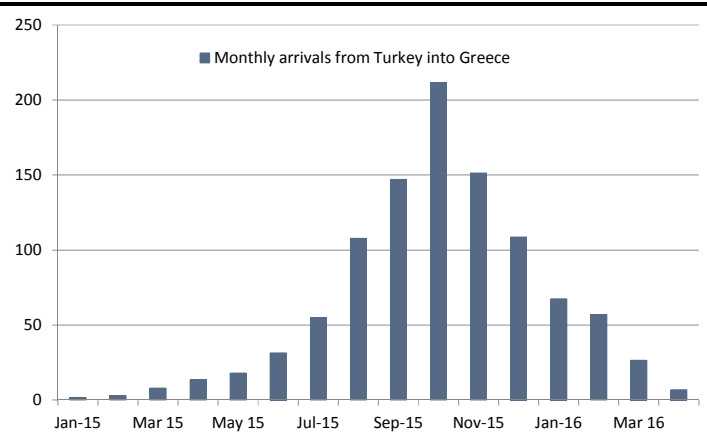


8 April 2016

European migrant crisis: a welcome respite

Flow of refugees from Turkey to Greece has slowed down sharply



Monthly arrivals of migrants and refugees in Greece, in 1000s; April 2016 estimate based on average daily arrivals 1-6 April. Source: UNHCR

- Can Europe get to grips with the migrant crisis?** Doing so may be crucial for the political future of Europe. The emotion-stirring migration issue is a factor in the UK debate ahead of the referendum on 23 June about staying in the European Union. It has also energised the eurosceptics in the Netherlands, who have gained a clear majority in a non-binding referendum on 6 April to reject the EU's association agreement with Ukraine. Amid a low turnout of just 32.2%, most mainstream voters did not bother to cast a ballot.
- A twin approach:** After last year's dramatic rise in the number of migrants and refugees crossing over the Aegean Sea from Turkey into Greece, Europe has tried to stem the inflow in two major ways: by de facto closing borders on the Balkan route from Greece towards Germany (the "Austrian approach"); and by striking a deal with Turkey to police its borders better and take back migrants without a genuine claim for asylum in Europe (the "German approach").
- The end of a surge?** The twin approach is showing results. The number of migrants and refugees arriving in Greece has dropped sharply from a peak of more than 7,000 per day last October to an average of 230 a day in the first six days of April. Whereas it is likely that the decline in the numbers from October to February largely reflected the worsening weather, the further drop since points to a shift in the underlying dynamic.
- Turkey remains a potential problem:** Of course, it is very early days. Whether Turkey will fully honour its deal with the EU over time remains an open question. As is whether Greece, with European support, can fast-track asylum applications and send rejected applicants back to Turkey in sufficient numbers to deter would-be migrants from trying to cross over into Greece. Meanwhile, migrants are likely to search for alternative routes.
- Libya next:** After Turkey, Europe's second biggest headache in the migrant crisis is Libya. From a low base, the number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean from there into Greece has risen steadily in recent months. According to some newspaper reports, around 200,000 would-be migrants are waiting on the shores of Libya for a chance to board a boat to make it to Italy.
- Work in progress:** Europe and the US are trying to deal with the political near-vacuum in Libya into which terrorists have expanded along parts of the coast. The new "national unity" government established in Tripoli, supported by the west and some of Libya's quarrelsome factions, is a step forward. It provides the basis for the west to grant more support to beat back IS, rebuild the Libyan state and regain better control of Libya's borders.
- The crisis is not over:** But the return to clearer rules on migration, the deal with Turkey and the first glimpse of political progress in a half-disintegrated Libya show that the migrant crisis can be contained. It is likely that the inflow of refugees and migrants will stay at numbers that are less headline-grabbing than they were last autumn. If so, chances would rise further that the UK will vote to stay in the EU and that the wave of anti-EU sentiment will crest in the foreseeable future.

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