



End of Year Reflection: From Refugee Camp to Incubator Village

Having decreased in number again this year, [135,000](#) irregular migrants came to Europe in 2018. At first sight a decline may seem positive but, looking deeper, this is not the case. For example, in Turkey alone, where [3.3](#) million Syrian war-refugees were already staying, their number increased by more than [200,000](#). This means that Europe has successfully defended its “[fortress](#)” but has insufficiently [shared](#) responsibility.

Large numbers of desperate people arriving to Europe, regrettably, induced a sentiment of insecurity to its societies and populist politicians have handily used this opportunity to generate a political narrative of [fear](#). Those opposing their message unfortunately did not counter this development. Instead of creating an [alternative](#) narrative of trust, they mostly generated their own story of fear, namely to fear populism.

The outcome is a refugee policy which strongly focuses on reducing the pull-factors of migration by [offering](#) deplorable reception conditions, [hindering](#) family reunification and by [sending](#) vulnerable people back home. This is completed by an ongoing “[discussion](#)” about “[regional disembarkation platforms](#)” and “[controlled centers](#)” to prevent a further influx of migrants.

From the perspective of advanced rich European final destination countries, it is indeed very [expensive](#) to integrate the many newcomers who [lack](#) the skills the labor markets require. This implies that, whenever possible, educating migrants in their country of origin would mostly be a better option than to do this after their arrival in Europe. However, allowing only educated people to migrate from poorer countries embeds the risky shadow-side of [brain-drain](#). Still, for war refugees there is only one option available, namely to help them and optimize their integration or their preparation for a future return.

Looking at [Greece](#) where, as opposed to [Italy](#) and [Spain](#), mostly war refugees instead of economically motivated migrants seek asylum, the circumstances look very dim. Only [one-third](#) of the [80,000](#) residing migrants currently live in permanent accommodation such as apartments. Most others live in refugee camps, face extremely limited [employment](#) chances and (since the Balkan Route is closed) have no option to travel onward. This means that, beyond finding temporary shelter, there currently is no future perspective for them. Nevertheless there are more people entering every day, partly because the [Turkish](#) economy is slowing down. As a result, it is to be expected that also next year, once again, substantially more asylum-seekers will arrive in Greece.

Europe is at the same time [aging](#) rapidly and in numerous places (especially [rural](#) ones) attracting additional (preferably young) people is becoming [vital](#) for their [existence](#). Furthermore, widely available Internet technology does meanwhile allow the relocation of education and employment to almost anywhere. This means that bridging the refugees' skills-gap to the requirements of the European labor markets and their adaptation to European cultural values can potentially be done in any environment where extra people are welcome. By giving refugee families the choice to relocate from refugee camps to low-living-cost "[incubator villages](#)" and by maximizing the investment in their education and work experience, great synergy can be achieved.

Rural incubation represents a narrative of trust. It is based on participation in and [contribution](#) to small, personal-interaction driven communities. The example of [Riace](#), although recently attacked by the new Italian government, proves that this can be harmonious and feasible. Unlike separated urban parallel societies, rural populations focus more on personal integrity than on individualism, they expect empathy and solidarity instead of exclusion, and finally they in general prefer reciprocal acceptance and compassion over dominance.

After three years of developing fear, it is high time for Europe to rebuild trust and take its responsibility. Only this way can it reverse fragmentation and become united. There is a great [opportunity](#) for Europe's rural "grassroots" communities in exploring refugee incubation and creating a more sustainable future for themselves. I therefore hope that 2019 will bring such light instead of more darkness.

Johannes Cornelis (Hans) van Nieuwkerk

www.refival.org

www.docs.refival.org