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## 2015 IN REVIEW: HOW EUROPE REACTED TO THE REFUGEE CRISIS

by Martin Wagner

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The year 2015 will be remembered as the year in which an unprecedented number of arrivals of refugees and migrants lead to a crisis in the EU. As seen in other crises, of the [millions of Syrians who fled from their homes](#) to escape violence the vast majority stayed in the region, hoping for the violence to cease and to return home. The lack of hope for durable solutions made Syrians and other refugees take their fate into their own hands leaving the region in search for a dignified living.

The EU attracted many refugees in search for protection, putting some EU Member States under severe pressure as regards their national capacities to process, accommodate and care for asylum seekers. Shocking images of a humanitarian crisis, worsening as temperatures were declining in autumn, covered all media.

In this blog, we look back at this decisive year, give a [chronological overview of key incidences](#) and [policy responses by selected European countries](#).

### Two popular routes

Between April and May, discussions and policy responses by the European Commission focused on the Mediterranean, aiming at fighting smugglers and saving lives. In summer, all eyes turned to the Western Balkans route, as the main track **shifted from the dangerous Mediterranean crossing** from Libya to Italy, **towards the east**, from Turkey to Greece, through the Balkans to Central Europe.

Until June, just as many refugees and migrants were taking the 'Central Mediterranean Route' as the 'Eastern Mediterranean Route'. This changed dramatically in July. There are a number of reasons behind this shift: it is less risky as the sea crossing is much shorter and prices for smugglers are lower.

It is noteworthy that despite this, the central Mediterranean route remained an entry point for migrants and refugees at a comparable level to 2014. There were simply more people on the move in total.

## Who was taking which route?

The Western Balkans route is mainly used by two nationalities, asylum seekers from two nationalities: **Syrians and Afghans**. Those two countries alone made up more than **70% of the flows in any given month in 2015**, peaking in August with more than 90% of the sea arrivals to Greece. Comparable smaller but on the rise are applicants from Iraq. It is notable that the share of Syrians taking this route has been decreasing since summer, to only 45% in November.

In comparison, the sea arrivals in Italy show a much **more mixed** composition of nationalities. Many migrants and asylum seekers from Eritrea, Nigeria and Somalia attempt this this dangerous crossing. It is not popular among Syrians.

## How has Europe reacted to the crisis?

First and foremost: **in discord**. As of late summer, we saw heated debates and an East-West divide over the [reception of refugees and their distribution](#) within Europe. Fences were constructed at 5 borders, outside and within the **Schengen** area. Border controls were reintroduced. A public debate about migration and terrorism was triggered by the terrible attacks in Paris in November, even though there was no clear link.

On the national level, several EU member states initiated amendments to their asylum legislation since autumn. In most cases, these changes mean **tightening legislation and restrictions to the rights of asylum seekers**.

We have put together a timeline with a [chronological overview of major incidences and policy responses by the EU](#) and its member states, listing what happened in each month. A more detailed overview of responses by EU member states is also available [per country](#).

Due to the volume of information available and the fast-paced developments, we were forced to be selective. We make no claim of an exhaustive coverage.

## Timeline:

[View the full chronological list of EU policy responses in 2015](#)

**Overview:**

[Policy responses on national level by country](#)

**View the full infographic:**

[2015 in review - how Europe reacted to the refugee crisis](#)

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