



PRESS RELEASE – THE WORK OF THE ASYLUM SERVICE IN 2016

In 2016, the Asylum Service registered 51,091 applications for international protection. This number does not include the approximately 15,000 applications the full registration of which will be completed in 2017. The four (4) main countries of origin of asylum seekers are Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In the first quarter of 2016, 5,586 asylum applications were registered, while in the last quarter the number was 20,609 registered applications. According to the most recent data of EUROSTAT, in the third quarter of 2016, Greece had the largest number of asylum seekers per million of population after Germany. While in the whole of the EU there were 702 asylum seekers per million of inhabitants, in Greece the equivalent figure was 1,152 asylum seekers per million of inhabitants.

At the end of 2014, the Asylum Service had 218 members of staff, while at the end of 2015 the equivalent figure stood at 290 individuals. As of 1 January 2017, the Asylum Service was staffed with 650 individuals. This tripling of the Service's human resources was mainly due to the speedy absorption of European funds and to the assistance of the Council on Staff Selection (ASEP). The Asylum Service has received assistance especially from the Hellenic Police (with the deployment of 25 Police personnel who deal with administration and conduct security checks of asylum seekers) and from the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) with the deployment of experts who assist in the procedures followed on the islands, in the Relocation procedure and in the Dublin procedure.

At the end of 2015, the Asylum Service operated from nine different locations throughout the country. At the end of 2016, it operates from 17 locations. The new locations where there are now regional asylum offices or asylum units include the islands of Chios, Samos, Leros, Kos, Crete and the city of Corinth. It should be noted that the Asylum Service does not pay rent for any of its buildings since office space has been donated from other bodies, mostly of the public sector.

Following the closing of the northern borders in February 2016, and in order to allow access to the asylum procedure to the tens of thousands of refugees who remained in the country and who had originally wished to depart, the Asylum Service embarked on an exercise of mass and speedy pre-registration. In the course of the exercise, this population was 'mapped' out, and its further management was organized (in other words, relocation, family reunification or the asylum procedure for those who are entitled to it). The exercise provided an important outlet for the anxiety of the asylum seekers; without it there would have been, without a doubt, much more tension and violence in the camps. By the end of February, in accordance with the Asylum Service's own commitment, the procedures for all those who participated in the pre-registration will have been completed.

Relocation remains the big challenge. As of 27 December, the Asylum Service had registered 21,431 applications from individuals who were eligible to participate in the

program, while it had received 13,634 pledges from other EU Member-States. Thus, there are 9,000 individuals who are ready for relocation and for whom there are no pledges, while the acceptance by Member-States of outgoing requests, which should be done within 10 working days, in practice takes much longer – up to six months. While Greece has sent to other Member-States 13,345 requests, 10,712 of these have been accepted and only 7,000 individuals have departed from Greece. There are serious delays even after the acceptance of outgoing requests for relocation. This is because most Member-States have not arranged for the creation of sufficient reception places, and consequently they request the postponement of the transfer of the relocated asylum seekers. In practice, these delays mean that the pressure on the reception facilities in Greece are not relieved sufficiently quickly, while the Greek administration is obliged at the same time to explain to the asylum seekers the reasons for these delays. The countries which are the destination of most relocations are France, the Netherlands, Finland, Romania, Portugal and Germany, while the countries which have refused to accept any refugees at all are Hungary and Poland. Up until August, several countries had consistently refused to accept unaccompanied minors. However, the publicization of this issue by the Greek authorities had a positive effect. Thus, by the end of 2016, 437 outgoing requests for the relocation of unaccompanied minors have been sent, mostly to Finland, and of these 254 have been accepted. The main problem is the existence of hundreds of unaccompanied minors, mostly Afghans, who are not eligible for the relocation program. The Asylum Service encourages the Member-States who really wish to help, to extend the program to other nationalities as well.

With reference to the Dublin Regulation and the relevant procedures, the National Dublin Unit sent in 2016 4,886 outgoing take-charge requests for family reunification. Of these, 2,462 have been accepted up to now while, conversely, 1,001 have been rejected. Concerning the latter, the Asylum Service has requested reexamination from the other Member-States. 1,107 individuals have travelled to the country of final destination. At the same time, the National Dublin Unit received in 2016 4,415 incoming requests for return to Greece (mostly from Hungary). Of these, 97% is based on the criterion of first country of entry. However, only three individuals have actually been returned to Greece.

With reference to the asylum procedure within the framework of the EU-Turkey Agreement, by 8 January 2017, 11,511 international protection claims had been registered, 3,756 claims had been rejected at the first instance including cases of discontinuation of the asylum procedure owing to explicit withdrawal on the part of the asylum seekers, while in 5,144 cases it was judged that the asylum seekers in question would remain in Greece. As of the beginning of January, 100 case workers from the Asylum Service were working on the islands, while the Member-States had deployed 45 case workers through EASO as well as the necessary interpreters.

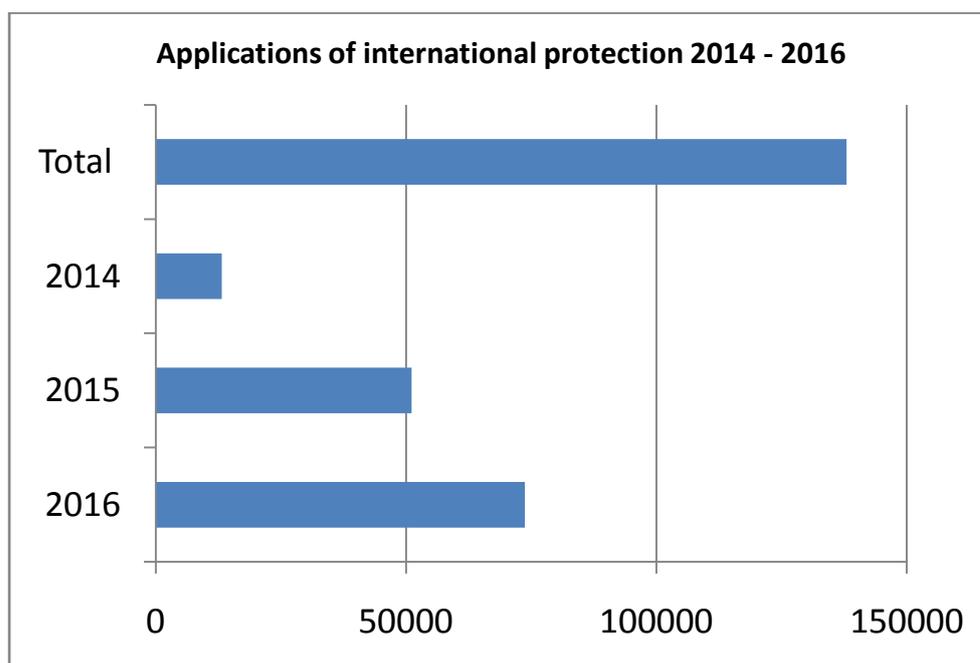
The Asylum Service sets as its aim on the one hand to prioritize vulnerable persons, and on the other hand to avoid separating extended families, so as to alleviate as much as possible the pain of being uprooted and to facilitate the integration of the refugees in the host societies, either in Greece or in the other Member-States which will accept them. As to the rapidity of the procedures, every effort is being put into improving this. However, rapidity should not compromise the justice and the quality of the asylum procedure. As the European Commission has noted, during recent years, very important steps have been taken in Greece concerning procedural guarantees including, among others, the examination of asylum claims by specialized staff, the quality of the decisions and the existence of sufficient interpretation services.

On 9 May 2016, Europe Day, the Asylum Service’s one-day conference was held with the following theme: “The Future of Asylum in Europe”. The subjects that were discussed included the application of the concept of “safe third country” with special reference to the EU-Turkey Agreement, and the creation of a European asylum system. At the same time, the photo exhibition “The Itinerary” was held with the contributions of eleven eminent photo journalists.

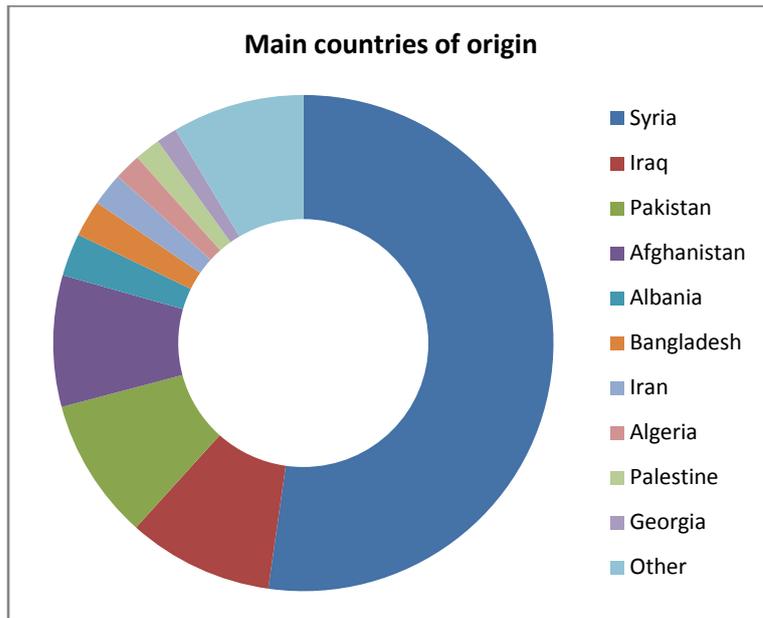
The staff of the Asylum Service, each member from the position that he/she holds, continues the daily struggle. The aims of the Asylum Service for the year 2017 include ensuring the quality of all procedures, especially as regards the asylum procedure within the framework of the EU-Turkey Agreement, the realization of a legal aid program for asylum seekers, ensuring the continuing training of the staff, and ensuring the speedier examination of the international protection claims. The Asylum Service thanks all those who assist it in its work, such as the various departments of the Ministry of Migration Policy, the Hellenic Police, EASO, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization on Migration (IOM), state actors such as the Council on Staff Selection (ASEP), regional and local authorities, as well as Non-Governmental Organizations.

More information can be obtained at asylo.gov.gr – especially for the Asylum Service’s statistics: http://asylo.gov.gr/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Greek-Asylum-Service-statistical-data_December2016_en.pdf

Graph 1: Total registered applications for international protection 2013-2016



Graph 2: Main countries of origin of applicants for international protection



Graph 3: International protection applications per asylum office

