

# The Changing Spatiality of the “European Refugee/Migrant Crisis”

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## SUMMARY

The “European refugee/migrant crisis” is a geopolitical designation with which the media, politics and the general public have labelled the arrival of a large number of refugees into the European Union in 2015 and 2016. The article analyses the spatial distribution of asylum seekers in the European Union during the 2011–2016 period. It focuses on how changes of the border regimes on the external and internal borders of the European Union have influenced the movement of asylum seekers and the spatial distribution of asylum applications during the “crisis”. It raises attention to the growing importance of the militarisation of borders and the securitisation of migration flows for the spatial distribution of the asylum applicants. The research is based on the analysis of the Eurostat data on the total number of asylum applicants in member states between 2011 and 2016. Although changes in border regimes were not the only factor influencing the spatial distribution of asylum seekers during the “European refugee/migrant crisis”, their effects can be used to demonstrate the restrictions asylum seekers are facing on their journey. The main aim of the article is to reflect on the use of the geographical designation “Europe”/“European” in the context of the “refugee/migrant crisis”. Using this designation creates the perception of a unified, borderless space, in which individuals can freely choose their asylum destination. The discourse of “the European refugee/migrant crisis” often presents the European Union as “an open asylum shopping centre” in which asylum seekers can pick whatever host they want. The article opposes this notion and emphasises the limitations and the effect that contingency plays in the choice of asylum destination.

**KEY WORDS:** migrations, refugees, border regimes, European Union, “European refugee/migrant crisis”

## INTRODUCTION

The number of asylum applicants in countries of the European Union has continuously grown from 2008 to 2016. 2015 was a special milestone, when over a million asylum applications were submitted in the EU. The arrival of a large number of asylum seekers via the Balkan route triggered

much attention in the media, politics and the general public. Several perceptions formed on who the new arrivals are and how their arrival will influence life in Europe (Berry, Garcia-Blanco and Moore, 2016; Goodman, Sirriyeh and McMahon, 2017; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016; Hoyer, 2016; Jontes, 2017; Pajnik, 2017; Zhang and Hellmueller, 2017). The media designated the event as a “European refugee/migrant crisis”<sup>1</sup> (refer to BBC, *Delo*, RAI, *Spiegel*, TVN24 media portrayals<sup>2</sup>). This term has become a convenient geopolitical designation that offers a limited understanding of the events and creates a specific perception and categorization. As all geopolitical designations, it reduces the complexity of reality and creates binary contrasts (Europe/rest of the world, legal/illegal migrations, migrants/refugees, citizen/foreigner) that serve as a separator between “them” and “us”. At the same time, it creates and supports certain ideas on what is possible politically, what is irrelevant and what we should fear (Rajaram, 2015).

All of this has brought much criticism to the designation “European refugee/migrant crisis” and all of its related narrations. The distinction between refugees and migrants, or “true refugees” and “economic migrants” attracted the most attention (Čapo, 2016; Goodman, Sirriyeh and McMahon, 2017; Vogrinc, 2015; Yarris and Castañeda, 2015; Župarić-Iljić et al., 2015). Some authors warned of the problematic use of the term “crisis”<sup>3</sup>. This is said to be primarily used to dramatize events and excuse specific policies and measures by countries (Bojadzijeve and Mezzadra, 2015; Čapo, 2016; De Genova, 2017; Hammond, 2015; Sardelić, 2017). Less attention has been placed on the varying spatial or geographical perceptions connected to the designation “European refugee/migrant crisis”.

<sup>1</sup> The use of the designation “refugee/migrant” is not intended for distinguishing between “true refugees” and “economic migrants”, but rather stresses the great variations in understanding and interpretations of the events. The author agrees with Župarić-Iljić et al. (2015) and Hammond (2015), who advocate the use of the term refugee crisis.

<sup>2</sup> Europe migrant crisis, BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32395181> (7 April 2016); Dosje: Begunska kriza, *Delo*, <http://www.delo.si/assets/info5/dosje/begunska-kriza/goto.html> (7 April 2016); L'emergenza Migranti In Europa, RAI, [http://www.rainews.it/ran24/speciali/2015/la\\_crisi\\_dei\\_migranti\\_esplode\\_in\\_europa/](http://www.rainews.it/ran24/speciali/2015/la_crisi_dei_migranti_esplode_in_europa/) (7 April 2016); European Refugee Crisis – Related articles, background features and opinions about this topic, *Spiegel*, [http://www.spiegel.de/international/topic/european\\_refugee\\_crisis/](http://www.spiegel.de/international/topic/european_refugee_crisis/) (7 April 2016); Kryzys migracyjny w Europie, TVN24, <http://www.tvn24.pl/raporty/imigracyjny-kryzys-w-europie,975> (7 April 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The author agrees with those who problematize the use of the term crisis, so it is expressed in quotation marks.

The article problemizes the usage of the geographical designation "Europe" and "European" in the context of the "refugee/migrant crisis". The author believes the usage of this designation is problematic, as it blurs the complex spatiality of the event and gives the impression that this is a uniquely European "problem". It creates a binary division of space into Europe and the European neighbourhood. The first is presented as the key asylum area, the second as the origin or the transit area of the refugees/migrants. This neglects and decreases the internal heterogeneousness and complexity of both areas. The use of the geographical designator "Europe" is also problematic, because it is generally used as a synonym for the European Union<sup>4</sup>. One of the main objectives of the European Union has been "to maintain and develop the Union as an area of freedom, security and justice, in which the free movement of persons is assured" (see Consolidated Version of The Treaty on European Union, Article 2–4<sup>5</sup>). The abolition of border controls on internal borders between the member countries of the Schengen area and the ability of EU citizens to move without restrictions from one member state to another have produced the notion of the European Union as a unified, borderless space, in which free movement of goods, persons, services and capital is ensured. In the context of the "refugee/migration crisis", this idea of a "united borderless Europe" creates the impression that asylum seekers may freely select their asylum destination after entering the European Union. The spatial distribution of the asylum seekers is therefore the result of their wishes and calculations.

The article challenges this assumption by highlighting the limits of the notion of a "united borderless Europe". First and foremost, the article emphasizes the continuing importance of borders in the European Union. The "European refugee/migrant crisis" has demonstrated the limits of a "Europe without borders". The restoration of internal border controls and the growing securitization and militarization of borders (see Jones and Johnson, 2016) has had a tremendous effect on the permeability of national borders, especially for third-country nationals. The idea of a "borderless Europe" also neglects the fact that the removal of border controls leads to the increase of internal control mechanisms (e.g., police activities at railway stations, airports, highways and city centers) across the national territories of the individual member countries (Kunz and Leinonen, 2007). Another of-

<sup>4</sup> The usurpation of the term Europe by western European countries and the European Union has its roots in the cold-war geopolitical spatiality of Europe (more in Debeljak, 2004; Murphy, 2005; Rogelj, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Consolidated Version of The Treaty on European Union, *OJ C 326*, 26.10.2012, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12012M%2FTXT>.

ten-neglected aspect of a “borderless Europe” is the fact that not all member states (Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, Ireland and United Kingdom) are part of the Schengen area. When talking about a “Europe without borders”, the distinction between the Schengen area and the area of the European Union is often blurred or neglected. Last but not least, it is important to acknowledge important differences in how asylum seekers are treated in different member states. In this regard, the harmonization and “Europeanization” of asylum policy in the European Union has not created a unified space (Toshkov and de Haan, 2012).

The article analyses the spatiality of the “European refugee/migrant crisis”, in particular how it was influenced by the changes in the border regimes. This particular factor is used in order to highlight the fact that the selection of the asylum country is often the result of a set of circumstances, on which asylum seekers have no influence, not of a premeditated plan. Changes in border regimes was not the only or the most important factor influencing the spatial distribution of asylum seekers in the European Union during the “European refugee/migrant crisis”, but it can be used in order to demonstrate the limits the asylum seekers are facing.

The introductory section is followed by a brief description of the main methodological problem. Next, some key aspects of modern migrations are presented, which are important for understanding the spatiality of the “European refugee/migrant crisis”. The data analysis of the asylum applicants in countries of the European Union in the period 2011–2016 constitutes the central part of the article. It should be mentioned that the analysis is not intended for categorizing countries based on their levels of “affliction”. By illustrating the heterogeneous geography of the phenomenon, we wish to stress its complexity and dynamism, while at the same time unveil the effect of changes in border regimes on the spatial distribution of the asylum seekers. All of this is intended to disprove the notion of asylum shopping<sup>6</sup>, which has become an intricate part of the discourse on the “European refugee/migration crisis”.

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<sup>6</sup> The EU defines the term asylum shopping as a phenomenon where an asylum seeker applies for asylum in more than one EU State or chooses one EU State in preference to others on the basis of a perceived higher standard of reception conditions or social security assistance (*EMN Glossary*, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/content/asylum-shopping\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/content/asylum-shopping_en)). In order to prevent such practices, the EU introduced so-called Dublin regulation as part of the Common European Asylum System. The regulation determines the EU Member State responsible for examining an asylum application. In the general, discourse surrounding the “European refugee/migrant crisis” refugees coming to the EU was often portrayed as asylum shopping since they did not claim asylum in the first safe country on their route or in the first EU member state (see Kogovšek Šalamon and Bajt, 2016).

## METHODOLOGY

The complexity and dynamic nature of the “European refugee/migrant crisis” is demonstrated using the spatial data analysis on asylum applicants in countries of the European Union for the period 2011–2016. The analysis was based on the Eurostat’s *Asylum database and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data* (rounded). It can be used to reliably ascertain the spatial distribution of asylum seekers for the area of the European Union. The analysis included data from 2011 to 2016. Even though the term “European refugee/migrant crisis” was used since the summer of 2015, the beginning of this process could be dated back to 2011, when the number of asylum applications in the EU rose again after a longer period above 300,000.

From a methodological standpoint, it would be best to use data on the number of first-time applicants, but since these are not available for some countries, the data on the total number of asylum applicants were used instead. It should be noted that an individual might submit an application in several countries, so the data do not reflect the actual number of asylum applicants in the EU. Their number is almost impossible to determine accurately. Numerous statistical data, reports and research prove indirectly that most of those who applied for asylum in Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Croatia have left the aforementioned countries and reapplied for asylum in other countries<sup>7</sup>.

Statistical data on the asylum applicants hide the dynamic nature of the phenomenon. The route to the final destination is often long and unpredictable. The speed of the journey depends on numerous factors, on which the asylum applicants have no influence. They are often forced to linger in transition countries for a longer period. This must be taken into account when interpreting the spatiality of the “European refugee/migrant crisis”. Despite the fact that many transit countries recorded a relatively small number of asylum applications at the height of the events, the transition of a great number of asylum seekers had a profound political and social influence on them.

<sup>7</sup> The extremely small number of final decisions regarding the asylum processes (Eurostat, 2017c), the large number of retracted applications (Eurostat, 2017b) and the numerous applications for jurisdiction transfer within the Dublin Regulation (Eurostat, 2016) point to a great discrepancy between the official and actual number of asylum applicants in the mentioned countries. Other non-governmental organizations and researchers have also come to a similar conclusion (see Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2015; McLaughlin, 2016; PIC, 2017).

The data used conceal the vast differences in the spatial distribution of the asylum applicants within countries. The data on the accommodation capabilities in the most important host countries point to a concentration of these in larger urban centres despite the introduction of regional and local quotas, which was intended for the countries to more evenly disperse them across the entire territory of the country (AIDA, 2017; BAMF, 2017; Migrationsverket, 2017). The same goes for countries of transit, where the main entry and exit points and some larger urban centres were the most exposed. At the height of the “crisis”, during the Balkan corridor, the countries organized the transport of the refugees between the entry and exit points themselves. At the same time, they introduced security measures to try and isolate the reception and accommodation centres from the local inhabitants as much as possible (Kogovšek Šalamon, 2016; Lunaček and Meh, 2016; Petrović, 2016).

## **IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF MODERN FORCED MIGRATION FLOWS**

Prior to the data analysis, three characteristics of modern forced migrations must be pointed out, as they are important for understanding the spatiality of the “European refugee/migrant crisis”. The first is their “mixed” nature. Forced migrants often have more motives for migrating. Searching for a refuge from violence and persecution is the most important, but not the only reason (Van Hear, 2012). The other motives are often the main reason, why some forced migrants do not look for refuge in the first safe country (in the case of the EU, these are the countries on the outer border), but look for safety in countries, in which they have relatives and friends, countries with a higher economic standard and a high level of protection for asylum seekers and refugees (Brekke and Aarset, 2009; Hatton, 2004; Havinga and Böcker, 1999; Neumayer, 2004; Zetter et al., 2003).

The other important characteristic is the transitory nature of forced migrations. An increasing number of asylum seekers passes through several transit countries on their way to the final destination, in which they can spend a greater amount of time (Koser and Pinkerton, 2002). Transit migrations also occur between individual EU members, especially between countries at the southern and eastern border and its northern and western part. The important differences in reception and accommodation conditions, living standard, the labour market conditions and access to government assistance drives the asylum seekers to migrate within the EU (Brekke and Broch-

mann, 2015; Lukić, 2016). The changing asylum policies and stricter border controls also greatly influence the transit nature of forced migrations. The asylum applicants are often forced to ask for protection in countries of transit in order to escape being deported. In some cases, they utilize the asylum processes, so they can rest and prepare for their continued journey (Lukić, 2016).

The third important characteristic of modern forced migrations is their adaptability. The choice of the transit route and the asylum destination is constantly adapting to the wider political, economic and social context, in which they are unfolding. Forced migrations are especially sensitive to any kind of change in the asylum policies (number of granted requests, rights of asylum seekers, asylum processes...) and the border regimes (immigration policies, oversight and border control). Studies so far have shown that at the beginning of their journey, most asylum seekers are not informed on the differences in the asylum policies between countries and that they do not travel according to a predetermined itinerary towards a predetermined destination (Hatton, 2004; Havinga and Böcker, 1999; Koser and Pinkerton, 2002; Zetter et al., 2003). The decision on the final destination is often made during the journey itself. Due to the lack of reliable information, these decisions are often made based on the opinions, suggestions and rumours coming from relatives, friends, other migrants and smugglers (Brekke and Aarset, 2009; Havinga and Böcker, 1999; Koser and Pinkerton, 2002; Robinson and Segrott, 2002).

## WHAT INFLUENCES THE CHOICE OF DESTINATION?

These characteristics are vital for understanding the spatiality of the "European refugee/migrant crisis", as they attest that forced migrations are an extremely dynamic and often unpredictable phenomenon. Even a brief overview of data on asylum applicants for the period 2011–2016 shows big changes in their spatial dispersion that occurred in a short period. Two key questions come to the forefront. Why did these changes occur? To what extent can asylum applicants choose their asylum destination?

Existing research has detected a number of factors that greatly affect the attraction of certain asylum destinations (Havinga and Böcker, 1999; Lukić, 2016; McAuliffe and Jayasuriya, 2016; Robinson and Segrott, 2002). Böcker and Havinga (1998) differentiate between three groups of factors. Ties between the country of origin and the country of asylum represent the first set. It includes former colonial ties, linguistic and cultural ties or similari-

ties, migration links (existing refugee or immigrant communities), political and economic relations between countries. The characteristics of the destination country represent the second set. It consists of asylum policy (recognition rates, rights enjoyed by asylum seekers and access to the labour market), economic situation, and real or perceived image of the destination country (human rights reputation, attitude towards immigrants, economic image). Events during the actual flight and journey compose the last set. Geographic proximity, air routes, activities of the agents who organize travel arrangements, barriers, controls and checks on the path are the most important factors in the last set.

The rapid changes in the spatiality of the “European refugee/migrant crisis” show that rather than the factors from the first two, the factors from the third group have influenced it the most. Among these, the role of the border regimes should be especially highlighted. These have an important effect on the transit routes and an indirect effect on the choice of the asylum destination. The changes in border regimes can quickly and extremely effectively reshape the spatial dispersion of the asylum applicants. Changes in border regimes and border management play a central role in the new EU migration policy. Better border management with an emphasis on reinforced control on the external borders is one of the four pillars of the European Agenda on Migration<sup>8</sup>, which was adopted as a direct response to the crisis. The European Union has invested substantial resources in improving security at the external borders and tackling migrant smuggling. One of the results of the new policy was the transformation of Frontex into the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. The new agency has more responsibilities in the field of border management and substantially more resources. The existence of varying regimes at EU’s external and internal borders at the same time refutes the idea of the EU as a unified, borderless space, in which applicants are free to choose their country of asylum.

Even though the analysis emphasizes the importance of border regimes, this does not negate the importance of the other factors. The reality is that there is an individual behind each application who must make decisions based on the information and options that are available at a given moment. The decision is often influenced by factors on which an individual applicant has no influence. Aside from the border regimes, the role of asylum policy

<sup>8</sup> A European Agenda on Migration, European Commission, 13.5.2015, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/communication\\_on\\_the\\_european\\_agenda\\_on\\_migration\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/communication_on_the_european_agenda_on_migration_en.pdf).



must also be stressed (Barthel and Neumayer, 2015; Hatton, 2005; McAuliffe and Jayasuriya, 2016) as well as smuggling networks (Brekke and Aarset, 2009). The selection of the asylum destination is therefore usually the result of a set of circumstances, rather than a pre-prepared plan based on the wishes and calculations of an individual.

Especially important are different push-back practices and deportations under the Dublin III Regulation and readmission agreements. The situation in Slovenia in 2016 illustrates the case. After closing the Balkan corridor in February 2016 and the increased oversight on the Austrian-Slovenian and German-Austrian borders, many refugees were stranded in Slovenia. Under the readmission agreements, Slovenia could deport them back to Croatia or other countries on the Balkan migration route, if they did not request asylum in Slovenia. Consequently, Slovenia marked a great increase in the number of asylum applications, from 277 in 2015 to 1308 in 2016 (Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Slovenia, 2017). For most, this was merely a tactical move before continuing on. Most asylum applicants leave Slovenia before the final decision on their application. In 2016, 1136 applications were processed in Slovenia. The great majority of the processed (870 cases or 76.6% of all applications) were retracted, because the applicants had left the country before the process was finished (Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Slovenia, 2017; PIC, 2017). Some decided to stay despite their original plan. Uncertainty in continuing the route and the inability to finance a continued journey were important factors. Due to the increased control on the intra-Schengen borders, continuing the journey was only possible with the help of smugglers. At the same time, the stricter enforcement of the Dublin Regulation has increased the possibility of deportation back to Slovenia.

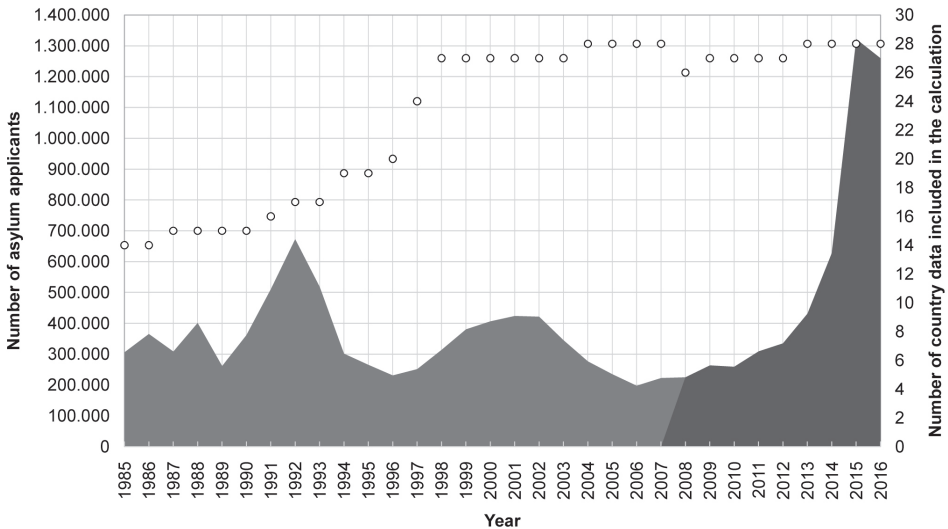
## **BORDER REGIMES AND THE SPATIALITY OF THE "EUROPEAN REFUGEE/MIGRANT CRISIS"**

Since 2011, the EU has marked a swift rise of the number of asylum applicants. It reached its peak in 2015, when over 1.3 million asylum applications were submitted<sup>9</sup> (Figure 1). The increase was especially high, as that number had been relatively low and stable in the previous period (between

<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that the media reporting in the time of the "European refugee/migrant crisis" talked much about the uniqueness of the event, it should be mentioned that the numbers of asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016 were very similar to the numbers from the early 1990s, when war raged on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. The statistical data (Figure 1) does not reflect this, because it does not include all of today's members.

2004 and 2011). Before presenting the detailed data analysis for the period 2011–2016, two characteristics of the spatial dispersion of the asylum applicants in the “pre-crisis (2004–2010)” period should be mentioned.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 1. Total number of asylum applicants in European Union member states (EU 28) from 1985 to 2015



Note: The dots on the graph represent the number of country data included in the calculation of the total number of asylum seekers. Due to the change in the methodology, the data prior to 2008 is not fully compatible with the newer data

Source: Eurostat (2015). *Asylum applicants by citizenship till 2007 Annual data (rounded)*, [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asyctz&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyctz&lang=en); Eurostat (2017c). *First instance decisions on applications by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data (rounded)*, [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asydcfsta&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asydcfsta&lang=en); UNCHR (2016). *Refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees (refugees and IDPs), stateless persons, and others of concern to UNHCR by country/territory of asylum, mid-2015 (or latest available estimates)*, <http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview>.

The first characteristic is a high concentration and a relatively equal dispersion of the asylum applicants in the economically most developed EU members. France stands out somewhat as the main host country, as it received about 18% of all applications in the EU in the period 2004–2010. It was followed by Great Britain, Germany, Sweden, Austria, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2015, 2017c). With the exception of Italy,

<sup>10</sup> For data analysis on asylum applicants to the EU prior to 2004, see Böcker and Havinga, 1998; Futo, Jandl and Karsakova, 2005; Hatton, 2004, 2009.

all the mentioned countries have a long history of immigration, numerous migrant communities and a high level of protection for asylum applications and refugees.

The rise in the number of asylum applicants in the countries at the southern external border of the EU, especially in Greece and in Italy and to a lesser extent in Spain is the second important characteristic of the pre-crisis period. The growth is connected to the increased role of the Mediterranean Sea as the central migration route for entering the EU (Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini, 2011). As a reaction to the new circumstances, the countries began changing their border regimes and establish a harsher asylum policy. The new approach was based on bilateral collaboration agreements on migration with the key countries of transit in northern Africa<sup>11</sup> and on shaping military-police operations for controlling sea routes between North Africa and Europe (McDonough and Tsourdi, 2012; Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini, 2011). These two measures have greatly decreased migrations through the Western Mediterranean and Central Mediterranean migration route, which heavily decreased the number of asylum applicants in Italy and Spain. The decreased number of applicants in Greece was the result of the economic crisis and a poor asylum system (Coluccello and Kretsos, 2015; McDonough and Tsourdi, 2012; Videmšek, 2016).

Table 1. Total number of asylum applicants in EU countries between 2011 and 2016

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
EU28	309,040	335,290	431,090	626,960	1,322,825	1,259,955
Germany	53,235	77,485	126,705	202,645	476,510	745,155
Italy	40,315	17,335	26,620	64,625	83,540	122,960
France	57,330	61,440	66,265	64,310	76,165	84,270
Greece	9,310	9,575	8,225	9,430	13,205	51,110
Austria	14,420	17,415	17,500	28,035	88,160	42,255
United Kingdom	26,915	28,800	30,585	32,785	40,160	38,785
Hungary	1,690	2,155	18,895	42,775	177,135	29,430
Sweden	29,650	43,855	54,270	81,180	162,450	28,790
Netherlands	14,590	13,095	13,060	24,495	44,970	20,945
Bulgaria	890	1,385	7,145	11,080	20,365	19,420

<sup>11</sup> For further information on bilateral and multilateral agreements between the EU and North African countries, see (Klepp, 2010; McDonough and Tsourdi, 2012; Casas-Cortes, Pickles and Cobarrubias, 2010, 2013).

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Belgium	31,910	28,075	21,030	22,710	44,660	18,280
Spain	3,420	2,565	4,485	5,615	14,780	15,755
Poland	6,885	10,750	15,240	8,020	12,190	12,305
Denmark	3,945	6,045	7,170	14,680	20,935	6,180
Finland	2,915	3,095	3,210	3,620	32,345	5,605
Cyprus	1,770	1,635	1,255	1,745	2,265	2,940
Ireland	1,290	955	945	1,450	3,275	2,245
Croatia	807	1195	1,075	450	210	2,225
Luxembourg	2,150	2,050	1,070	1,150	2,505	2,160
Malta	1,890	2,080	2,245	1,350	1,845	1,930
Romania	1,720	2,510	1,495	1,545	1,260	1,880
Czech Republic	750	740	695	1,145	1,515	1,475
Portugal	275	295	500	440	895	1,460
Slovenia	355	295	270	385	275	1,310
Lithuania	525	645	400	440	315	430
Latvia	340	205	195	375	330	350
Estonia	65	75	95	155	230	175
Slovakia	490	730	440	330	330	145

Source: Eurostat (2017b) *Asylum applications withdrawn by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data (rounded)*, [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asywitha&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asywitha&lang=en); Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Croatia (2014). *Statistički pokazatelji tražitelja azila 2008. – 2014. po državljanstvima*, Zagreb, [https://www.mup.hr/public/documents/Statistika/Statistički pokazatelji tražitelja azila 2008. – 2014. po državljanstvima.pdf](https://www.mup.hr/public/documents/Statistika/Statistički_pokazatelji_tražitelja_azila_2008.---2014._po_državljanstvima.pdf)

The period from 2011 to 2013 served as a prelude to the “European refugee/migrant crisis”. It was marked by a rapid increase of the number of asylum applicants (Table 1, 2, 3 and Figure 2, 3), which was the consequence of the outbreak and intensification of the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia and due to the poor economic conditions in the neighbouring countries to the EU. Rapid growth was not noted for all the EU members, so important shifts occurred in the spatial dispersion of the asylum seekers. Germany became the most important host by far, as it hosted almost 30% of all asylum seekers in the EU in 2013. A dramatic increase was also noted in Sweden, Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria. On the other hand, France, Great Britain, Belgium and Italy recorded a relatively low growth or even a decrease in the number of applications.

Table 2. Individual countries' share of asylum applicants as a share of the EU total between 2011 and 2016 (%)

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Germany	17.2	23.1	29.4	32.3	36.0	59.1
Hungary	0.5	0.6	4.4	6.8	13.4	2.3
Sweden	9.6	13.1	12.6	12.9	12.3	2.3
Austria	4.7	5.2	4.1	4.5	6.7	3.4
Italy	13.0	5.2	6.2	10.3	6.3	9.8
France	18.6	18.3	15.4	10.3	5.8	6.7
Netherlands	4.7	3.9	3.0	3.9	3.4	1.7
Belgium	10.3	8.4	4.9	3.6	3.4	1.5
United Kingdom	8.7	8.6	7.1	5.2	3.0	3.1
Finland	0.9	0.9	0.7	0.6	2.4	0.4
Denmark	1.3	1.8	1.7	2.3	1.6	0.5
Bulgaria	0.3	0.4	1.7	1.8	1.5	1.5
Spain	1.1	0.8	1.0	0.9	1.1	1.3
Greece	3.0	2.9	1.9	1.5	1.0	4.1
Poland	2.2	3.2	3.5	1.3	0.9	1.0
Cyprus	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2
Ireland	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Luxembourg	0.7	0.6	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Malta	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.2
Romania	0.6	0.7	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.1
Czech Republic	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1
Portugal	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Croatia	0.3	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.2
Slovenia	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1
Lithuania	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0
Latvia	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0
Estonia	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Slovakia	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0
EU28	100	100	100	100	100	100

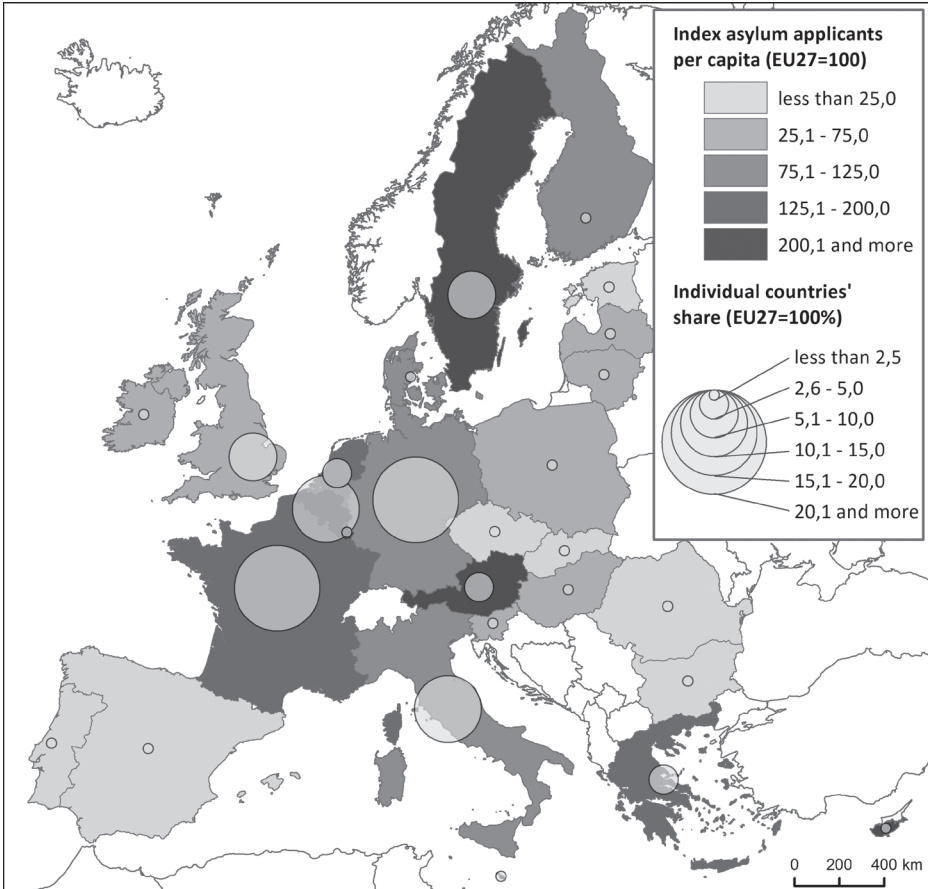
Source: Eurostat (2017b). Asylum applications withdrawn by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data (rounded), [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asywitha&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asywitha&lang=en); Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Croatia (2014). Statistički pokazatelji tražitelja azila 2008. – 2014. po državljanstvima, Zagreb, [https://www.mup.hr/public/documents/Statistika/Statistički\\_pokazatelji\\_tražitelja\\_azila\\_2008.\\_–\\_2014.\\_po\\_državljanstvima.pdf](https://www.mup.hr/public/documents/Statistika/Statistički_pokazatelji_tražitelja_azila_2008._–_2014._po_državljanstvima.pdf)

Table 3. Number of asylum applicants per 100,000 inhabitants in EU countries between 2011 and 2016

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Germany	66.4	96.5	157.4	250.9	586.9	906.8
Austria	172.2	207.1	207.1	329.6	1028.0	486.2
Greece	83.7	86.4	74.7	86.3	121.6	474.0
Malta	455.4	498.1	532.8	317.4	429.7	444.3
Luxembourg	420.1	390.6	199.2	209.2	445.0	374.8
Cyprus	210.8	189.7	144.9	203.4	267.4	346.6
Hungary	16.9	21.7	190.7	433.1	1797.3	299.4
Sweden	314.9	462.5	567.9	841.7	1666.6	292.3
Bulgaria	12.1	18.9	98.1	152.9	282.8	271.5
EU28	61.4	66.5	85.3	123.7	260.1	246.9
Italy	67.9	29.2	44.6	106.3	137.4	202.7
Belgium	290.1	253.0	188.4	203.1	397.4	161.6
France	88.2	94.1	101.0	97.5	114.6	126.2
Netherlands	87.6	78.3	77.8	145.5	266.1	123.4
Denmark	70.9	108.3	128.0	260.9	369.9	108.3
Finland	54.2	57.3	59.2	66.4	591.1	102.1
Slovenia	17.3	14.4	13.1	18.7	13.3	63.5
United Kingdom	42.7	45.4	47.9	50.9	61.9	59.3
Croatia	18.8	27.9	25.2	10.6	5.0	53.1
Ireland	28.2	20.8	20.6	31.5	70.8	47.5
Spain	7.3	5.5	9.6	12.1	31.8	33.9
Poland	18.1	28.2	40.0	21.1	32.1	32.4
Latvia	16.4	10.0	9.6	18.7	16.6	17.8
Lithuania	17.2	21.5	13.5	14.9	10.8	14.9
Portugal	2.6	2.8	4.8	4.2	8.6	14.1
Czech Republic	7.2	7.0	6.6	10.9	14.4	14.0
Estonia	4.9	5.7	7.2	11.8	17.5	13.3
Romania	8.5	12.5	7.5	7.7	6.3	9.5
Slovakia	9.1	13.5	8.1	6.1	6.1	2.7

Source: Eurostat (2017b). *Asylum applications withdrawn by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data (rounded)*, [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asywitha&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asywitha&lang=en); Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Croatia (2014). *Statistički pokazatelji tražitelja azila 2008. – 2014. po državljanstvima*, Zagreb, [https://www.mup.hr/public/documents/Statistika/Statistički pokazatelji tražitelja azila 2008. – 2014. po državljanstvima.pdf](https://www.mup.hr/public/documents/Statistika/Statistički_pokazatelji_tražitelja_azila_2008._--_2014._po_državljanstvima.pdf)

Figure 2. Individual countries' share of asylum applicants as a share of the EU total in 2011 and index of asylum applicants per capita compared to EU average in 2011



Note: On average 61.4 asylum applicants per 100,000 inhabitants were recorded in the EU in 2011.

Source: Eurostat (2017b). *Asylum applications withdrawn by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data (rounded)*, [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asywitha&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asywitha&lang=en).

These changes were the result of various factors, one of the more relevant being the redirection of the migrants to the Balkan migration route. This occurred due to the aforementioned measures in the Western and Central Mediterranean and the increased oversight on the intra-Schengen routes from Greece. In the past, migrants would freely continue on with their journey to other EU countries after arriving in Greece, as there was

no systematic passenger control on the regular intra-Schengen sea and air routes. This practice was abandoned in 2011. The Balkan migration route became the fastest and safest route to other EU members for an increasing number of migrants in Greece. Its popularity was further strengthened by two processes. The first was the abolishment of the visa regime for some western Balkan countries<sup>12</sup>. This led to a decreased border control and a heavy increase in the border flow of people and goods in the area of the Balkan migration route. The other reason was the liberalization of the Hungarian asylum legislation. In accordance with it, asylum applicants were housed in open holding centres. This greatly increased Hungary's appeal as a country of transit, as applicants could submit their application, then continue on their journey to other EU countries<sup>13</sup> (Frontex, 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Lukić, 2016; McDonough and Tsourdi, 2012).

The rapid growth of asylum applicants in the EU continued into 2014 (Table 1, 2, 3), when their numbers exceeded 600,000. The prevalent trends from the previous years continued. Germany was still the key host country, as it hosted almost a third of all asylum applicants in the EU. Due to the increasing significance of the Balkan migration route, Bulgaria, Hungary and Austria also recorded rapid growth. A key factor for creating certain transit routes was the inability or unpreparedness of the countries on the route. Their passive border management policies enabled those with at least some financial means to travel from Greece to Austria or Germany relatively inexpensively, quickly and safely (Tinti and Reitano, 2016; Videmšek, 2016). Italy also recorded a great increase in the number of asylum applicants. The political chaos that erupted after the fall of Gadhafi's regime in Libya created ideal conditions for the smuggling industry (Tinti and Reitano, 2016). Consequently, the central Mediterranean migration route was revived in late 2013<sup>14</sup>.

On the other side, France's and Great Britain's roles kept diminishing. The former hosted only 10% and the latter only 5% of all asylum applicants

<sup>12</sup> The liberalisation of the Visa regime to biometric passport-holders from Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina led to a sharp increase in the number of asylum claims from those two countries. Nationals from Western Balkan states could enter the EU under a visa-free regime and later on file an asylum request in one of the member states. Combined, the asylum applications from the five visa-exempt Western Balkan nationalities amounted to roughly 15% of all asylum applications in the EU and to around 95% of asylum applications submitted by visa-free nationalities (Eurostat, 2017a; Frontex, 2012b, p. 5).

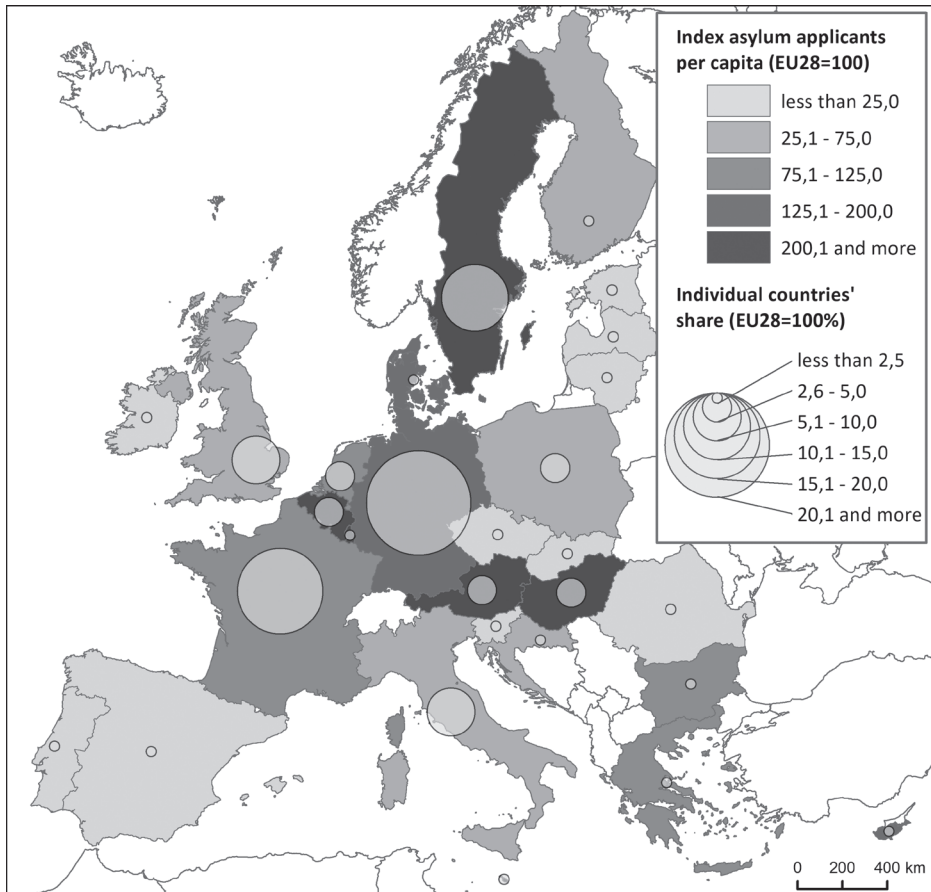
<sup>13</sup> This policy was reverted in 2017 when Hungarian parliament approved a law allowing all asylum seekers to be detained (Dearden, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> The high death toll led the Italian government to launch the Mare Nostrum rescue mission in late 2013.



in the EU. A very small number of asylum applicants applied for asylum in new EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe (with the exception of Hungary and Bulgaria). This can be associated with their weaker economic condition compared to some other member states, the non-existent tradition of immigration and a poor reputation of refugee and asylum applicant protection.

Figure 3. Individual countries' share of asylum applicants as a share of the EU total in 2013 and index of asylum applicants per capita compared to EU average in 2013



Note: On average 85.3 asylum applicants per 100,000 inhabitants were recorded in the EU in 2013.

Source: Eurostat (2017b). *Asylum applications withdrawn by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data (rounded)*, [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asywitha&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asywitha&lang=en).

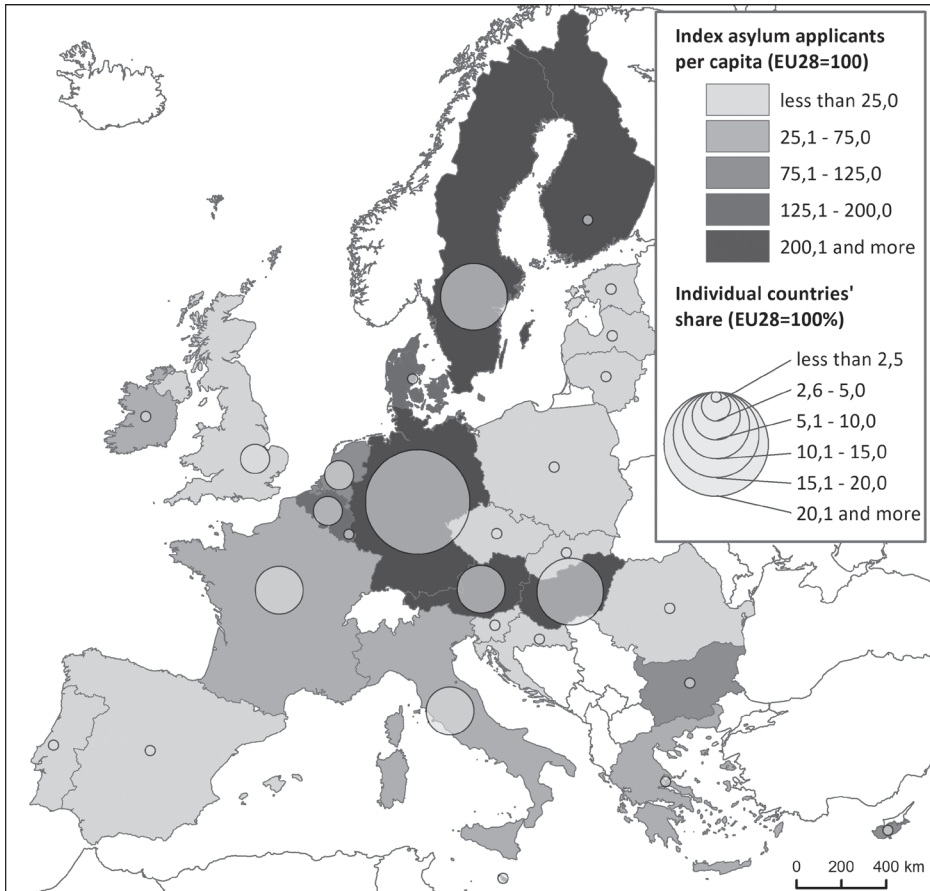
At the height of the “crisis” (from the spring of 2015 to the spring of 2016), the European Union witnessed a high increase in the number of asylum applications (Table 1, 2, 3 and Figure 4). The rise was the direct result of different interrelated factors. The intensification of the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan in early 2015 strengthened the flow of refugees into Turkey, which resulted in over-crowdedness in refugee camps. The Turkish authorities responded to the new conditions with a more lax control of the sea border with Greece. Smugglers exploited the emerging situation and drastically increased the refugee transfer via the so-called Eastern Mediterranean migration route. Greece was not able to take in such a large number of asylum applicants, so it did not impede their journey. The rest of the countries on the Balkan migration route adopted a similar approach. Asylum seekers from other nationalities took advantage of the situation. An important stimulant was Germany’s public declaration of an open door policy and the decision to apply the discretionary clause in the Dublin III Regulation for Syrian refugees in August 2015 (Sardelić, 2017).

Organizing travel and refugee care was left to individuals or non-government organizations at first; later, various state institutions collaborated with non-government organizations to take over transport, supply and temporary housing. Consequently, the period from September 2015 to March 2016 saw the formation of the Balkan corridor<sup>15</sup> (Beznec, Speer and Stojić Mitrović, 2016; Lunaček and Meh, 2016). The existence of the corridor enabled refugees to relatively quickly and safely arrive at their selected asylum destinations in the EU<sup>16</sup>. As a result, all EU members except Croatia, Lithuania, Slovenia and Slovakia noted an increased rise of asylum applicants in 2015. Three key countries at the end of the Balkan corridor—Germany, Hungary and Austria—received over 740,000 asylum applications combined (over 56% of all applications in the EU).

<sup>15</sup> The Balkan corridor was established when nation states started to facilitate and organize the transportation of refugees from one border to another (for details see Kogovšek Šalamon, 2016; Kogovšek Šalamon and Bajt, 2016)

<sup>16</sup> The author shares the opinion of those researchers who claim that the organization of the supply, accommodation and transport for the refugees by the respective countries was not a humanitarian gesture, but a crucial step for establishing control and ultimately stopping the refugee flow (see Lunaček and Meh, 2016; Petrović, 2016).

Figure 4. Individual countries' share of asylum applicants as a share of the EU total in 2015 and index of asylum applicants per capita compared to EU average in 2015



Note: On average 260.1 asylum applicants per 100,000 inhabitants were recorded in the EU in 2015.

Source: Eurostat (2017b). *Asylum applications withdrawn by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data (rounded)*, [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asywitha&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asywitha&lang=en).

In the period from September 2015 to January 2016, seven countries<sup>17</sup> in the Schengen border system re-established internal border control. Some countries even went a step further and began erecting a wire fence in some of the most exposed border areas in order to deter refugees. By erecting a fence on the border with Serbia and Croatia, Hungary managed to redirect refugee transit towards Slovenia and Croatia. The newly constructed fence on the Macedonian-Greek border in late November 2015 had an even greater influence on the spatial distribution of the asylum applicants.

These measures strengthened efforts to close down the Balkan corridor. Due to a fear that the German and Austrian borders would be completely closed, the countries of transit began a coordinated action to close the corridor<sup>18</sup>. At the same time, efforts to halt the transit on the Eastern Mediterranean route between Turkey and Greece gained strength at the EU level. In late March 2016, an agreement was signed between the EU and Turkey, which allowed Greece to extradite all “illegal immigrants” back to Turkey.

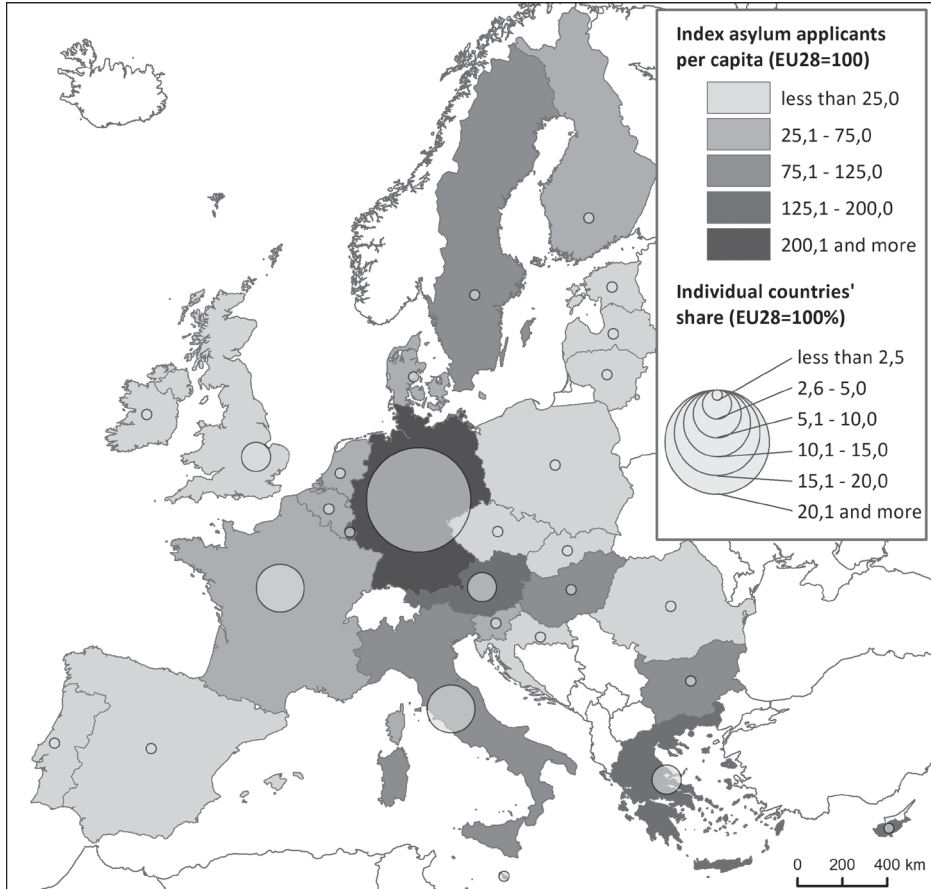
Enforced border control on EU’s internal borders, closing the Balkan corridor on the Macedonian-Greek border and the agreement between the EU and Turkey created new conditions that crucially influenced the dispersion of asylum applicants in 2016 (Table 1, 2, 3 and Figure 5). The increased control at the internal Schengen borders dramatically decreased the inflow of new asylum applicants in Scandinavian countries. The closed Balkan corridor also greatly decreased the inflow of applicants to Austria and Hungary, while their numbers multiplied in Greece. After the Eastern Mediterranean route was closed down, the Central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy again gained popularity. In late 2016, Italy once more became the central entry point into the EU, as it recorded a great increase of asylum applicants.

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<sup>17</sup> Germany was the first to introduce control on its internal borders. In September, it launched a border control operation at the border with Austria. Austria and Slovenia soon followed Germany’s example and Hungary, Sweden, Denmark and Norway followed later. Even though this is supposed to be a temporary measure (European Commission, 2015), five countries still continue the practice at the time of writing (Germany, Austria, Sweden, Denmark and Norway). Hungary and Slovenia discontinued the practice in late October 2015.

<sup>18</sup> The Balkan corridor started closing on 18 November 2015 when Macedonian authorities granted border crossing only to refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The Macedonian-Greek border finally closed completely on 8 March 2016 (Lunaček and Meh, 2016). The closed corridor on the Macedonian-Greek border was the result of the coordinated actions of Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia and supported by Visegrad countries and Germany.

Figure 5. Individual countries' share of asylum applicants as a share of the EU total in 2016 and index of asylum applicants per capita compared to EU average in 2016



Note: On average 246.9 asylum applicants per 100,000 inhabitants were recorded in the EU in 2016.

Source: Eurostat (2017b). *Asylum applications withdrawn by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data (rounded)*, [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asywitha&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asywitha&lang=en).

The role of most important host country in 2016 once again went to Germany, which hosted 745,155 asylum applicants, which is almost 60% of all applicants in the EU. This high number is somewhat surprising, as the closed Balkan corridor and border control on the Austrian border would lean one to expect similar trends as in other host countries. We can only speculate on the causes for this increase. Whether the increase was the re-

sult of new arrivals through different channels or the result of secondary migrations from other EU countries in 2016 remains unanswered and open for further research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The media labelled the mass arrival of refugees to the area of the European Union during the 2015–2016 period as a “European refugee/migrant crisis”. This geopolitical designation carries specific perceptions and categorisations that affect one’s understanding of the event. Using the term Europe or European creates a binary division, in which “Europe” is presented as a key host area and the neighbouring countries to Europe as the source or transit area of asylum applicants. Refugees or asylum applicants then become an expressly European problem, but what is unsaid is that we have been witness to a quickly growing number of forced migrations around the world in the past decade and that Europe and the rest of the developed world host only a smaller share of the refugees (Rogelj, 2017).

The other perception created by the use of the geographical designation “Europe/European” is the notion of Europe and the European Union as a unified, borderless space, in which asylum applicants are free to select their destination. Accordingly, their spatial distribution is said to be the result of careful planning based on the wishes and calculations of individuals. The data analysis on asylum applicants in the EU between 2011 and 2016 has shown that this is not the case. During the analysed period, numerous fast changes occurred in the spatial dispersion that cannot be attributed to the wishes and interests of the individuals.

The spatial dispersion of asylum seekers has been influenced by multiple interrelated factors, on which asylum seekers had no influence. The article focuses on only one of them, namely the changes in the border regimes in the European Union and its neighbourhood. Modern migration flows exhibit a high level of adaptability to the current political, economic and social conditions. Increased or decreased border control at EU’s internal borders has an important influence on the transit routes and selection of the countries of asylum.

There are of course other, equally important factors influencing the distribution of asylum seekers during the “European refugee/migrant crisis” that the article does not address. Among them different aspects of the Common European Asylum Policy (especially the Dublin III Regulation and readmission agreements), important differences in the implementation of the

common asylum policy (despite the efforts to harmonize the asylum procedures and the rights of asylum seekers) and above all the growing trend in securitization, militarization and externalization of the EU migration and asylum policy, have to be acknowledged (see Allen et al., 2017; Beznec, Speer and Stojić Mitrović, 2016; Ibrahim, 2005; Jones and Johnson, 2016). All the above-mentioned factors indicate that the spatial dispersion of the asylum applicants is therefore the result of circumstance, not of planned actions.

Finally, attention should be raised on the transitory nature of modern migrations, due to which the analysis results do not illustrate the actual picture of the spatiality of the "European refugee/migrant crisis". Asylum applicants often have a very limited knowledge of the host countries and their asylum policies, which is particularly true for those who left their homeland in a hurry without a plan (Brekke and Aarset, 2009). For many people, the basic goal is to come to Europe or the European Union. They only begin to contemplate their asylum destination after their arrival in the first European country and their decision is often influenced by information and rumours they had heard on their journey. At the same time, it should be noted that the increasing illegalisation of forced migrations and the European or national asylum policies often force individuals to submit an asylum application in countries of transit located at the EU outer border. The described reasons cause so-called secondary or transit migrations from member states, through which asylum applicants enter the EU (see Brekke and Brochmann, 2015; McDonough and Tsourdi, 2012; Valenta, Zuparić-Ilić and Vidović, 2015). These have an important influence on the spatial dispersion of asylum applicants within the EU. Further analysis must focus on this specific aspect of the phenomenon, especially what is the reason and what information is the basis for the asylum applicants' decision to change their country of asylum.

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## Promjene u prostornim odrednicama »Europske izbjegličke/migrantske krize«

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### SAŽETAK

„Europska izbjeglička/migrantska kriza“ geopolitička je oznaka kojom su mediji, politika i šira javnost obilježili dolazak velikog broja izbjeglica u Europsku uniju 2015. i 2016. godine. U članku se analizira prostorna raspodjela tražitelja azila u Europskoj uniji od 2011. do 2016. Usredotočuje se na to kako su promjene graničnih režima na vanjskim i unutarnjim granicama Europske unije utjecale na kretanje tražitelja azila i prostornu raspodjelu zahtjeva za azil tijekom »krize«. To skreće pozornost na sve veću važnost militarizacije granica i sekuritizaciju migracijskih tokova na prostornoj raspodjeli podnositelja zahtjeva za azil. Istraživanje se temelji na analizi Eurostat podataka o ukupnom broju podnositelja zahtjeva za azil u državama članicama između 2011. i 2016. Iako promjene u graničnim režimima nisu jedini čimbenik koji utječe na prostornu raspodjelu tražitelja azila tijekom »europske izbjegličke/migrantske krize«, njihovi se učinci mogu iskoristiti kako bi se pokazale granice s kojima se azilanti susreću na svojem putu. Glavni je cilj članka problematizirati upotrebu geografske oznake »Europa«/»europski« u kontekstu »izbjegličke/migrantske krize«. Ta upotreba stvara percepciju jedinstvenoga, bezgraničnog prostora u kojemu pojedinci mogu slobodno izabrati svoje azilno odredište. Diskurs »europska izbjeglička/migrantska kriza« Europsku uniju često predstavlja kao »otvoreni trgovački centar za azil« u kojemu tražitelji azila mogu odabrati bilo koju zemlju domaćina. Članak se suprotstavlja tom pojmu te naglašava ograničenja i učinak koji kontingencija (slučajnost) igra u izboru odredišta azila.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: migracije, izbjeglice, granični režimi, Europska unija, „Europska izbjeglička/migrantska kriza“

