

NORWAY

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The Norwegian response to the refugee crisis

NORWAY RECEIVED HIGHEST NUMBER OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

In 2015 Europe has experienced one of the greatest influxes of refugees and migrants since WW2 as vast numbers of people have fled the ongoing violence in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries. The European asylum systems have consequently been put under severe pressure. Norway is one of the countries that have received the highest number of asylum seekers compared to local population in 2015. In relative terms, only six European countries received more asylum applications (January-October 2015).ⁱ

The situation has forced European countries, including Norway, to strengthen their border-control and change their migration policies in order to minimize the 'pull-effect', and gain control.

Development in the refugee situation in 2015 in Norway

Over the last few years the number of asylum applications to Norway has been relatively stable. In 2012 the total number was 9,785. The following two years numbers fluctuated between 11,000 and 12,000. By the end of November 2015 the total number of asylum applications lodged in Norway this year had reached 30,110, by far the highest number in a single year ever.ⁱⁱ

During the first months of 2015, the number of migrants seeking asylum in Norway remained relatively moderate. However, in August numbers started to rise rapidly (see figure below). In July 1 391 people applied

for asylum in Norway. The following month the number had grown to 2,325. The trend continued in September with 4,945 applications. The numbers peaked in October with 8,666, followed by a moderate decline in November, with 8,163 applicants.

People fleeing from Syria constitute the largest group of migrants seeking asylum. By the end of November 10,267 Syrian citizens had applied. However, the number of asylum seekers from countries such as Afghanistan (6,625), Iraq (2,921) and Eritrea (2,893) has also been exceptionally high over the last few months.

Like many other European countries, Norway was ill prepared for the unexpected wave of asylum seekers in 2015. Obviously, the systems in place for processing asylum applications and providing accommodation were not dimensioned for the number of migrants entering the country since August.

New policies

For many years the immigration and refugee policy has been one of the most dividing issues in Norwegian political debate. Although the main intention in the regulation of immigration to Norway has had broad support from most of the political parties, immigration, and in particular the asylum regulations, has been an area of intense debate. The rhetoric has been harsh, especially between the socialist party (SV), the liberal party (Venstre) and the Christian democrats (Kristelig folkeparti) on one side, and the right wing Progress party

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(Fremskrittspartiet) on the other. The latter has had the strictest asylum policy in Norway, and the three former have had a more liberal approach to refugees.

Fremskrittspartiet is currently a part of the government, together with the conservative party (Høyre).

As the number of asylum applications has been growing rapidly in the last months, the different parties have, however, managed to come together and have agreed on a number of measures to cope with the refugee situation. All the parties in parliament, except the socialist party (Sosialistisk Venstreparti) and the green party (Miljøpartiet de grønne) signed an agreement on November 19, asking the government to consider a number of measures intended to make the asylum regulations stricter.

Among the measures that will probably be taken as a result of this agreement are:

- reduced benefits for people living in reception centres
- issuing temporary residence permits and facilitating return if the situation in the country of origin changes
- limiting family reunification and family establishment rights for refugees

In addition, the Norwegian government has already launched other measures to gain control of the situation, e.g. introduction of a temporary border control on November 24 to prevent people without the required travel documents from entering the countryⁱⁱⁱ, and strengthening of the Directorate of immigration (UDI) through additional funding. Moreover, the authorities have discouraged asylum seekers from entering Norway via Russia – a route hitherto used by thousands of migrants. In a move criticised by civil rights NGOs, Norwegian authorities have declared Russia safe and started turning back asylum seekers with valid residence permits in Russia.^{iv}

Latest developments

During the last week of November, Norway experienced a drastic reduction in the number of asylum applications, with 968 regis-

tered applications compared to 2108 the previous week.^v The government quickly took credit for this development, claiming that the reduction was caused by the stricter policies introduced lately, while at the same time emphasizing that the numbers typically fluctuate from week to week, and that the crisis is by no means over.

The number of asylum seekers has continued to decline significantly in the beginning of December, and during the first week of December only 363 people applied for asylum in Norway.

Mid and long term perspectives on the international refugee situation and asylum system

As in other European countries, there is also a debate going on in Norway regarding the need for a more fundamental reform of the asylum system, on an international and European level. In the agreement made between the vast majority of the parties in the Norwegian parliament on November 19, the government is asked to take an initiative to review the conventions constituting the international asylum system in order to make sure the regulations are in line with the challenges caused by the refugee crises in our time. It is not clear yet how, and if, such initiatives will be taken.

ⁱ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.udi.no/en/statistics-and-analysis/statistics/asylsoknader-etter-statsborgerskap-og-maned-2015/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/introduction-of-border-controls/id2464073/>

^{iv} <http://www.thelocal.no/20151125/norway-to-clamp-down-on-asylum-system-misuse>

^v <http://www.udi.no/en/statistics-and-analysis/statistics/registered-asylum-applications-by-citizenship-top-five-in-the-last-three-weeks-2015/>