

Using refugees as leverage? Greece and the instrumentalisation of the European migrant crisis

How does forced migration feature in the foreign policy approaches of EU member states and how does it affect their bargaining strategies? Drawing on a new study, [Gerasimos Tsourapas](#) and [Sotirios Zartaloudis](#) assess the foreign policy response of Greece during the 2015-16 migrant crisis. They detail how the Greek government first adopted a 'blackmailing' strategy focused on threats, before shifting to a 'backscratching' strategy of co-operation once the numbers of asylum seekers within its territory were reduced.

The Syrian refugee crisis has been one of the gravest outcomes of the Syrian Civil War, which has been ongoing since 2011. Currently, the conflict has resulted in over 6 million internally displaced persons as well as over 5.6 million forced migrants seeking shelter abroad. As the EU became implicated in this during the 2015-16 European migrant crisis, EU member states pursued a range of diverse strategies that have yet to be adequately discussed.

In this blog post, we summarise the findings of a [research project](#) aiming to expand upon existing understandings of the interplay between forced migration and EU member states' bargaining strategies within the context of the 2015-16 European migrant crisis. We focus on Greece, an EU member state particularly affected by forced migration, arguing that it explicitly adopted an issue-linkage strategy that relied, firstly, on *blackmailing* and, secondly, on *backscratching* over two time periods.

Initially, between January 2015 and March 2016, the SYRIZA–ANEL coalition government was able to pursue a coercive foreign policy strategy of blackmailing based on threats. This was due to the country's strategic geopolitical position vis-à-vis the EU: Greece served as the initial point of the 'Balkan corridor,' while transfers of asylum seekers to Greece under the Dublin Regulation had been suspended, further strengthening the country's position as a 'transit' rather than a 'host' state.

However, from March 2016 onwards, Greece shifted to a non-coercive bargaining approach via backscratching, which sought to secure economic payoffs based on co-operation necessitated by the diminished geopolitical importance of the country vis-à-vis the EU: implementation of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement led to a dramatic decrease of refugee inflows, while the closure of the Balkan corridor and the resumption of Dublin transfers effectively transformed Greece into a migrant-host state.

Using refugees in intra-EU bargaining

Recent research has identified ongoing processes of states [using migrants and refugees in their migration diplomacy strategies](#). However, this line of work typically examines interstate bargaining as occurring between [richer donor states of the Global North and poorer recipient states of the Global South](#), via mutually beneficial 'bargains,' 'compacts,' or 'deals.' More recently, research on [South-South migration has unpacked such processes even further](#). Yet, the question remains: are Northern states and, in particular, EU member states also able to seek such payoffs and, if so, how?

The context of European states' intra-EU bargaining strategies has highlighted the [prominence of issue-linkage strategies](#), namely the connection of diverse issues to obtain additional leverage in interstate negotiations characterised by [complex interdependence](#). We bring this body of research in conversation with work on [migration interdependence](#) and asymmetric power relations, and we introduce two key terms from international relations – [blackmailing and backscratching](#), broadly corresponding to coercive/zero-sum and co-operative/positive-sum strategies, respectively. Our research project examined how Greece's refugee policy strategies allowed for deeper insights into EU member states' use of refugees as instruments of leverage.

Greek-EU bailout negotiations: From blackmailing to backscratching

In January 2011, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the country was violating asylum seekers' human rights and that [EU member states should temporarily halt any returns of asylum seekers to Greece as per the Dublin Regulation](#). This implied that Greece theoretically received a carte blanche to wave asylum seekers through its territory. But no Greek government had yet attempted to use this as a negotiating strategy.

This changed after the rise of the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition to power in January 2015 which engaged in a paradigmatic shift of Greek refugee policy towards a less restrictive and punitive stance regarding irregular migration following a 'compassionate' approach to irregular migration which was in sharp contrast with the 'inhumane' strategies adopted by Brussels and EU member states.

More specifically, Greece would be releasing any detained irregular migrants, closing detention centres and providing automatic short-term 30-day permits to all irregular arrivals along with the end of the policy of deterrence at its land and sea borders. Unsurprisingly, between January and July 2015, Frontex documented an astonishing [663 per cent increase of irregular border crossings into the Western Balkans compared to the previous year](#).

The SYRIZA-ANEL government's attempt at issue linkage via blackmail focused on the ongoing negotiations over the review of the country's Second Economic Adjustment Programme. Before an informal Foreign Ministers meeting on 6-7 March 2015, Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Kotzias declared that the Greek state would collapse if not adequately supported via a favourable bailout package. Two days later, Panayiotis Kammenos, the government's junior coalition partner and Greece's Defence Minister, argued that '[We cannot keep ISIS out, if the EU keeps bullying us](#).'

However, the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government's initial strategy of blackmailing was unsuccessful, as Greece agreed to a Third Economic Adjustment Programme in July 2015. Nevertheless, the September 2015 government (another SYRIZA-ANEL coalition) did not alter its policy vis-à-vis irregular migration. As new arrivals continued coming in through the country's eastern border with Turkey and transiting through its northern borders with North Macedonia and Albania, the SYRIZA-ANEL government continued its belligerent rhetoric in the hope of securing external economic payoffs. As late as December 2015, Premier Tsipras would continue targeting the EU and individual EU member states for their approach to the crisis via belligerent rhetoric, even asserting that '[if the Europeans want us carry the bodies of refugees then they should say so openly](#).'

Yet, three developments undercut the Greek strategy of blackmailing via 'waving through' irregular migrants from Turkey towards Western Europe via the Balkan corridor. Firstly, the EU concluded an agreement with Turkey, according to which the latter would maintain refugees within its territory and agree to accept anyone intercepted attempting to cross the Turkish/Greek border without approval. Secondly, Austria reached an agreement with several Western Balkan countries aimed at securing border controls and blocking irregular migrant flows. Thirdly, in April 2016, the European Commission re-entered Greece into Dublin II and asylum transfers from other EU states to Greece would gradually resume.

In the absence of the conditions necessary for stronger leverage, Greece effectively complied with demands for externalisation control through immigration detention in the European periphery. Greece reintroduced migrant/refugee detention camps, the detention of all irregular arrivals at its borders, and strict restrictions of their movement within Greek territory. Significant economic aid began flowing into Greece from March 2016 onwards while the aggressive government rhetoric of 2015 and early 2016 also disappeared for the remainder of the coalition government's term.

Conclusions

Our findings contribute to a range of existing academic and policy debates on the interplay between forced migration, interstate bargaining, and the foreign policies of EU member states. Firstly, we have identified how issue-linkage strategies feature in the strategic calculations of European refugee host states and explored specific mechanisms at play, thereby providing an analytical framework that informs a range of stakeholders on state responses to forced migration.

We have also demonstrated how Greece attempted to employ the European migrant crisis to project national interests and its domestic agenda at the EU level, thereby identifying conditions that enable coercive or co-operative bargaining strategies. Finally, we offer a more nuanced picture of the importance of forced displacement for EU member states' foreign policy by demonstrating how intra-EU politics are affected by refugee crises on the broader neighbourhood.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in the [Journal of Common Market Studies](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: Nicolas Economou / Shutterstock.com
