

POLICY UPDATE

December 2015 | GPoT PU No 11

EXTERNALIZING THE CRISIS: BUFFER ZONES AROUND THE EU

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With the Syrian civil war soon entering its fifth year of armed conflict, the European Union is facing the largest influx of people in its history. Over 710,000 refugees and irregular migrants, of which a majority were Syrians, entered EU territory in the first 3 quarters of 2015 only (FRONTEX, 2015). Despite several informal top-level meetings between the EU member states and a pledge to relocate 160,000 refugees from the two main reception countries Greece and Italy, concrete action has yet to be taken and, as of yet, less than two hundred have been resettled within the EU (European Commission (d), 2015). Attempts to manage the influx of refugees and irregular migrants on a supranational level have been met with resistance from the governments of the member states. As the situation deteriorates and the number of people arriving shows no sign of abating, the member states are desperately looking outside the EU for solutions. Hoping to persuade transit countries to participate in refugee protection, and to contribute to stronger borders, the EU is engaging in various projects and negotiations focusing on its near abroad, with the aim of creating a buffer against the migrants.

This policy update will briefly explore the history and implementation of these buffer zones, from the visa restrictions during the Yugoslav wars in the 90's to the increasing use of 'safe third countries' today. Further, the positive and negative aspects of these buffer zones will be examined with the objective of: 1) detecting the possible risks of human rights violations, poverty, and insecurity, that closed border could cause; and 2), highlighting the potential benefits to the refugees and irregular migrants, the host countries, and the refugee sending countries, that could be the result of well-constructed policies.

WHAT IS A BUFFER ZONE?

A buffer zone for refugees is an absorbing area created with the purpose of preventing or discouraging refugees from reaching a specific region or set of countries. The area where the buffer zone is created normally functions as a transit route for refugees on their way to countries they perceive as safer and/or more hospitable. These destination countries, however, are reluctant to receive high numbers of refugees, and thus create the buffer zone. Rather than creating a refugee reception system to absorb and integrate the refugees, much of the focus is on how to ensure they do not reach the destination country in the first place. By involving neighbouring states in refugee management and readmission agreements, the external border of the destination country is expanded outside its geographical limits. For refugees, this means that there is no longer an open transit path to the destination country, but rather a stretch of countries where they will be expected to register and

apply for asylum, and to where they could be sent back if they were to leave. The buffer zone aims to absorb the majority of refugees, thus reducing the number of asylum seekers in the destination country.

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BUFFER ZONES IN THE 90'S

The concept of a buffer zone is not a new one: as war raged in the former Yugoslavia during the greater part of the 1990's, Europe stood to receive the largest inflow of refugees since the Second World War. Similar to what we see in 2015, the vast majority of the asylum seekers (90%) were received by Austria, Germany, and Sweden, with other countries functioning as transit routes (Koser & Black, p.533). In order to prevent the situation of escalating, the EU strove to contain the refugees outside its borders by joint policies.

The two main strategies that emerged to manage the refugee influx were: 1) externalisation of migration control; and 2) preventive approaches (Boswell, 2003, p. 22-24). Firstly, by extensive border control to stop illegal entry, smuggling, and trafficking, and by enabling asylum seeking in transit countries, the EU effectively externalised its migration control to non-member states. It also worked towards readmission agreements with transit countries, to facilitate the return of refugees, and to establish 'safe third countries' outside EU borders. Secondly, the preventive approach was aimed at addressing the root causes of migration

by development investment, financial support, and facilitating asylum processing in the refugee sending region. The latter approach, however, failed to gain sufficient political support at the time and remained empty discourse rather than political action (Boswell, 2003, p. 27).

Lacking a unitary plan on how to apportion the arriving refugees evenly between the member states, efforts were instead made to restrict the routes into the EU. With the expansion of the Schengen area, carrier sanctions and visa requirements for nationals from the conflict areas were imposed as part of the agreement. The sanctions effectively transferred the responsibility of border control from the receiving countries to the airline staff at the international airports, with heavy fines the punishment of non-compliance (The Schengen acquis, article 26). The Schengen agreement, while allowing free movement within the area, also introduced the need for stricter external border controls, making Europe even more unattainable for the asylum seekers (The Schengen acquis, article 6). The whole area was effectually made impenetrable for individuals lacking a visa.

Another policy was to label transit countries bordering the Schengen area as 'safe third countries' in accordance with Article 3 in the Dublin Regulation, permitting resettlement of the asylum seekers back to eastern Europe and the countries of transit (Collinson, 1996, p.83-85). By sending the refugees back to these 'safe third countries', and by implementing strict external border control, the EU successfully "passed the buck" to its eastern neighbours, using them as a buffer between themselves and the refugee sending region. This, in turn, encouraged these 'buffer states' to enforce their own border controls to prevent the refugees to enter into their territory, and, in doing so,

further strengthened the EU border against the east (Collinson, 1996, p.81-82).

ENFORCING BUFFER ZONES TODAY

Although many of the eastern European states that functioned as buffer zones in the 90's are now integrated into the Union, many of the policies are still in place. Carrier sanctions and visa requirements effectively prevent refugees from travelling legally into the EU, a common list of 'safe third countries' is proposed, and 17 readmission agreements have been negotiated with non-member states (European Commission (a), 2015). New policies have also been developed to further reduce the number of arriving refugees and irregular migrants, with a larger focus on preventive approaches and root causes of refugee and irregular migration movement.

Although the aim of the buffer zone is to prevent refugees and irregular migrants from reaching the EU, to some extent, buffer zones have even been created within the Union. Through the so-called 'hotspot approach', the flow of refugees is prevented from advancing through the EU unchecked. These hotspots are created in Greece and Italy, the main receiving countries, from where refugees are subsequently resettled throughout the Union (European Commission (c), 2015). They are designed to serve as the first points of registration of refugees, and as collection points until resettlement of those with a clear need of protection can take place (European Commission DG Migration and Home Affairs, 2015). Although refugees in these hotspots will receive the protection to which they are entitled, it is a clear signal to other irregular migrants that the EU is tightening its borders in hope of dissuading other from making the journey.

Projects like the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), in which 'privileged partnerships' are established with neighbouring countries, also integrate asylum and immigration issues such as visa policy, readmission agreements, and improved border control (Rodier, 2006, p. 9-10). With the offer of closer ties with the EU and financial aid, these neighbouring countries are urged to contribute to the safety of the external border of the EU by precautions of their own. The EU/Egypt Action Plan "emphasises close cooperation on democratic reform, economic modernization, social reform, and migration issues", clearly showing that the agreements encompass both externalisation of migration control and a preventive approach (European External Action Service, n.d.).

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Through the Regional Protection Programmes (RPPs), capacity-building for asylum protection in transit countries, and in countries in the region of the refugee sending country, is financed as a way to help the refugees at an earlier stage, i.e. outside the EU (Rodier, 2006, p.9-10). The work largely focuses on promoting local integration, in collaboration with local and international organisations, or voluntary repatriation when possible. Resettlement to one of the EU member states is proposed as a last resort, but studies by the European Resettlement Network (n.d.) have shown that very few places have been made available for this purpose.

In an effort to close the most trafficked route into the EU, the Aegean Sea crossing between

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Turkey and Greece, a Joint Action Plan has been negotiated with Turkey. In exchange for a readmission agreement and stricter border control on behalf of Turkey, Europe offers financial help and closer ties with the EU, with promises of visa liberalization and renewed accession negotiations. As part of the agreement, the EU vows a €3 billion Refugee Facility for Turkey to help them cope with the more than two million Syrian refugees currently under temporary protection in the country (European Commission (b), 2015).

Other proposals from the member states have included: 1) asylum camps in North Africa, where refugees wishing to reach Europe could have their asylum applications processed before possible resettlement, and to where they could be sent back if found attempting to cross into Europe illegally; and 2) calls for the EU to label countries like Tunisia and Libya as 'safe third countries' (Cuttitta, 2014, p.123). Although these proposals were not adopted, they are symptoms of a strategy where the border control of the EU is stretched far outside the geographical perimeter of the Union. In fact, while no joint European list of 'safe countries of origin' or 'safe third countries' exists, a survey by the European Migration Network (2014) shows that at least 8 out of 25 member states have such lists. These lists enable them to fast-track asylum applications and potentially send migrants back.

CONSEQUENCES

There are many debates on whether or not the EU should open its doors to the refugees knocking: some posit the member states can afford the cost of protecting many more; while others warn that the situation is spiralling out of control. What are the possible consequences of a reduced number of refugees gaining asylum in

the EU, as a result of increased obstacles on the migration path to get there?

Pros

Cost efficiency

The Regional Refugee and Resilience Programme (3RP), set up by UNHCR and UNDP for the Syria crisis, requires \$5.5 billion in funding to provide aid to the 4.27 million refugees benefiting from the programme (UNHCR & UNDP, n.d.). These refugees are based in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, and Iraq, and cannot afford the expensive journey to Europe in the hands of smugglers. At the same time, an estimation of the German cost of refugee reception, based on number from 2014, was set at \$22.58 billion for only 1.1 million refugees (Bellon, 2015). According to these numbers, the cost of protecting a refugee in Germany is almost sixteen times higher than that of the UNHCR programme.

Encourage humanitarian aid

If the EU would devote the same financial support to refugees outside the Union as it does to those arriving at its shores, the situation for the refugees under the protection of UNHCR would be greatly improved. However, it would seem that the so-called refugee crisis at home draws both attention and resources away from the much larger refugee population situated in the countries near the conflict area. Sweden, a country which has the highest developmental aid budget in terms of percentage of GNP in the world, is now considering to reallocate up to 60% of that budget for the national reception of refugees (Jacobsen, 2015). If buffer zones strategies incorporate preventive approaches, more financial resources could be diverted to helping a larger amount of refugees, with fewer refugees having to risk the dangerous journey to benefit from the humanitarian aid.

Raise public awareness

The blatant domination of the refugee crisis in European news has drawn attention away from the situation in the regions surrounding the refugee creating countries, to where most of the refugees flee. By slowing down the arrival of refugees, more space in media could be consecrated to the coverage of the vulnerable situation of the majority of refugees in the world. This could steer public opinion to exhort the EU to increased humanitarian aid, and thus improve the chances for the UNHCR to fund their programmes.

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Promote integration

With an increased focus on preventive approaches to irregular migration, more funding and effort could be dedicated to policies with an aim to improve the situation for refugees in protracted situations. Together with financial support, these policies could encourage host countries to offer more possibilities for refugees, such as work and education. With Uganda's 2006 Refugee Act, refugees are now allowed to work, travel, and access public services like education. Rather than being a burden for the country, they have become tax-paying contributors to the economy, creating job opportunities both for refugees and nationals. This would not have been possible without humanitarian aid from international organisations, providing funds to settle the refugees and provide basic needs of education and health care (Givetash, 2015). Even in countries like Jordan and Lebanon, refugees have had a positive effect on the economy, according to two World Bank economists, creating a higher demand for

local produce and working in unskilled labour spurned by national citizens (Massimiliano & Sekkarie, 2015). Renewed focus on the refugees outside of Europe could inspire the EU to give more funding to UNHCR, and also to work for local integration that would be made possible if refugees were seen as less of a burden and more as a resource.

Legal ways to Europe

With more than 4 million externally displaced Syrian refugees, of which many live outside of refugee camps, only 160,000 places, for resettlement or humanitarian visas, had been made available by the end of November, 2015 (UNHCR, 2015). In fact, out of the 14.4 million in the care of UNHCR, less than one percent is considered for permanent resettlement in a third country (UNHCR, n.d.). With such low numbers, applying for resettlement through legal channels must seem a vain attempt at best, and surely makes the illegal routes proposed by smugglers seem more accessible in comparison. The question of who actually leaves the refugee camps becomes contingent upon resources to pay a smuggler, rather than a question of humanitarian need. If the EU, while stemming the illegal migration, were to increase the capacity of the legal ways to Europe, the refugee inflow could be managed in a more secure and fair fashion.

Prevent brain drain

One of the greatest problems in post-war countries is the loss of intellectuals and educated professionals needed to rebuild the country. In a situation where passage to Europe is only attainable for those capable of paying dearly for it, those fleeing are most likely the well-paid and educated segments of the refugees. Left in the camps are those too weak or poor to afford the trip. Professor of Economics and Public Policy, Paul Collier (2015), suggests that, rather than

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only providing a few with a future in Europe, opportunities be created in the regions around Syria, havens where the Syrian economy could incubate until the end of the conflict. Through policies and financial aid, the EU could offer work and education in the refugee camps and in the host countries. Thus a brain drain could be prevented, as those settling in the EU are less likely to return after a protracted displacement.

Discourage dangerous passage to Europe

As the Syrian civil war enters its fifth year, with no conflict resolution in sight, many refugees see the EU as only possibility of a future. In interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch (2015), refugees arriving in Europe were asked why they had attempted the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean.

“When I first arrived, Lebanese people were very hospitable to me [...] They treated me like a refugee, someone who needed protection and had fled from the war. Now they treat me as if I am a terrorist or a security threat.” – Syrian refugee.

If the EU would increase its humanitarian aid to the countries with the highest population of refugees, refugees would less likely be seen as a problem to the local communities. In order to create effective buffer zones, the refugees must feel secure where they seek protection, and the host community must receive international support so that the refugees do not become a burden.

“Refugees are also not allowed to study in university in Iran, so I decided for my future to go somewhere else. I didn’t want to go back to Afghanistan.” – 15 year old Afghan boy.

With a preventive approach, neighbouring countries, such as Iran, could be encouraged and helped to offer education to refugees, no longer forcing them to leave the region in order to continue their studies.

In Turkey, only 250.000 to 300.000 refugees are living in camps, while the rest of the 2.2 million Syrians are left to find their own housing. Since they only have ‘guest’ status in Turkey, and are not considered refugees, they have no work permits and struggle to pay rising rental costs (Genç & Altun, 2015). By offering Turkey financial aid, and if Turkey was persuaded to grant the status of refugee to the displaced Syrians, fewer would feel pressed to tempt the dangerous journey to the shores of Greece.

Reducing xenophobia in Europe

As hundreds of thousands of people flee into Europe, of which many are Muslims, the EU’s far-right political parties are profiting from the fears of the citizens. With a xenophobic discourse, referring to refugees as ‘a swarm’, ‘an army’, or ‘parasites’, they attempt to foment the general public against the refugees, claiming the cultural foundations of Europe are under attack. The attempts of burden sharing throughout the Union, through resettlement quotas, paired with the inability to mitigate the crisis, has also played in their favour. By portraying the policy as unjustly imposing on their national sovereignty, while at the same time accusing the EU of being inefficient, their anti-EU rhetoric gains support and the very survival of the Union is under threat. Arriving refugees face increased hostility from scared Europeans, and moderate politicians face a growing opposition of ethno-nationalists pulling the politics to the far-right (Robins-Early, 2015). With a managed migration policy and refugee reception, the EU, and the governments of its member states could ease the concerns and fears of its citizens, steering them away from xenophobic parties.

Cons*Buffer zone-countries creating buffer zones*

One risk with creating buffer zones is that the very countries where the refugees are directed might decide to create buffer zones of their own. This was indeed a consequence observed during the Yugoslav Wars in the 90's, when western European states labelled eastern European states as 'safe third countries' in order to return asylum seekers there. These eastern European states, however, proved unwilling to take upon themselves the responsibilities passed on by the EU, and instead put in place restrictions of their own. The discourse in the EU increasingly focused on helping the refugees "as close as possible to their original homes", some even promoting safe havens inside the country of origin (Koser & Black, 1999, p.527). In line with this discursive climate, countries like Croatia repatriated Bosnian refugees if their region of origin was deemed safe and free of conflict (Collinson, 1996, p.85). Buffer zones within the conflict riven countries were created to contain the exodus of people fleeing the war.

We can see similar proposals today, from nations unwilling to accept any more refugees. Turkey, for example, suggests a 'safe zone' inside the Syrian border, where displaced Syrians could seek refuge in their own state, rather than flee to nearby countries (Barnard, 2015). Similarly, the Balkan states warn they would close their borders to refugees if the EU member states were to do the same, refusing to become a buffer zone for the Union (Tsolova, 2015). If the rich countries of the west prove unwilling to take upon themselves the financial cost of the refugees, poorer transit countries will find little motivation to step up and assume the burden.

Refugee warehousing

Warehousing is a term used to describe the practice of depriving refugees in camps of their rights to work, get education, run businesses, own property, move about freely, or choose their place of residence. If the EU closes its border to refugees, without increasing its humanitarian aid and the capacity of its RPPs, refugee protection in strained countries runs a risk of becoming refugee storage. In the case of Uganda, refugee self-reliance could only be realised with the financial and administrative aid of international organisations like the UNHCR.

Human rights disregarded

If readmission agreements with 'safe third countries' are implemented without assurance that human rights will be respected, or if refugees end up stranded in disreputable transit countries, refugees risk being sent from one unsustainable situation to another.

For example, Australia, in an attempt to dissuade refugees from making the dangerous boat journey to their shores, the Australian immigration authorities, rather than give them asylum, paid the administration of the island Nauru to resettle the refugees instead. Refugees living on the island report discrimination, violence, and abuse as a daily occurrence, preferring the detainment camp rather than the 'freedom' of the island (Mathiesen, 2015).

High risk countries

Some countries face the burden of migration more severely than others, due to their vicinity to the refugee sending country. In Lebanon, Syrians now account for one out of five people, making it the country with the highest per capita concentration of refugees in the world. Lacking international support and burden relief, countries like Lebanon run precariously close

to internal conflict themselves and are forced to resort to problem solutions of their own. By complicating the process of applying for and keeping a refugee status, Lebanese authorities make it next to impossible for many Syrians to stay legally in the country. Syrians are asked to present valid ID and address, with a pledge not to work, and are at the same time demanded proof of financial means to support themselves (Amnesty International, 2015, p.14-15). A closed door policy on behalf of the EU risks: triggering a domino effect of closed borders and push-backs; creating hotspots of refugees in already politically unstable countries; and, in the end, spreading the conflict.

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Refugees resort to smugglers

As the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) for 2015 and 2016 remains underfunded, Syrian refugees are recognising that their stay in the region, in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, is unwelcomed and that these countries are financially stretched to the limit. Faced with no other alternative, Syrian refugees flee to Europe instead, in the hands of human smugglers. The failure of the international community to produce humanitarian havens for the refugees has instead helped create a market for trafficking and human smuggling, with little regard for human life. In August, 2015, 71 refugees were found suffocated in the back of a truck in Austria, while more than 2,300 are believed to have lost their lives attempting to cross over to Europe by sea (Jones, 2015). Without legal ways to Europe, or a possibility for asylum elsewhere, people will continue to risk their lives for a chance of safety, regardless of policies and closed borders.

CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration the pros and cons of buffer zones, it would seem that the effectuation of a buffer zone is not necessarily something negative for refugees or transit countries. Rather, the consequence of a buffer zone depends on the policies and humanitarian assistance, or lack of such, that are part of the implementation. Unless the underlying push-factors are addressed, such as poverty or discrimination, people will continue to risk the deadly journey the EU and perceived safety.

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