



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Complicity of The European Union in the Syrian Migration Crisis with focus on Europe

Aadarsh Khanduri* and Prof. (Dr.) Nagalaxmi M. Raman**

*Research Assistant, MA (IR), **Director and Head Amity institute of International Studies
Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Abstract

The publication aims to look at the Complicity of the European Union in the creation of The Migrant Crisis as faced by the continent in 2015-2016. Critics from those countries disagreed with the literature review's assertion that peripheral countries like Greece and the Balkan states bear the primary responsibility. Data was taken from various sources ranging from the Human Rights Watch to Deutsche Welle to assemble a clearer picture of the current issue. Europe's hostility towards migration is unsustainable in the long term and can permanently damage its standing among The Global South. In its place long term planning and integration measures are necessary.

Keywords : European Union, Sanctions, Troika, Migration

Context of European Union involvement

While the Syrian Migration crisis has affected countries such as Jordan and Turkey as well, the focus of this article will be its impact on Europe and the EU's role in the expansion of the crisis through inattention and long standing divides between the European north and European south. There is credible evidence to link Greece's treatment of these refugees to the EU's own lack of care about Greece's precarious condition which as can be observed from the Euro-Crisis due to the preconceptions that dominated inter-European discourse such as national stereotypes about Greece. This matter has been raised by eurosceptic scholars prior to the crisis but the emergence of the Syrian migration crisis has led to an expansion in such literature. Greece's economy was in little shape to accept the numbers of migrants coming in but the EU showed little energy to make any meaningful changes to the situation.¹

Global North and Anti Migration Rhetoric Another facet of the conversation is observed since the conventional conversation of migrations fails to account for the Global North's own complicity in the Syrian situation. The western countries are not blameless here as their own tacit support of the Arab Spring and the extrajudicial attack on Gaddafi while justifiable due to his destabilisation tactics weakened the region's power balance and aided in the development of counter forces in the region to oppose the current regimes that were slight improvements over the existing structure or in many cases even less stable. This can be borne out by the resentment that these countries' citizens now show to the events of 2011 and its consequent revolutions.² The Gadaffi debacle has long been the reason given by both China and Russia as to why they no longer support UNSC led movements. Syria was also a stepping stone for powers such as Russia but the US's direct involvement in the country means that many atrocities were also committed on behalf of the United States. With

Russia out of the equation, the country that is in a position to fill the space left by it is not the US but rather Turkey which already had outsized influence over the country and has not stopped its bombing runs on Kurdish militants in the border provinces of Syria. As multiple op-eds and analysts have noted, the Kurdish people have a long standing history of conflict with Turkey and the new regime's closeness to them may affect the migration cycle in the country even further.³

Greece and the Olympics impact in 2011

The European Union itself was founded on the basis of the monetary interests of Europe's historically central powers such as Germany, France, UK etc. The European Coal and Steel Community was founded in 1952 as a way of consolidating the steel and coal industry in post war Western Europe. This system favored the interests of Europe's post war elite over that of the periphery nations that would later join the organisation. The organisation is neoliberal in nature owing to the time of its creation and the economic systems followed by its early adopters and core members. Greece would spend the 20th century in political and economic turmoil suffering the brunt of bombardment during the second world war only to fall into political turmoil due to the struggle between more conservative minded elements in its elite and had begun recovering around the time of the 2008 financial crisis.⁴ Greece had indeed borrowed in excess through the late 1990s and early 2000's and hosting The Olympic Games purported to bring beneficial economic aid had proven to be unsuccessful. Nonetheless there had been precedent for Greece profiting from the Olympics games as it did in 1896 when the first modern olympics took place just 3 years after the Greek economy went into financial crisis.⁵ A similar hope was applied to the 2011 games but the end result was the spending of valuable money from the Greek administration and the EU coffers on refurbishing the Olympic Village which has sat in disrepair since the games. It put the country further in debt rising from 110% prior to the games in 2011 to 158.2% as of 2024 with an all time high of 207.4% in 2021.⁶ ⁷ The Grecian economy's prospects were poor and the sudden need to impose austerity did it no favours. The Troika, The EU's powerful financial elements were immediate in their actions demanding the recently elected leftist party Syriza impose austerity measures and aid in the upliftment of the euro in the region.⁸

Syriza agreed to do so even as The KKE and other leftist parties demanded that Greece leave the Eurozone and opposed any and all austerity measures. The size of the government was scaled down, thousands of people were laid off, sectors were made available to the private sector and the strength of unions was greatly decreased. This made the populist party unpopular and they would succeed in bringing the Greek economy back to stable financial health to be shuttered out and replaced by a more conservative party that would follow suit. The issue remained that austerity required the economy to be uplifted even if it came at the cost of jobs, monetary value or other consumer friendly needs. After the debacle blame was levied at Greece which had been using money intended for the economy on party leadership and which has led to the modern European stereotype of Greeks as unworthy of trust and corruption. Similar such stereotypes also abound for other periphery states such as North Macedonia. The Greek financial crisis was a worst case scenario for the European Union and one which it had neither expected nor prepared for. Debate continues to this day on the practicality of austerity measures versus allowing for countries to rely on public sector consumption or even allowing for the bankruptcy of defaulting states.

EU abandonment of Greece

The Syrian Migration Crisis thus took place during a time when the Greek people were finding themselves without jobs or economic security, thus requiring that they find an external target to impose blame on. The Syrian migrants were willing to do any work and thus earned the resentment of the locals who were finding it difficult to remain financially stable in the country. North Macedonia, a country that has long been in tension with Greece also chose to shut its own borders in 2015 leading to a hundred thousand migrants being stuck in Greece unable to leave.⁹ As was seen in the 2015 migrants pushback along the borders of North Macedonia the refugees were desperate enough to cross rivers in the early hours of the night if they could flee their situation but as the north Macedonia army began to get harsher towards them, many more chose to flee elsewhere or settled down in the country. All this would have been difficult to handle even if Greece's economy had been on

the same level as the central European states but in the midst of an economic crisis, an additional refugee crisis only made the current situation worse. Greece alongside Italy would begin policing its vast shoreline attempting to send migrants back to Turkey or the other countries from where they were fleeing northward. In 2016 the European Council and Turkey reached an agreement to limit the number of migrants coming through although this only further emboldened those crossing by unsafe boats leading to a large-scale loss of life in the Mediterranean. As recently as 2023, stories of foreigners fleeing in illegal boats were a common sight in the European sphere with a gradual shift from Syrian migrants to those from other conflict affected nations like Sudan and Afghanistan.¹⁰

The EU throughout this crisis maintained a constant but lax demeanor when it came to the implementation of necessary measures. As stated by Francois Crepeau, the EU in many respects abandoned Greece leaving it to handle both the necessary austerity measures while also handling the refugees. The result was camps like Idomeni which Syrians fled from en masse as seen in the 2015 pushbacks by North Macedonia. Conditions in the camps were not consoling or adequate to house the sheer numbers of refugees leading to mass spreading of disease and other ailments. In 2016, Greece would simply dismantle the camp with refugees alleging they were simply being displaced with many taking their chances with human smuggling rackets out of desperation.¹¹ The EU in its own rush to close borders would sign deals with nations such as Turkey leaving Greece entirely out of such talks as its own focus was on the migrants collecting in the more powerful European states. Crepeau further argues in a later interview that all the closing of Europe's borders has accomplished is increasing the rate of human smuggling and other illegal inhumane ways of getting around the official ban. Citing examples such as the prohibition on liquor by the United States in the 1920's Crepeau further argues that by illegitimizing the desires of migrants the EU forces them to take less safe options such as crossing the borders at night or getting smuggled in. One case cited by the Human Rights Watch noted that the smuggler refused to take him any further, took all his money and beat him up when he complained. Since their very presence is illegitimate the migrants cannot even seek any justice emboldening such human smuggling gangs. The migrants are also often tied to familial bonds and thus will constantly attempt to immigrate regardless of how dangerous border security services attempt to make it. Across multiple narratives from different migrants one commonality that can be observed is their perseverance and refusal to accept their deportations. For many this is not a question of their own safety but rather that of their families and their futures. Many successful migrants encourage more of their family to join them when possible or send them resources that allow them to repeatedly cross borders. Successful immigration is idolised by those dispossessed of their own homes as in Syria which increases their chances of repeatedly breaking the border regulations. Francois Crepeau also notes that one way around this could be to simply station guards across the borders but this is not feasible and also unfitting of democratic societies. Egypt as far back as 2020 was shooting climate refugees on its borders towards the rest of Africa but a similar behavior by any European state would destroy its claims to validity. He further points to the known data on climate refugees noting that close to 2 billion people could start moving upwards in the direction of the Northern hemisphere from the Southern hemisphere in the coming century. Such scenarios are in his view unavoidable facts and that integration of migrants is necessary to address the various complications caused by migration. His argument is on the basis that prohibitions have often throughout modern history failed in their purpose as with the US prohibition on alcohol that only made the fortunes of the underground.¹² Secondary actors are happy to take charge of the business if it is labelled illegal and perpetuate the problem. There is a perceived surplus of jobs in the Global North in the eyes of most migrants that makes it a desirable goal no matter what hurdles they must face. The European Union has not successfully integrated even those minorities that have been on the continent for over 400 years lessening the chances of them doing anything of the sort for Syrian migrants. Integration programs were a common procedure prior to the end of the second world war when it was perceived that economic migrants would make a decent living, learn a trade and then return to their countries but the rise of failed nations across the global south compromised by various external and internal causes has led to the rise of permanent migration. What the Union and its fellow western countries offer refugees is simply more profitable and beneficial to their eyes than what their own country's can attempt. Turning them back in this case will only feed the consequent mafias that emerge in human smuggling. This factor of being ignored is not unique to Greece with much of the periphery of the European Union facing similar behavior from the dominant EU states. North Macedonia and Greece have faced issues between the two on the basis of identity for over a hundred years but much of the EU has been happy to ignore this less relevant country if it came at the expense of the more affluent and developed parts of the organisation. This harms the EU's claims to represent the entirety

of the European entity and continues existing narratives of eastern Europe as the less noticed part of the continent. A common criticism stated by Eastern Europeans in the last decade has been of the EU underfunding the region and that the wealth and prosperity of the EU is being concentrated in those nations that already greatly benefit from it. This has fueled the growth of a silent but growing resentment of the dominant European Union members and the organisation itself. In many cases locals did not see the EU demanding that refugees be housed within as a humane gesture but rather one that ignored their own conditions that the EU had a hand in creating and continued imposition from below. Governments in such nations are wary of rocking the boat either in terms of their own populace or the dominant EU narrative and are left with little room to make meaningful changes that both sides can appreciate. The migrants themselves are removed from their own inherent state and viewed instead as those benefiting from the current system even if in the majority of cases they have nothing to fall back on. While the EU did not intend to revive nationalist fervour on the continent as that leads to the further dilution of its powers it has allowed for such a phenomenon due to its perceived favouritism which as seen in the lessons of German neoliberalism is inherent to the system as it exists today. The EU uses a financial system that, while modified to fit regional patterns, originates from the strongest EU economic power and that country's own current woes link it to the economic security of the entire union. While great efforts were undertaken after the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties to ensure the EU was a more equal organisation willing to listen to the issues faced by its less powerful member states, the neglect of Eastern Europe by EU leaders has damaged public trust in these countries towards the whole organisation.

Southern Vice and Northern Virtue

An additional factor that led to the fallout over Germany's economic model and theory was that in the aftermath it was framed in terms of southern vice and Northern virtue implying that only the European Union's own method held validity in the continent and looked down upon the powers affected by the euro crisis. They were dubbed PIGS for PIIGS in a manner that left the image conjured towards them explicit. Such narratives of eastern and southern Europe being lazy or less developed have persisted throughout the Euro Crisis and continue to be simply accepted as fact in a manner similar to the American backlash at the French for their refusal to aid Bush in Iraq. As in many such cases the periphery views are seen as irrelevant and their issues due to mistakes in following instructions rather than any genuine flaws in the system they have been told to adopt. The German system continues to pull from preexistent ordoliberal economic theory in part due to the last generation of bureaucrats trained in it still being in power. It is likely as noted by Josef Hien that the last vestiges of ordoliberal thought will end with the removal and retirement of current bureaucrats as in the academic sphere, ordoliberalism has few defenders left and has transitioned to market economics in a manner akin to the rest of the world.¹³ This transition however has only been noted after 2011 when the Greek government's default led to a drop in the Euro severe enough to cause reconsideration of such existing systems. In the likely future, Germany will choose to let European countries declare bankruptcy rather than defending them through the imposition of austerity which has proven to be an ineffective tool in correcting the market imbalance and which also remains widely unpopular. Within Germany itself the eurozone has waned in popularity even as it remains the strongest economy in the collective due to the gradual loss of healthy growth rates.¹³ In 2023 Germany saw further decline of its economy even as the rest of the EU soldered on and while the EU system does benefit Germany more than it affects it, such a grievance has been amplified by the rise of far right parties such as The Alternative for Deutsche (AFD) who oppose further EU integration and encourage closer connections with Moscow. Angela Merkel's policies in the heyday of the crisis have retroactively been framed as ordoliberal in their process by various international publications and journals further leading to the future ostracization of such practices. Her policy was seen as unhelpful and based in the same neoliberal orthodoxy that has allowed parties such as the AFD to gain the influence they have. Another major point of division has been the EU's divisive nature since 2008 with various countries in the bloc voting based on their own and not the shared interests. Hungary was an outlier to the bloc as early as 2013 being among the first countries to rebuff immigration and has since been joined by more and more nations in the union. Its concerns however have basis in the media narrative on Southern Europe that is to say those nations whose economies suffered from the crises who were demonised and blamed for their own suffering. The narrative in Northern Europe was one of the 'northern virtues or saints' in contrast to the 'southern vices or sinners'. The northern virtues were those of hard work and fiscal responsibilities, qualities it was argued the southern European countries had failed to inoculate.¹⁴ It was

from these northern European countries as a study has theorised that resistance to financial aid for the affected nations came from. These countries argued for austerity measures which were what Greece would eventually have to pass through leading to the gradual steady rise of a eurosceptic bent of mind. The European Union was characterized post Euro Crisis by a marked indifference to the challenges faced by these southern European countries such as Greece which were subject to factors entirely outside of their control and were forced to obey the orders of Brussels as demanded by the Troika. Countries such as Northern Macedonia have spent decades fighting for their continued existence as entities even as hostile powers attempt to take away their very identities, a process that the EU has only recently begun to focus on. This has allowed for a swell of ground level animosity towards international organisations such as the European Union which is seen as representative of Western Europe not the whole continent's interests.

EU sanctions as blockages to peace

The emergence of ISIS and the spate of extrajudicial campaigns of mass terror that followed were of supreme importance in the European context where fundamentalist terror would make a major impact. While the European Union did not engage in bombing runs in Syria, its sanctions alongside those of the US prevented any other nation in West Asia from establishing closer relations with Syria. This was grounded in the EU's observance of human rights violations against any of Assad's opponents regardless of their grievances and that such policies required correction. The sanctions which had been in place prior to 2011 were strengthened as the scale of Assad's actions became clear. As of 2013 additional sanctions were imposed intended to ban the sale of arms to the Syrian government as based in Council Decision 2013/255/CFSP.¹⁵ This was also the position held by the United Nations which aimed to bring the conflict to a close and stop the leaving of working age Syrians who could be employed. It was due to the rise of Daesh and those that followed it that Breedlove would argue before the assembled listeners and warn of infiltration by terrorist sympathisers among legitimate migrants. The spate of attacks in Europe by Islamist groups would only further escalate the hostility shown by European locals towards Syrian migrants and other communities of Muslim origin.

This is not to argue that the European Union has not attempted to manage the crisis even prior to its impact being made visible at home with it putting sanctions on Syria as far back as 2011 that have stayed in place till the current times. The EU also supported aid packages through its various member states and their individual actions. It has claimed that it has provided more aid to Syria than any other organization and the ground reality does bear this out. Nonetheless the EU's sanctions have had consequences for the normalization of the region. Assad's actions were also deemed contrary to human rights as defined by the Universal Charter of Human rights with the ICJ declaring him guilty.¹⁶ Much of the material gathered on Assad was through European intermediaries such as the European Court of Human Rights that covered for the damages sustained by Syrians opposed to Assad in his prisons and ordinary Europeans have fought for the rights of the migrants since the inception of the crisis. European sanctions have also however prevented any reformation of the country as the sanctions are harsh enough to make meaningful infrastructure development impossible and led to the complete collapse of the country's prior energy industry. Europe was the chief importer of Syrian energy products and the crisis has led to the complete loss of that source of revenue. The view of Europe in regards to the sanctions was to force Syria into bringing the conflict to a close but its backing by Russia and other resurgent powers like Iran only lengthened the time that Syria has lost to recover its economy. Prior to the civil war Assad's government had hopes of slowly shifting away from petroleum and coal towards domestic natural gas and eventually sustainable energy but such schemes are unlikely to even restart in the current scenario. The country's oil exporting potential has only further dwindled with time already long past the days when over 2 million barrels were being exported from the region. This collapse began under Hafez Al Assad but Bashar Al Assad's policies hastened the complete collapse of the sector that has been commandeered by Russia and Iran with the US holding power over rebel oil fields due to its aid.¹⁷ That energy will be needed by the new regime as Syria has gone from an exporter of energy to a net importer of it in bulk. As analysts have already begun to warn, the energy crisis the country faces could flare the next war if the sanctions imposed on Syria are not swiftly dismantled and allowance for regular trade flows made. Between its bombardment by the IDF, the incursions by Turkey, the ever present threat of Iranian retaliation and the volatile nature of the current government the region will continue to play a major role in the fate of West Asia. The sanctions may thus continue to stay in

place and lead to the replacement of the current regime by forces even more hostile to great power interests than Assad.

Conclusion

The historical baggage of colonialism still hangs like a shadow over much of the global south and the Middle East is no different with it unlikely that the geopolitical significance of the region means that the powers that be would allow for non interference in the region. It is central to the expansionist views of the global powers today and a means to starve the other of the valuable resources that the region has to offer. Both Russia and the US have already established valuable stakes over the rich coalfields of the region and the EU has already begun negotiations to loosen the sanctions on Syria and start the restoration of its broken economy. Syria's technical and service sector related infrastructure has been bombed out of existence by 12 years of conflict and the returning refugees will have to tackle this existential issue as well. The biggest consequence of this conflict has been the rise in the acceptance of eurosceptic talking points and views due to an indication the EU favours certain nations over others. Part of this is baked into the financial architecture of the EU with little that can be done about the organisation favoring those members that contribute more in its function economically. The western half of Europe has historically ruled the continent with the periphery nations existing either as vassals or property of hostile states. Greece was an Ottoman colony till the 18th century and many of the eastern European states share in the experience of being othered by the western Europeans for their values and beliefs as well as their appearance. Many of these states have historically existed on the peripheries of empires such as those of the Ottomans and the west and have long standing grievances with the dominance of Western Europe in the European Union. This has been brought attention to since the very founding of the EU but little has been accomplished in its handling. EU agencies are not a monolith and held different views as to the cause, symptoms and cure for the ongoing migration crisis.

The result was inaction that has led to the gradual loss in faith among normal Europeans as the union is seen as unfavorable to their aspirations. All this and more will plague future European leaders as the rise of parties hostile to the European Union's values gain ascendance due to the co-option of the organisation by neoliberalism which has been fundamental to its very implementation. German bureaucrats remain steadfast in their acceptance of ordoliberal economic logic even as it loses favor everywhere else including academic circles and while future European governments will utilise the same market economics as all else, it does not mean that future crisis could not escalate in its own way. Europe must accept in its own place in this debacle and work to aid regional policy makers to hasten a more secure end to the perpetual conflicts that West Asia has faced for the last 30 years. As Crepeau warned, a harsher migration policy will not automatically result in the decline of migration, only aiding in resolving the long seated tensions at the point of origin can such matters be solved. Regardless of what methods Europe adopts, the migration crisis has not reached its end and future conflicts in West Asia could lead to the recurrence of such major events. Future stakeholders in the region have to be accepted and heard out by the global north powers and help facilitate the return to stability for the region.

References

1. United Nations Human Rights Office of The High Commission, (2016), 'Greece: "Europe's lack of political will creating serious suffering for thousands of migrants in Greece" – UN rights expert', Office of the High Commission, 3-8, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2016/05/greece-europes-lack-political-will-creating-serious-sufferi> ng-thousands?LangID=E&NewsID=19976
2. Safi, M, (2020), 'He ruined us': 10 years on, Tunisians curse man who sparked Arab spring, 7-8, [https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/16/he-ruined-us-10-years-on-tunisians-curse-m](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/16/he-ruined-us-10-years-on-tunisians-curse-man-who-sparked-arab-spring) an-who-sparked-arab-spring
3. Mohammed, S. J., & Romano, D. (2023). The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: The Central Role of Identity Recognition (or Lack Thereof). *Ethnopolitics*, 1–18., 7-9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2023.2275229>
4. Clogg, R. Ralph Mowbray , Danforth, . Loring , Smith, . Catherine Delano , Haldon, . John Frederick and Bowman, . John S. (2025, February 7). Greece. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Greece/Greeces-debt-crisis>
5. Randell, D (2011). Winter 1893: Greece is bankrupt. Summer 1896: It hosts the first modern Olympics, Independent, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/history/winter-1893-greece-is-bankrupt-summer-1896-it-hosts-the-first-modern-olympics-6257912.html>

6. CEIC Data, (2024). Greece Government Debt: % of GDP, 1999 - 2024 | Quarterly | % | CEIC Data, CEIC Data, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/greece/total-debt--of-gdp>
7. Eurostat, (2022). Government finance statistics - quarterly data, Europa, Eurostat, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Government_finance_statistics_-_quarterly_data
8. Lekakis, J. N., & Kousis, M. (2013). Economic Crisis, Troika and the Environment in Greece. South European Society and Politics, 18(3), 305–331. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2013.799731>
9. MSF, (2016). EU Migration Crisis Update - May 2016, Crisis Update, Medecins San Frontieres, 1-7, <https://www.msf.org/eu-migration-crisis-update-may-2016>
10. Seibert, L (2024). Sudanese Refugee Deaths Highlight EU Policy Failures, euobserver, 2-3, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/158176>
11. Janjevic, D, (2016). Thousands of migrants cleared from Idomeni camp, Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/thousands-of-migrants-cleared-from-idomeni-camp/a-19281157>
12. Enright, M, (2017). Why nothing will stop people from migrating, The Sunday Magazine, The Sunday Edition, CBS Radio, 8-9, <https://www.cbc.ca/amp/1.4451437>
13. Hien, J, The rise and fall of ordoliberalism, Socio-Economic Review, Volume 22, Issue 4, October 2024, Pages 1947–1966, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwad018>
14. Juneja, J (2017), How Germany benefits the most from its Eurozone membership, Research in International Business and Finance, Vol 42, pgs 1074-1088)
15. Rosenthal, J. (2012). GERMANY AND THE EURO CRISIS: Is the Powerhouse Really So Pure? World Affairs, 175(1), 53–61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41638992>
16. Council Decision 2013/255/CFSP of 31 May 2013 concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2013/255/2024-11-25>
17. ICJ, (2023). Order of 16 November 2023, Case 188 - Application of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Canada and the Netherlands v. Syrian Arab Republic), International Court of Justice
18. Kreutz, A, (2010), 'Syria: Russia's best asset in the Middle East', IFRI: Institut Français des Relations Internationales. Russie.Nei.Visions, No. 55, <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1408633/syria/2022898/>

