The Development of a European Asylum Policy in an Expanded European Union

Alex Cunliffe & John Wilton

Abstract

In recent years, there have been a number of attempts to harmonise European policies towards the increasing numbers of asylum seekers. Indeed, in 1997, the Amsterdam Treaty committed members of the European Union (EU) to a 2002 deadline whereby visa, asylum and immigration decisions would be transferred from Pillar III (Intergovernmental co-operation) to Pillar I (Community matters). However, this process of harmonisation, whereby member states would effectively abdicate their sovereign decision-making powers to the jurisdiction of the European Commission, must be placed in the context of a contemporary European political environment that is far from even in its reaction to asylum seekers. On May 1, 2004, ten new states from East Central Europe joined the EU and this expansion of the Union’s borders eastwards has formally shifted the focus of managing and receiving movements of asylum seekers seeking to gain access to the EU. This paper explores the extent to which it is accurate to portray current European practice in terms of the application of a ‘Fortress Europe’ wherein policies towards asylum seekers have shifted from offering protection to an emphasis on rejection and exclusion. Consideration will be given to the extent to which policies towards asylum seekers and refugees in the new Member States conflict with the concept of ‘Fortress Europe’.

The release of recent figures on the number of asylum applications in Europe has brought into sharp focus the debate surrounding the protection of refugees and European states’ legitimate concerns to control their borders. Until the early 1980s, the
number of asylum seekers lodging applications in Western Europe rarely exceeded 100,000 per annum. The vast majority of these people came from Eastern Europe and the cultural, political and economic objections to their arrival in Western Europe were not regarded as insurmountable. However, by the mid 1980s, there was an intrinsic shift in the dimension and character of asylum applications. In 1986, the number of applications was 200,000 and, by 1989, it had reached over 311,000. Moreover, an increasing proportion of these asylum seekers originated from the so-called ‘Third World’ and recipient Western European states began to perceive a more limited range of ideological advantages to open door policies.

The political events in Eastern Europe of 1989 acted as a further catalyst for asylum applications, culminating in an unprecedented peak of over 660,000 in 1992. During 1999, in excess of 425,000 people lodged an application for asylum in 20 European countries. This represented an increase of over 18% on the previous year and an increase in excess of one quarter million upon 1997 annual applications. In many countries, this burgeoning flow of applicants contributed yet further to an administrative backlog of unprocessed applications. For example, in the United Kingdom, the increase in the number of asylum applications throughout 1999, together with administrative delays in processing applications by the Home Office, resulted in over 100,000 asylum seekers awaiting decisions by January 2000.

In the light of these figures, the European Union’s reaction to this burgeoning flow of humanity has, with such Agreements as the Schengen accord, been perceived by many commentators as the application of a ‘Fortress Europe’ approach wherein the policy emphasis has shifted decisively from one of offering protection to refugees to one of rejection and exclusion. For example, Jeff Crisp notes:

“When the number of asylum applications in Western Europe began to rise in the early 1980s, the immediate response of states was to introduce what became known as ‘restrictive asylum practices’. The list of such practices is long and the rigour with which they have been applied has intensified in the course of the past 15 years. They include the introduction of visa restrictions and carrier sanctions; the application of the ‘safe third country’ and ‘safe country of origin’ concepts; interpretations of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention which excludes the victims of war and people who have been persecuted by non-state actors; the detention and deportation of asylum seekers; and the introduction of readmission agreements which allow refugee claimants to be returned to countries where they have been in transit.” (Crisp 1999a, p.6)

Crisp proceeds to outline the ‘draconian measures’ that governments have introduced
in order to deter arrivals. It is undoubtedly the case that European Governments are anxious to address the refugee problem in a ‘firm’ manner and recent statistics released by the UNHCR reveal a sharp decline in number of asylum applications in EU states in 2004. Within the environment of the European Union, few Home Office Departments appear to have been anxious to retain a liberal policy towards asylum seekers. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Gutteres is clear in his assessment of European policies:

“Though many factors may contribute to this drop, one apparent cause is the increasingly restrictive measures states have taken to limit access to asylum as they attempt to manage migration and safeguard their security.” (UNHCR 2006, p. x?)

There is the real threat that, in the desire to develop a common policy towards asylum seekers, as outlined in the Amsterdam Treaty and the more recent Tampere and Hague meetings, the harmonisation process might be of a downward character towards the lowest, common, illiberal denominator. On May 1, 2004, ten new states, primarily from East Central Europe, joined the EU and this expansion of the Union’ borders eastwards has formally shifted the focus of managing and receiving movements of asylum seekers attempting to gain access to the EU. Consideration will be given to the extent to which policies towards asylum seekers and refugees in the new Member States conflict with the concept of ‘Fortress Europe’.

STATISTICAL OVERVIEW OF ASYLUM TRENDS IN EU COUNTRIES

A brief statistical analysis of the asylum levels and trends in the last 15 years provides an insight into the nature and size of the refugee crisis in Europe. The conflict in Former Yugoslavia acted as an obvious catalyst for the huge arrival of asylum seekers from the early 1990s, culminating in over 692,000 applications in 1992 alone – the overwhelming majority (over 96%) lodged applications in the states of the European Union (EU), whilst Germany alone received over 438,000 applications. At the end of 1992, there were over 526,000 asylum applications pending in the member states of the European Union and the social, political and economic costs associated with the flow of refugees were becoming the subject of nationalist political agenda. This period heralded what many observers perceived to be a more vigorous, restrictive European attitude labelled ‘Fortress Europe’. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the rate at which the European Union has granted recognition status to asylum applicants has been
consistently lower in the 1990s than equivalent recognition rates throughout the world. This is especially the case for Germany, the largest recipient of applications where the granting of Convention or humanitarian refugee status has averaged less than 8% per annum.

Table 1: Asylum Applications: EU and Accession States (2001-2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region of Asylum</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU ‘Old’ (15)</td>
<td>394,990</td>
<td>393,450</td>
<td>309,340</td>
<td>241,000</td>
<td>212,590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU ‘New’ (10)</td>
<td>44,000</td>
<td>32,090</td>
<td>37,350</td>
<td>38,860</td>
<td>25,250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries, UNHCR, 2006

As Table 1 illustrates, the number of annual asylum applications to EU States in recent years has not only failed to reach the peak of 1992 but has been in rapid decline – a reduction of over 132,000 from 2001 to 2005 (almost 23%). These trends were replicated in the EU candidate countries between 2001 and 2002 and it would appear that a substantial number of asylum seekers chose not to remain in these countries at this time but to attempt to move on to EU states in the West. However, in 2003, the year before accession, and 2004 this trend was reversed and these 10 states, including those about to become the eastern border of the EU, received in excess of 37,000 asylum applications which represented a rise of 16% over a 12 month period. The Czech Republic (34%), Poland (34%) and Slovenia (57%) witnessed a particular rise in popularity in terms of the increase in asylum claims in these years. However, in 2005, both ‘new’ and old member states of the EU appear to have ‘harmonised’ in their enthusiasm to reduce asylum applications. Indeed, asylum applications in the European Union dropped by 16 percent in 2005, compared to 2004. The sharpest decrease was recorded in the 10 new EU member countries where claims went down by 35 percent, compared to a decrease of 12 percent in the other 15 EU countries.

FORTRESS EUROPE: RAISING THE RAMPARTS?

Although the states of the EU only receive a relatively tiny proportion of the world’s 20 million asylum seekers, refugees and people of concern to the UNHCR, it is apparent that there is a widespread fear amongst politicians and the public about the number of asylum applications. A cursory examination of large sections of the media reveals that the common image of the asylum seeker and refugee community is largely negative. In general terms, the focus has tended to be on the short term, political, economic and
social ‘costs’ of providing housing, health and social security benefits for the asylum seeker and refugee (ASR) communities.\(^1\) Within the European Union, this negative image was reflected in legislation and directives intended to limit the number of asylum seekers.

**White lists, safe 3\(^{rd}\) countries, “carriers” legislation & non state persecutors**

Historically, the movement towards a common refugee policy and/or shared responsibility for refugees was initially piecemeal. The political commitment to the creation of economic market and the aim to develop ‘an area without internal frontiers in which the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital is ensured’ was enshrined in the adoption of the Single European Act in 1987 (Guild 1999). However, in the years up to the deadline of 31 December 1992, when this was to be achieved, the tension between abolishing internal boundaries between member states whilst maintaining control over the entry of third country nationals over external frontiers remained largely unresolved. Indeed, in the anxiety to prevent the concerns of Interior Ministers about immigration and asylum from becoming obstacles to the signing of the Treaty on European Union (Maastricht), the environment chosen for policy in these areas was inter-governmental and the finished product often allowed individual member states to retain a large degree of individual control and influence over asylum policy.

In 1990 the Dublin Convention was signed (effective in 1997) by member states of the then European Community (Denmark signed in 1991). Its main thrust was to harmonise conflicting national policies towards asylum applications by ensuring that one member state only would take responsibility for an asylum claim. In order to deter people from moving around Europe in an effort to obtain the most favourable place for refuge, the Dublin Convention laid down the principle that anyone arriving without a visa seeking asylum would need to make an application in the first Convention country reached (Byrne & Shacknove 1996). This placed the administrative and financial burden in the processing of asylum applications upon the initial host state and, amongst other things, appears to have acted as a catalyst for the speedy implementation of national ‘Carriers’ legislation. Such legislation has generally taken the form of imposing fines and sanctions upon private transportation carriers for bringing in passengers without valid passport and visa documentation (Nicholson 1997). As forcibly argued elsewhere, such

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\(^1\) A number of studies (e.g. Kaye 1998, and Mollard 2001) have analysed the impact of the negative media image of asylum seekers and refugees.
legislation would appear to be incompatible with the basic spirit, if not norms of international refugee law (Jens Vedsted-Hansen 1999). Moreover, it may well be the case that such legislation has done nothing to prevent the large scale industry profiting from the illegal trafficking of people.

**Resolutions of London 1992**

In the years following the signing of the Dublin Convention, member states chose to ‘harmonise’ asylum and immigration policy through the medium of Resolutions and Conclusions. In February 1992, the Treaty on European Union directed Justice and Home Affairs Ministers to establish a framework for a European-wide asylum policy. However, in November/December of the same year, at a meeting in London, European Ministers approved two non-binding Resolutions and one Conclusion relating directly to asylum policies. The first, *Manifestly Unfounded Applications for Asylum*, allowed member states to refuse individuals application to seek asylum if the individual could have sought protection in another ‘safe’ country. The second Resolution, *Harmonized Approach to Questions Concerning Host Third Countries*, outlined the principle that, if possible, people should be sent to states beyond the boundaries of the European Union rather than returning them to states within the European Union, as outlined in the Dublin Convention.

The Third ‘Conclusion’ on ‘safe’ countries of origin was directed at accelerating the processing of applications of asylum seekers coming from countries where there was perceived to be no general serious risk of persecution.² For Elspeth Guild, these hybrid measures have questionable legal status but, for member states, Resolutions and Conclusions afford the luxury of not being accompanied by any enforcement mechanism. In other words they only acquire a legal identity if transposed into national law.

“The two Resolutions are peculiar documents in format in that they contain mandatory language and dates by which implementation is to be achieved and yet lack any legal structure for their adoption or implementation…There is no mechanism in respect of the inter-governmental measures on asylum whereby action can be taken to enforce their implementation or require a member state to adapt its legislation. Notwithstanding the existence of an implementation date in some of the measures these are in fact toothless lions in that the

² Periodically, a number of European states, including Germany and the United Kingdom have compiled ‘white lists’ of ‘safe countries’ from which asylum applications are to be denied. For example, note the ‘white list’ of so called safe states in the UK Asylum and Immigration Act 1996. Germany’s list of safe countries includes all those bordering Germany whilst France has, with reservations, classified Romania as a safe country of origin.
measures themselves, without any clear legal force and without any administrative structure to supervise and ensure implementation, in effect, constitute no more than gentlemen’s agreements.” (Elspeth Guild 1999, p. 324)

Irrespective of the legal and binding character of these Resolutions, the implicit aim was to consolidate and introduce measures to curtail asylum applications both from people who have passed through a third country outside the European Union before travelling to a member state, or from people from countries which have been determined safe according to a nationally determined ‘white list’.

If one intention of these resolutions was to reduce the number of asylum applications, a brief examination of the annual statistics from 1992 may indicate a measure of success. From the peak of 1992, the rate of annual applications to member states of the European Union had fallen by 1996 more than 60%. However, it is interesting to note that the refugee populations in Europe remained high. Germany and France, where the refugee populations were in excess of 1.2 million and 150,000 respectively, supported a ‘Joint Position on the Harmonized Application of the Definition of the Term “Refugee” in the Geneva Convention’ in November 1995 (formally approved March 1996). This attempted to allow states to limit recognition to persons persecuted only by a government and its agents. Under this interpretation, victims of persecution by non-state actors – rebel groups or extremist organisations – have no right to refugee status. It thereby threatened the status of asylum applications of people fleeing countries devastated by civil war - for example, Somalia, where state authority had totally collapsed or, in France, where certain applicants held a fear of persecution form Algerian extremist groups. Furthermore, as the UNHCR complained:

“This interpretation creates an anomalous situation in which someone targeted by the government in a civil conflict could gain asylum abroad, but not an equally innocent civilian persecuted by the opposition, as has been the case with many Algerians. If governmental authority collapses altogether – as has happened recently in Somalia or Liberia – no-one might qualify for refugee status.” (UNHCR 1995)

Periodically during the last eight years, some European states, by means of this controversial interpretation of the 1951 Convention, have denied asylum applications from Bosnian Muslims, Somalis, moderate Algerians and people who have fled Afghanistan’s Taleban.3 This is despite the objections of the UNHCR, the European

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3 For example Germany’s Federal Administrative Court has ruled that persons who fled Afghanistan’s Taleban cannot qualify for refugee status whilst Austria has deported 43 Bosnians under similar interpretations. For further details, see ‘Europe: the Debate over Asylum’, Refugees, Issue 113, UNHCR
Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and numerous civil rights groups (ECRE 1999a).

The Treaty of Amsterdam 1997

Nevertheless, the issue of asylum policy is in a process of shift away from a purely intergovernmental framework towards a more Community based decision-making environment. The Amsterdam Treaty of June 1997 brought asylum and immigration policies under EU competence and relocated these issues from the Third Pillar to the First Pillar, to be dealt with by the Commission. The Commission was charged with producing a programme for a co-ordinated approach to asylum issues including:

a. Criteria and mechanisms for determining which Member State is responsible for considering and application for asylum submitted by a national of a third country in one of the Member States.

b. Minimum standards on the reception of asylum seekers in Member States.

c. Minimum standards with respect to the qualification of nationals of third countries as refugees.

d. Minimum standards on procedures in Member States for granting or withdrawing refugee status.

e. Minimum standards for giving temporary protection to displaced persons from third countries who cannot return to their country of origin and for persons who otherwise need international protection.

f. Promoting a balance of effort between Member States in receiving and bearing the consequences of receiving refugees and displaced persons (De Jong 1999).

This was confirmed in October 1999, at a special summit of the European Council of Ministers in Tampere (Finland) to discuss Justice and Home Affairs issues where, for example, the need to create financial reserves to assist states in cases of the mass influx of refugees was raised. This summit shaped the framework in which the EU’s legislation on asylum was to be developed. The avowed agreement was:

“(to) work towards establishing a common European Asylum System, based on the full and inclusive application of the Convention, thus ensuring that nobody be sent back to persecution, i.e. maintaining the principle of non-refoulement”

As part of this process, emphasis was placed upon the development of common minimum standards whereby an asylum applicant should receive the same decision and,

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Sweden has amended its law in order to explicitly recognise that there is nothing in the 1951 Convention which would exclude refugee status for persons persecuted by non state agents whilst court rulings in the UK and the Netherlands have also confirmed this interpretation of the Convention. www.europarl.eu.int/summits/tam
by implication, treatment, irrespective of the EU state in which the application was first lodged. Indeed, this was deemed to be consistent with the principles of the Dublin Convention which clarified that individuals claiming asylum must make their application in their first EU country of entry. Unfortunately, it is often the case that any process of ‘harmonisation’ involves a trend towards the lowest common denominator. In other words, the general policy direction of member states of the European Union (and states seeking to join) appears in the past to have been a tendency to harmonise asylum policies by copying the most restrictive practices. Naturally, it remains to be seen the extent to which divergent national interests will inhibit the formation of such a common framework or whether, in the desire to harmonise, the process to harmonise asylum policy falls to the level of the lowest, most illiberal common denominator. Certainly, recent governmental reaction in the United Kingdom to the rising tide of asylum applications appears to suggest an affirmation of relatively draconian measures to inhibit the flow of refugees.

The Tampere meeting confirmed a target date of May 2004 as the deadline for the completion of this harmonisation process. This proved to be an unrealistic deadline. A number of reasons have been given to explain the failure to meet this deadline but it would be wrong to assume that the accession of ten new Members States in the same month alone threatened the process.5 Admittedly, the major principles and direction of contemporary EU asylum policy have been largely devised by the fifteen pre-enlargement Member States and the ten new Member States have been required to adopt all decisions made prior to their accession as part of the EU acquis (the body of European Union law). Indeed, the ten new member states effectively had to accept the steps towards a common asylum policy as a condition of membership. However, in many respects, the eight Central and Eastern European Countries appear to have had few difficulties in matching the restrictive thrust of the old EU member states. The movement eastwards of the EU’s borders may have geographically shifted the territorial points of entry, but the traditional thrust of asylum policy within the new Member States broadly mirrored the trend towards illiberality. Indeed, in its Global Report 2004, the UNHCR had a number of concerns about the treatment of asylum seekers in new EU border countries:

5 For a discussion of the EU’s failure to meet the deadline, see for example, Heaven Crawley, ‘Europe: Fortress or Refuge?’ Forced Migration Review , May 2005.
“As UNHCR intensified its border monitoring activities, it was observed that a number of States retained asylum-seekers in detention-like conditions in border areas, thus limiting their access to the RSD (Refugee Status Determination) procedure and to legal counselling. In a number of detention centres for asylum seekers, the UNHCR observed the absence of clear criteria governing the decision to impose detention measures, the lack of permanent interpretation services and the need to communicate effectively with detainees to give them an understanding of their rights and the obligations incumbent upon them...In other cases, asylum-seekers were simply kept in detention centres pending their deportation under bilateral readmission agreements with other states."^6

Asylum trends in new EU Members States

In recent years, the new Member States have broadly been able to amend their national asylum legislation to bring them into line with EU Directives and Dublin regulations and, as Table 2 illustrates, the recognition rates of the new accession states mirrored, if not compounded the restrictive approach of the EU.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Asylum</th>
<th>Asylum Claims Submitted</th>
<th>Convention Refugee Status Granted</th>
<th>Total Admissions (1)</th>
<th>Total Admissions per 1000 Inhabitants</th>
<th>Recognition Rank (industrialised countries ) (2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>1,715</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>43,191</td>
<td>1,647</td>
<td>2,503</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>48,996</td>
<td>1,694</td>
<td>7,706</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Rep.</td>
<td>69,263</td>
<td>1,144</td>
<td>1,144</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>44,401</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>15,311</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU (15)</td>
<td>3,195,440</td>
<td>493,022</td>
<td>1,277,414</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Number of persons granted refugee or humanitarian status, refugees admitted under

It is interesting to note the degree to which recognition rates in the new East Central European Accession states have been poor. In terms of rank order, it is apparent that these states can be placed amongst the most restrictive in their admissions policies. From a total list of 38 industrialised states assessed by the UNHCR, Hungary has been the most ‘liberal’ in its admissions policy (ranked 22) whilst states such as Latvia and Estonia ranked amongst the three most restrictive states in the industrialised world. Indeed, even in comparison with the ‘old’ 15, the number of people granted protection in the new accession states has been very limited. In these terms, it is apparent that in the years up to 2004 the accession states did not counter the concept of a ‘Fortress Europe’ in terms of the development of a restrictive EU wide asylum policy.

Moreover, in 2005 and the first full year of entry to the EU, these states as a whole have continued to pursue relatively, restrictive admissions policies. The number of asylum applications lodged with these states fell by 35% (in comparison with 2004) and the annual admission rate for 2005 was 0.3 per 1000 inhabitants. It should be noted, however, that within this general trend, there is some diversity amongst the new member states. For example, the number of asylum applications in Slovenia increased in 2005 whilst there is some evidence that the admissions rate in the Czech Republic has increased in recent months. Nevertheless, the general profile of the new States is broadly restrictive.

In November 2004, the EU adopted the ‘Hague Programme’ which focussed upon the development of EU justice and home affairs policy for the following 5 years. Within this programme, commitments were made to further co-ordinate and integrate immigration and asylum policies for EU members. It stipulates that by 2010, there should be a common asylum policy executed by a single EU institution through a single asylum policy. In order to reach consensus and make this deadline more realistic than the 2004 one originally set by the Amsterdam Treaty, it has been agreed that decisions on immigration and asylum will not require a unanimous vote but will be taken by a ‘qualified majority’. In other words, an agreement can be secured by 55% of EU members, including at least 15 countries which make up at least 65% of the population. Within this structure, the vote of the new EU accession states may be influential.
CONCLUSION

Exploring the metaphor that Europe’s approach to asylum seekers represents a ‘Fortress’ like approach in its reaction, the thrust of many European initiatives would suggest that the castle is surrounding itself with a deeper moat and the drawbridge is ever raising. Carrier Liabilities legislation, the Dublin Convention, Resolutions and attempts to interpret the Convention whereby asylum seekers who have a well founded fear of persecution from non state actors cannot be classified as genuine asylum seekers are amongst some of the ‘initiatives’ which would suggest that only those people who can provide documented evidence of swimming prowess (for the moat) or Olympic style high jumping qualities (for the walls) may enter the castle.

The burgeoning flow of refugee applications to Europe over the last 15 years has not, generally speaking, heralded the introduction of government policies reflecting an automatically welcoming reaction to those in fear of persecution. Within the European Union, the pressures to harmonise asylum policy, evident in the Amsterdam Treaty do provide perhaps increased scope for independent judicial consideration of asylum decisions. However, on the whole, it would appear to be the case that European states are increasingly anxious to address the problems of contemporary refugee movements by discouraging potential asylum seekers from crossing international boundaries. The accession of the East Central European states to the EU in 2004 would not appear to have countered the thrust of policies and directives which seek to limit asylum seekers and refugees. Historically, these states have not had a progressive approach towards the granting of refugee status and recognition rates in these countries have generally been very poor. In these terms, the deadline of 2010 for the harmonisation of EU asylum policy is unlikely to be stalled by the new members.

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