

Irregular migration is feeding into the growth of anti-establishment politics in southern Europe

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On 15 February the Italian coastguard launched an operation to rescue more than 2,000 migrants who were in difficulty between the island of Lampedusa and the coast of Libya. [Anna Triandafyllidou](#) writes on the pressure irregular migration is having on the countries of southern Europe. She argues that countries such as Italy and Greece are now facing a 'triple crisis' composed of irregular migration, stubborn unemployment rates, and high levels of poverty, which is feeding into the growth of anti-establishment politics.



In recent years, Greece seems to have functioned as a barometer for social tensions in Europe. The country's economic crisis and potential exit from the euro has generated deep anxiety for the Eurozone, first in the period between 2010 and 2012, and again in the aftermath of the Greek election on 25 January. At the same time, Syrian asylum seekers' [squats in Syndagma square](#), which emerged in November last year – directly in front of the Hellenic Parliament – exemplified the failures of the EU's asylum system.

Syrians were given international protection by the Greek state through a facilitated and rapid procedure, after a government decision in November. The asylum seekers themselves do not want this protection: they wanted to move on to other European countries where such protection comes with a set of integration measures (accommodation, training, family allowances) that would guarantee these families a future in the host country.

Ultimately, the squat was dissolved partly through negotiation and satisfaction of the refugees' claims – the mayor of Athens, along with the national government, sought shelter for families and tried to integrate these people into the admittedly scarce social assistance programmes that Greece has been running in these austere times. It was also achieved partly through police intervention – effectively the asylum seekers were physically removed from Syndagma square by police forces one chilly December morning.

These events highlight the tough challenges that southern European countries, and particularly Greece and Italy, face. Asylum is a common concern for both northern and southern European countries, however southern countries are exposed to pressures at their borders because of their geographical proximity to zones of instability and conflict. Northern and western European countries, on the other hand, are the preferred destinations of asylum seekers.

Thus both groups of countries have a common concern to share this burden, albeit looking at the problem from different perspectives. Southern European countries simultaneously face the pressures of irregular migration and asylum seekers, which necessitates a way of effectively filtering applications. Northern European countries are more 'protected' from irregular migration because of their geographical position and hence face mostly the problem of processing applications rather than that of filtering them at their borders.

The problem of irregular migration in southern European countries

Four EU countries have taken the brunt of irregular migration arrivals and asylum seeker applications in the past 15 years: Spain, Italy, Malta and Greece. While Spain was a preferred route for irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-2000s, this western Mediterranean route is by now largely abandoned. Italy by contrast has been registering high numbers of arrivals of irregular migrants throughout the last ten years and ranks 12th in terms of its share of asylum seekers among the top ten receiving countries worldwide in the period 2008-2014.

Lampedusa, Credit: [Dorli Photography](#) (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

In 2011, arrivals were related to the Arab spring: an estimated total of 25,000 Tunisians arrived at the island of Lampedusa in the first two months of 2011. An additional 20,000 sub-Saharan Africans arrived in the spring and summer of 2011 in Lampedusa and Sicily, fleeing the war and racial violence in Libya. Since 2013, though, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Syrian asylum seekers fleeing war in the region, leading to a huge upsurge in arrivals on Italian shores. The *Mare Nostrum* operation, run by the Italian government with the aim of intercepting migrant boats headed for Italy, saved over 150,000 asylum seekers and irregular migrants in the period between October 2013 and October 2014.



Greece also remains one of the main geographical points of entrance to the EU for Asian and African irregular migrants and asylum claimants travelling through Africa or Asia to Turkey and then crossing into Europe. Apprehensions of irregular migrants (including potential asylum seekers) at the Greek Turkish land and sea borders nearly doubled in the period 2007-2010, before decreasing from 2011-2013, only to pick up abruptly in late 2013, leading to over 72,000 apprehensions in 2014 (twice as many compared to 2013).

The three Mediterranean routes of irregular migration (and hence also of asylum seekers) function as communicating containers: when one route is stopped, another is under pressure. When this route is abandoned it is not because irregular migration and asylum seeking pressures overall fall but rather because the routes shift. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Greek Turkish land and sea corridor was heavily under pressure, and in the last year we have witnessed another dramatic change as irregular migrants and particularly asylum seekers seek to cross from Libya or Turkey to Italy.

Loading asylum seekers or irregular migrants onto small dinghies, which in turn transfer them to cargo ships and then push them toward Italian waters is the latest strategy uncovered by the coastguard, migration experts and [the media](#). The turbulent Middle Eastern context suggests that pressures for asylum seeking from the region and opportunities for smugglers to make money by ferrying people to southern EU shores will continue.

Irregular migration and anti-establishment politics in Greece, Italy and Spain

In this difficult international landscape, Greece, Italy and Spain are caught between a rock and a hard place: they face an international migration and asylum seeking management crisis, and an internal migration crisis – as migrant workers who are settled in the country face dramatic unemployment and increasing poverty often resulting in their loss of legal migration status. However they also face an increasingly angry electorate, tired of years of austerity and looking for a route towards economic growth and improvement of the social protection net (which was weak in the first place and has become nearly non-existent after five years of austerity).

Greece has experienced its own neo-Nazi moment with the rise of [Golden Dawn](#) in the last five years. Gaining seats for the first time in the municipal council of Athens in the 2010 election, Golden Dawn won 7 per cent in the 2012 national elections, and 6.3 per cent in 2015. In the lead up to the 2015 elections, the left-wing protest vote was nevertheless directed toward [Syriza](#) and other parties, including the centrist [To Potami](#) (The River), and the [Independent Greeks](#) (ANEL), who eventually entered into a governing coalition with Syriza. For now, the momentum behind Golden Dawn appears to have stalled.

The populist [Five Star Movement](#) led by Beppe Grillo in Italy has also become deflated to some extent. After a spectacular success in the 2013 election, internal discord and the allegedly 'authoritarian tendencies' of the party's

leader have led to disillusionment among some voters. In Spain, despite harsh austerity measures and dramatically high unemployment (like Greece) popular discontent has been channelled to new centre-left forces, chiefly [Podemos](#), which more closely resembles Syriza than Grillo's movement.

The challenge perhaps remains whether these political parties can manage to successfully channel popular discontent and citizen protest back into the political system, strengthening efforts aimed at socio economic and political reform rather than leading to anti-systemic populist or radical-right protest. Dealing with their triple crisis – increased migration and asylum pressures, rampant unemployment and de-regularisation of settled migrants, and increasing poverty for citizens – southern European countries and their governments undoubtedly face tough times ahead. Part of the solution to their challenges lies, however, with Europe, as national migration/asylum management and socio-economic reform are closely intertwined with EU policies in these areas.

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