees were moved around a lot, the questions or concerns from the refugees were taken into account and volunteers offered sports, music and Dutch language classes. Martijn Vroom, mayor of Krimpen aan den IJssel, shared his most important tip in his success story in his municipality: "share responsibility with residents who have competencies that are needed; dare to think in terms of possibilities and discuss this with each other".^a In 2018, most of the crisis shelters for refugees in the Netherlands were closed, although in the case of Krimpen aan den IJssel, for instance, the gym halls could still be used in case of emergency.^a

The Lesbos Story Continues...

Although the scale of the refugee crisis in Europe has declined in terms of numbers since 2015 (**Appendix G**), the issue is ongoing, with little expectation of being resolved at the time of compiling this case. In 2019, the crisis in the camps on Lesbos appeared to be spreading to another Greek island, Samos. In April 2019, the Dutch NGO Movement on the Ground announced that it would expand its mission to Samos.⁵⁶ There were reports that the refugee camps on this island were similarly overcrowded,

hosting 2-3 times their capacity.⁵⁷ Also, Greece was met with criticism for legally underperforming on the EU-Turkey deal.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, as far-right political parties, such as Viktor Orban's Fidesz in Hungary, continued to gain momentum in the polls,⁵⁹ the EU has been drawing on data and metrics (**Appendix H**) showing that the refugee crisis was over, as a counter argument to anti-immigrant political agendas.

Appendix A: Situation on Camp Moria, Lesbos. August 2018



Source: Youtube, BBC News

Shortened version: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/embed/p06jcyf4/45372942>

Appendix B: Mental Health Data from Moria, gathered by the International Rescue Committee (IRC)

IRC mental health centre data

Symptoms	Percent of clients
Suicidal Ideation	60%
Anxiety/Stress	55%
Suicide attempts	29%
Aggressiveness	18%
Self-harm	15%
Psychotic symptoms	6%
PTSD	41%
Depression	64%

Source: International Rescue Committee (IRC), September 2018
<https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/3153/unprotectedunsupporteduncertain.pdf>

Appendix C: A Timeline of Events – Refugees Entering Europe from 2015-2018



Source: Youtube, Infomigrants

Appendix D: Hotspots in the European Union

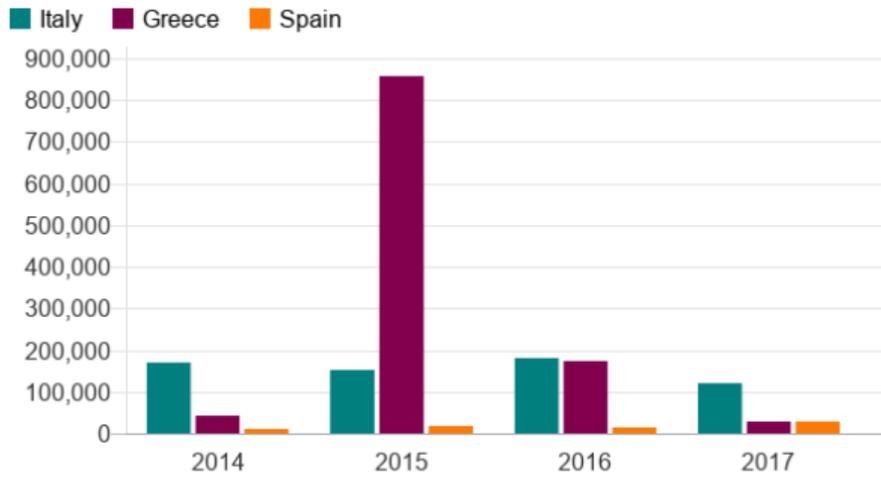


Source: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)⁶⁰

Appendix E: Number of Migrants Arriving versus Numbers of Migrant Deaths in the Mediterranean Sea⁶¹

Migrants and refugees

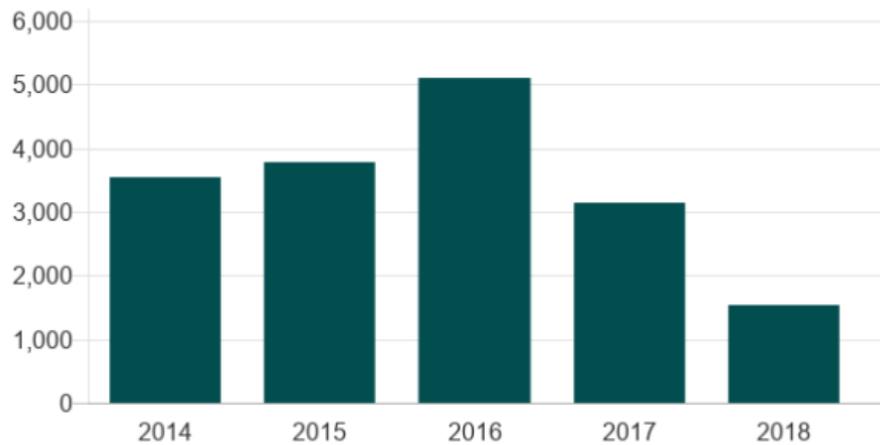
Total arrivals 2014-17



Source: UNHCR



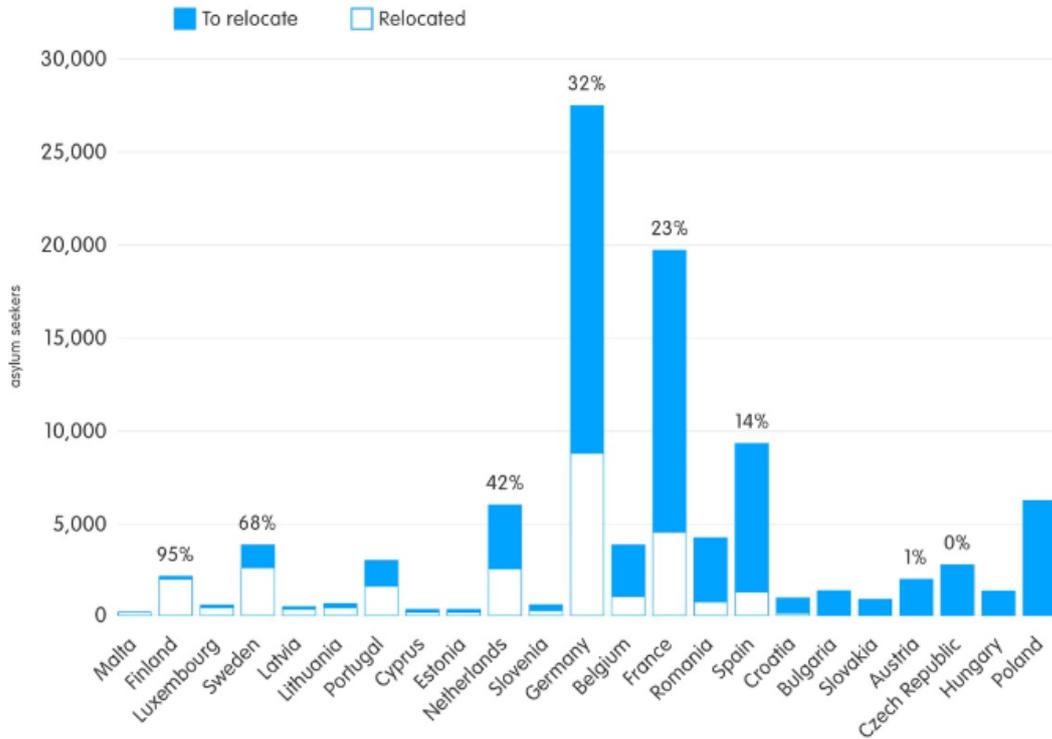
Deaths in the Mediterranean



Source: UNHCR, figs to 11 Sep 2018

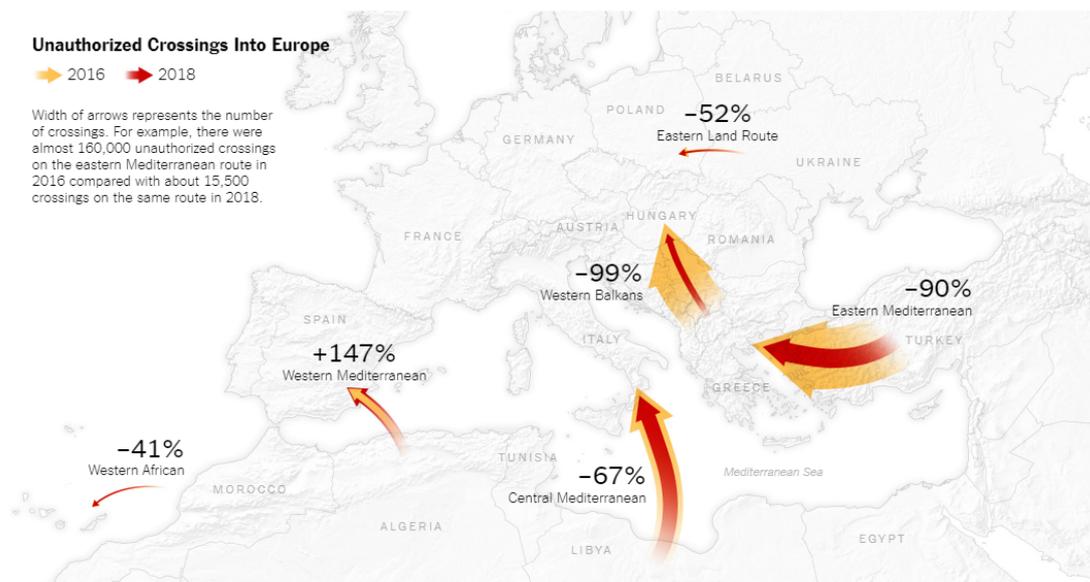


Appendix F: Relocation of Asylum Seekers from Italy and Greece. Commitments versus Reality (December 2017)



Source: European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). Data: Eurostat
https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/mapping_migration

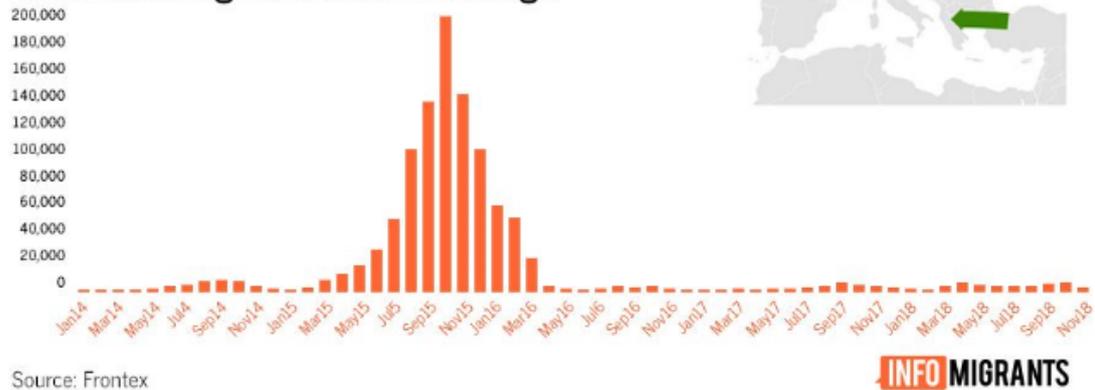
Appendix G: Unauthorised Crossings through Various Routes (Numbers in 2015 versus 2018)⁶²



By Sarah Almukhtar | Source: Frontex. Note: Unauthorized crossings show totals for each route from January to April of each year.

Appendix H: Recorded Irregular Border-crossings at the Eastern Mediterranean Route, from 2014-2018

The Eastern Mediterranean route: Recorded irregular border-crossings



Source: Frontex



Eastern Mediterranean Route | Credit: InfoMigrants

Source: Frontex, visualised by InfoMigrants⁶³

Endnotes

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