**DSCTC/CDSDG**

019 JOINT 17 E

Original : English



NATO Parliamentary Assembly

SUB-COMMITTEE ON TRANSATLANTIC DEFENCE AND SECURITY COOPERATION (DSCTC)

AND

SUB-COMMITTEE ON DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE (CDSDG)

**MISSION REPORT**

**SKOPJE, THESSALONIKI**

**and athens**

**27 - 29 JUNE 2016**

www.nato-pa.int January 2017

This Mission Report is presented for information only and does not represent the official view of the Assembly. This report was prepared by Ethan Corbin, Director of the Defence and Security Committee.

# Introduction

1. From 27 to 30 June 2016, a 15-member parliamentary delegation, representing eight NATO member states and led by Sverre Myrli (Norway), visited Skopje, Thessaloniki, and Athens. The mission covered a host of issues central to the two southeast Europe nations, particularly the civil disruptions in Skopje in reaction to protracted political turmoil in the country, and the growing refugee crisis overwhelming Greek institutions.

2. Over the course of its slate of meetings in Skopje, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly delegation learned the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)[[1]](#footnote-1) is caught in a prolonged political crisis. Short of a more active involvement by NATO and the EU, this situation carries with it a continued and serious risk of destabilisation. Popular protests marked the parliamentarians’ visit as thousands of people demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the pace of reform in the country in front of the Parliament. Members of the delegation pressed their counterparts from FYROM to put in place a concerted effort to enact significant structural reforms, particularly when it comes to the rule of law, to rebuild unity in the fractured state.

3. Officials in Skopje in turn called on NATO and the EU to do more to show the membership option not only remains on the table, but also lies ahead in the near future. They welcomed Montenegro’s upcoming accession to the Alliance, and contrasted this with Skopje’s succession of 17 annual cycles of the Membership Action Plan (MAP). Sverre Myrli, while acknowledging Skopje’s frustration, stressed the importance of delivering on domestic reforms: “It is frustrating that the name issue remains a primary obstacle to bringing the country into NATO. Nevertheless, while seeking a solution to this problem, we will need to see a paralleled political will for reform in Skopje to expedite the process as well.”

4. After their meetings in Skopje, the delegation drove down to Thessaloniki, to visit an army‑administered refugee camp set up on the outskirts of the city. Greece is hosting over 60,000 refugees caught in limbo as access to the north remains closed, forcing them to choose between registering for potential relocation through the EU refugee plan or applying for asylum in Greece. The delegation learned the country has already invested hundreds of millions of euros in building camps, and is spending over EUR 2.5 million a day to care for refugees.

5. “Greece is committed to treating these people with the dignity and respect they deserve until more long-term solutions become clear. We must all remember what these people are fleeing”, Christos Karagiannidis, member of the Greek parliament and head of the Greek delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, told his counterparts from other NATO nations.

6. The parliamentary delegation visited two of the several dozen camps in Greece set up to help accommodate refugees stranded in the country after its northern borders to the Balkans closed in Spring 2016. Over 900,000 refugees made their way through the eastern Mediterranean route in 2015, raising by well over 1000% the number of people attempting to cross through Greece to destinations further north in the European Union. The delegation learned 75% of the refugees currently in Greece have fled Syria.

7. Some of the financial burden is being eased through emergency funds being made available by the European Union, but not nearly enough to cover the cost. To date, officials noted, out of the €500 million in assistance pledged by Brussels, Athens has received only about half.

# Skopje

## Euro-Atlantic integration

8. A consistent theme throughout the delegation’s meetings in Skopje with government officials and parliamentarians was the persistence of strong support for NATO integration among the people and the political elite. The country continues to enjoy high-level cooperation with the Alliance, mainly via the framework of annual cycles of the MAP, which was offered to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia back in 1999.

9. The delegation learned that Skopje sees itself as a regional and international security partner due to its participation in international peace missions. As **Nikola Poposki**, Minister of Foreign Affairs, told the delegation, some 3,000 of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’s armed forces have participated in various missions over the years. Minister of Defence, **Zoran Jolevski**, reminded the delegation that, until recently, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was in fact the fourth largest troop contributor to NATO’s ISAF mission in Afghanistan. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia armed forces also provide important logistical support to the KFOR mission. **Sasho Akjimoski**, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Security, also noted his country’s substantial contribution to European security by playing a critical role in handling the 2015-2016 refugee and migration crisis.

10. Minister Jolevski noted, however, that Russia is actively seeking to prevent further NATO enlargement in the Balkans. Therefore, he urged NATO member states to speed up the Montenegro integration process and to activate the MAP with Bosnia and Herzegovina. He also expressed his support for closer cooperation between NATO and Serbia. During a working breakfast at the Turkish Embassy in Skopje, which is currently serving as the NATO Contact Point Embassy in the country, members of the NATO PA delegation as well as Allied ambassadors residing in Skopje highlighted the support their respective countries gave to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’s bid for NATO membership. The working group agreed that NATO membership for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia would increase stability in the broader region as well as help stabilise the domestic situation in the country. The general feeling was that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has been neglected for too long.

11. Several Allied ambassadors also stressed the country has made significant achievements in terms of necessary defence sector reforms, as well as progress toward meeting interoperability standards. Several Allied ambassadors stressed the need to reinforce and encourage the country’s membership aspirations. Without proper international attention, several ambassadors warned this multi-ethnic country faces a serious risk of destabilisation, which could easily have a destabilising effect on the entire region.

12. Frustration over the lack of NATO membership perspective is growing in the country, and the sentiment was palpable during the delegation’s visit. The delegation learned that popular support for NATO has dropped from over 90% to over 70%. **Ermira Mehmeti**, Head of the Delegation to the NATO PA, admitted that it is a challenge for NATO-friendly voices within the country to uphold the same level of public interest and support to continue the necessary efforts toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Minister Poposki warned that the situation concerning NATO integration is turning into a vicious circle: the longer the membership is postponed, the more internal problems emerge, which in turn makes it harder to convince the Allies to support membership. However, some Allied diplomats were positive that domestic support for NATO integration will remain high, not least because of certain ethnic calculations: Ethnic Macedonians see NATO as a guarantor of the country’s territorial integrity, while ethnic Albanians are hoping that NATO would protect them from discrimination.

13. Foreign minister Poposki argued that the diplomatic standoff with Greece over the unresolved name issue is the sole reason preventing the country’s membership in the Alliance. Government officials and parliamentarians in Skopje regretted Greece’s decision not to abide by the 2011 ruling of the International Court of Justice, which rebuked Athens for vetoing Skopje’s NATO membership aspirations. On the other hand, some Allied ambassadors commended the recent Skopje-Athens cooperation on the refugee issue. Parliamentarians in Skopje also noted that economic and people‑to-people relations with Greece are indeed excellent. They asked the delegation to convey the message of reassurance to their Greek colleagues that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has no territorial claims vis-à-vis Greece.

14. The delegation learned, however, that support for EU integration remains very high. FYROM officials stressed that visa liberalisation agreement with the EU has had a considerably positive impact on the country. Minister Poposki said that Skopje, while supporting Ukraine’s territorial integrity, does not believe in the policy of economic sanctions against Russia and has not aligned its foreign policy with the EU in this regard. In any case, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’s sanctions on Russia would hardly make an impact, the minister argued. Allied ambassadors in Skopje were concerned that the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU will affect the EU enlargement process.

## Political crisis and reform agenda

15. The NATO PA visit to Skopje took place amidst a protracted domestic political crisis – the so‑called “Colourful revolution” – which has engulfed the country since May 2015 because of a wiretapping incident. While there is a general agreement between major political players that new elections are necessary, the opposition was concerned that the government has not made sufficient steps to rectify the existing electoral system and to ensure that any upcoming elections would be free and fair. The ruling party representatives complained that making necessary legislative changes is difficult because the opposition has chosen to boycott parliament. The delegation also heard that the crisis is having a very negative effect on the economy, while also accelerating the costly brain drain on the country.

16. Some Allied ambassadors argued that the political crisis and attendant social unrest will be difficult to resolve because civil society activists lead the protests and coordinate through social media, while the negotiations take place among representatives of traditional political parties. The delegation had the opportunity to witness popular protests in Skopje as thousands of people demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the pace of reform in the country in front of the parliament. Some international and local interlocutors told the delegation that, to end the crisis, the country’s elites need to develop a new political culture and to increase dialogue with civil society.

17. Several delegation members stressed the lack of progress on Euro-Atlantic integration cannot justify the violations of the rule of law and media freedom. The delegation heard that the Special Prosecutor’s Office – a new institution widely praised for its commitment to eradicate high-level corruption – lacks adequate government support. It is imperative that the Special Prosecutor can continue her work without being obstructed, in addition to having sufficient funding and personnel. The delegation heard the judicial sector in the country generally lacks independence. NATO lawmakers pressed their counterparts from FYROM to put in place a concerted effort to enact significant structural reforms, particularly when it comes to the rule of law, to rebuild unity in the fractured state.

18. Border control and handling the refugee/migrant flow remains a priority for officials in Skopje. In recent years, more than a million refugees/migrants passed through the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the delegation heard. The numbers of people crossing the country have dropped dramatically since the closure of borders across the region earlier in 2016. The delegation learned that, at the time of their visit, only about 200 people remain stranded inside the country. FYROM officials and parliamentarians were largely satisfied by the way the country’s institutions handled the crisis. **Mitko Chavkov**, Minister of Interior, said that the country’s border management agency has undergone comprehensive reform and developed close ties with international partners, including Frontex. In addition to handling the refugee/migration crisis, it has achieved very good results in disrupting cross-border organised crime and human, weapon and drug trafficking activities, the Minister said.

19. Nevertheless, Minister Chavkov also stressed that the border management agency still lacks certain material-technical capabilities and assets and appealed to the representatives of NATO member states to consider increasing assistance to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in this field. Defence Minister Jolevski also noted that the country continues its defence and security sector reforms. In particular, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is considering ways to increase the military reserve by making the voluntary service more attractive.

# Greece

20. The Greek delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly invited the delegation to visit the country to examine the status of the refugee crisis in Greece and to get a better insight into the broader impact on the region and on Europe as a whole. Throughout its visit to Greece, the delegation learned about the role of the Greek government and Frontex in the execution of the EU immigration plan, as well as the general humanitarian and security situation among the refugee population in the country.

## Thessaloniki

21. After the several-hours' drive down from Skopje to Thessaloniki, the delegation stopped at the **Diavata Refugee camp**. Diavata is a former military base recently converted to host temporary refugee facilities by the Greek government. The camp opened on 24 February 2016 in the frenzy to respond to the growing waves of refugees and migrants exploiting the eastern Mediterranean route. While at the beginning of the crisis, the camps were designated as hot spots for registration and the administration of some basic services, as the refugees were seeking to move north, often to Germany or Sweden, the situation changed dramatically with the closure of the borders into the Balkans.

22. Parliamentarians learned that the central Macedonia region of northern Greece alone had built 20 refugee camps. Currently, Macedonia is hosting about 25% of all of Greece’s refugee population. Camp officials noted that 12 of the 20 camps were former military bases refitted to host the refugee populations. The outfitting and management of the camps is a complicated process organised between the Greek Interior and Defence Ministries, but the military coordinates the daily running of all of the camps. The provision of sufficient tents, sleeping bags, water, waste facilities, food, and access to communications facilities was proving difficult, but officials noted significant improvements had been made. In addition, briefers noted that the government was also using former industrial sites for camp locations due to their proximity to cities and, therefore, stronger cell networks, which are vital links for migrants and refugees trying to maintain a link with their families back home.

23. Camp administrators briefed the delegation on the refugee situation in Greece more broadly since the closure of the Balkan passage as well as the more specific details regarding the Diavata camp. They noted that the total number of refugees in the country at the time of the visit exceeded 57,600 with more still coming every day, though the volume of refugee flows was down significantly since the implementation of the Turkey-EU deal and the subsequent NATO operation in the Aegean Sea. Syrians comprise 74% of the current population, with Afghans and Iraqis making up the bulk of the remaining 26%. Camp officials also noted that while Syrian refugees were mostly families, Afghans and Iraqis were mostly single men. There were a relatively small number of unaccompanied minors in the refugee population of the camp.

24. The delegation learned that it is likely that 80 to 90% of the current population will get asylum and integrate into Europe, meaning very few would be repatriated to Turkey. To get into the camps, all the refugees had already passed through mandatory registration at the EU hot spots. As such, all persons in the camp had the necessary documentation with them. Camp officials noted the stark choice all of them faced by the time they arrived in a camp like Diavata: 1.) Register to be relocated; 2.) Remain in Greece and hope for asylum in the country; or, 3.) Go back to their country of origin. No option, officials noted, would be easy.

25. To give the delegation an idea of the size and scope of the humanitarian operation the Greek government is undertaking, briefers noted that it costs about €2.3 million a month just to maintain basic camp operations. Breaking some of these costs down, officials noted that it costs €5.72 per day to feed each refugee and about €20,000 to clean each camp. Inside the camp there were only recreational activities at the time of the visit. Officials noted, however, that school-age children would be incorporated into the Greek public school system at the beginning of the academic year.

26. UNHCR officials noted that most of the refugees wanted to begin a new life in Europe, while only a smaller percentage were seeking to return to their countries after peace was established. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was directly operating services to administer humanitarian provisions, psychological assistance, and hygiene. The ICRC was also administering the efforts of a local university to help facilitate recreational activities for children. Greek police was running general camp security.

## Athens

27. Early in the morning the following day, the delegation was driven over to the Piraeus Port area of Athens. Prior to their meeting with Frontex, whose main office is in the area, the delegation was given a tour of a large refugee camp right in the port. The **Skaramagas Refugee Camp** is home to approximately 3,000 refugees. As the delegation walked through the camp, they learned of the government-run facilities as well as the activities of the various NGOs operating in the camp. Much like the previous day in the Diavata camp, the clear majority of the refugees in the camp came from Syria, with the bulk of the rest being from Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of the conditions for food, shelter, and entertainment paralleled those witnessed in Diavata the previous day. Many delegates spoke with various refugees in the camp.

28. **FRONTEX** - The following day Frontex’s Athens Liaison Office in Piraeus welcomed the delegation to continue discussion on the various response efforts to the refugee crisis in Greece and the region. Officials noted that Frontex was established by the European Union to help manage, but not to substitute national authorities in any region. Officials noted that Frontex has been operating throughout the Union since 2005; and is governed by a management board consisting of all 28 voting member states. The 2016 budget equalled €250 million, and the agency employed and deployed approximately 313 staff.

29. After a brief presentation of the facilities and office in Piraeus port, the Frontex official began discussing the various levels of cooperation supporting Frontex’s work in response to the refugee crisis in the eastern Mediterranean. To deal with the crisis, the EU developed the *hotspot* concept in 2015, whose main objective was to coordinate various EU agencies and local member state authorities’ efforts and thereby increase efficiency. Hotspots work from interception/rescue to processing for residency/asylum; in Greece, Frontex implements the concept in cooperation with Operation Poseidon Sea. There are five Greek Islands currently serving as hotspots. The EURTFs (Regional Task Forces) coordinate hotspots’ activities providing a platform for inter-EU agency coordination – e.g. since last year, Frontex has been coordinating between EUROPOL, EUROJUST, EASO, FRA and the European Commission as well as the Hellenic Authorities to deal with the refugee surge.

30. Operation Poseidon Sea is a Frontex operation to assist patrolling coastal waters in the Eastern Aegean between Greece and Turkey. European Union member states assist the operation by deploying additional maritime surveillance assets in the waters between the Greek and Turkish borders. Poseidon Sea is Frontex’s main operational activity in the Mediterranean region.The concept of the operation encompasses border surveillance, surveillance and reconnaissance efforts, interagency informational sharing/intelligence; identification and registration support (document verification), and database checks. In the case of readmission of refugees or migrants within the parameters of the EU-Turkey agreement, Frontex supports these efforts via the provision of buses, aircraft, and maritime vessels. Frontex also coordinates and assists NATO MARCOM with its current maritime operation in the eastern Mediterranean as well.

31. The delegation learned some of the personnel in Greece have been relocated to Italy as a result of the shifting of the refugee flows. Frontex officials noted the agency was able to scale up and down its coordination efforts in response to the shifting concentration of the refugee flows.

32. The delegation asked several questions of their Frontex interlocutors, from the status of the new European and Border and Coast Guard, and how Frontex would be absorbed in this, to the officials’ understanding of how Daesh terrorist fighters may be able to infiltrate the system. Officials noted that they were waiting for greater detail about the articulation of the new agency. In addition, they stated that no system is perfect, but that they were doing their best to identify refugees as best they can. They noted that hotspots are currently significantly overcrowded, which delays registrations as well as any kind of repatriation. They noted their cooperation with Turkey as essential. As one Frontex official noted: “The problem doesn’t start in Turkey and Greece; these countries just serve as key transit points. As a result, we will have to work closer together to find a solution to benefit not only the regional states, but also the waves of refugees. It is clear, however, there will be no long-term solution until we find a political solution to the war in Syria.”

33. Another delegation member asked about interdiction and punishment procedures as well as counterfeit identification. Asking specifically whether Frontex has any standing assets or if it is totally dependent upon member state contributions, officials responded that Frontex does not have any standing assets; all are contributions. This could change, he continued, with the new Border and Coast Guard agency, but this remains to be seen. Currently Frontex can only lease some assets (i.e. this year they leased some fixed wing aircraft).

34. Regarding counterfeiting detection, Frontex officials noted they work with member state experts to help identify the false documents. Briefers told the delegation that, to date, inter-agency cooperation has resulted in the capture of 650 counterfeiters - 450 caught in Greece and 200 in Turkey, all of whom are currently in prison. Frontex officials also stressed their strong levels of coordination – from intelligence gathering to prosecution - with both Greece and Turkey to break down existing smuggling networks.

35. **Greek Parliament –** The delegation was welcomed at the Hellenic Parliament in the afternoon for a slate of meetings with the Greek government officials in charge of managing the burdens imposed on the Greek state by the successive and growing waves of refugees over the past two years. Joining the group of Greek legislators was Philippe Leclerc, currently serving as the Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner in Greece. All focused on the challenges at hand as well as highlighting the steps that needed to be taken.

36. **Konstantinos Douzinas**, Chairman of the Standing Committee on National Defence and Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Parliament, began by reminding the delegation that Greece is in a state of paralleled emergencies – economic, political, and, now, the burdens of welcoming refugees and migrants. He highlighted a few statistics to underscore his statement, noting that Greece’s GDP has dropped 27% over the past few years, unemployment hovered around 35% (with youth unemployment reaching as high as 60%). The country’s string of debt crises and the political turmoil that has accompanied them along the way has resulted in a staggering degradation of wealth throughout the country, Dr Douzinas continued, dropping, for example, average family wealth by approximately 40%. On top of this, he said, well over 1.3 million refugees have been attempting to flow through Greece, placing a large additional humanitarian burden.

37. At the beginning of the refugee crisis, he continued, the EU was manifestly unprepared to handle the problem. “Greece decided to welcome the people rather than raise walls – and we were pleasantly surprised by the attitude of our own people in the effort to handle the problem,” he noted. The decisions by states north of Greece to close their borders in the face of the refugee waves forced the Greek government to mobilise quickly in response, he said. Efforts to move these people to reception centres and camps throughout the country is an attempt to give “a measure of dignity to all the refugees as they experience a period of great hardship.”

38. He continued by stating that the EU-Turkey agreement helped dramatically reduce the flow of refugees into the country. In addition, the NATO-led operation has led to a measured success in terms of ISR-sharing, but “it has also revived long-standing problems with both Greece and Turkey about where each country’s area of responsibility lies, resulting in the limitation of some over-flight rights by NATO forces.”

39. The EU and Greece were unprepared for the refugee crisis, he concluded, “but as a country and a party we take special measures to protect these people in full commitment to international law in support of human rights.”

40. Several members of the delegation questioned Dr Douzinas about the potential security challenges associated with the large waves of refugees, particularly in the wake of the string of terrorist attacks across Europe. He answered by stating that the Greek government had verified information that at least two of the Paris attackers came through Greece and were registered. He noted that the database organisation by INTERPOL and member states has been considerably tightened in the wake of the attacks. He continued by stating: “We understand the magnitude of the problem and work very hard to coordinate all available assets to address it, but we also need to understand the homegrown element of terrorism and be careful about how we present the problem which can tarnish the image of the refugees who deserve compassion and respect.” He concluded by noting: “There is a clear rise in racism and xenophobia in general throughout Europe as a backlash to the rise of terrorist attacks; we need to be careful of such reactions.”

41. Another member of the delegation asked about the associated costs to handling the large numbers of refugees in Greece. Dr Douzinas responded by saying that the official figures given by the Greek government state that the refugee crisis costs approximately 2 billion euros/year. He continued by stating that there are several EU funds mobilised to assist Greece’s deal with the refugees, noting that the total pledged at the time of the visit was about €500 million, of which only 250 million had been received. He also stated that the Greek government is aware of the need to invest in facilities to allow for these populations to remain for a significantly longer period than expected.

42. When asked about the long-standing dispute between Greece and FYROM over the official name the government in Skopje can use for the country, Mr. Douzinas noted: “We believe this issue must be resolved as soon as possible. We believe that the current political turmoil in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is not good for either the people of the country or the entire region. Greece does not want “Macedonia” being used in the official name of that country – hopefully there can be mutual compromises to settle the problem, then I think the Greek government would be happy to support FYROM’s NATO membership.”

43. **Kouroumplis Panagiotis** began his remarks by condemning the recent Istanbul terrorist attacks, stating that Europe is at a critical juncture for peace and security. He then noted that the refugee crisis is not regional, but global – the various conflicts fuelling it will continue for at least the short-term. Thus, he told the delegation that all EU and NATO member states face similar questions and concerns.

44. He then stressed the need for all of Europe to help address the sources of the conflicts through political, economic, and diplomatic assistance. “The burden of the refugee challenge should not rest on the shoulders of our region alone,” he stressed. He reminded the delegation that the potential costs of inaction were too high not to be concerned, as "the rise of extremism and xenophobia are threatening European unity.” In addition, he said, that while clear attention needs to be paid to security concerns attendant to the rise in refugee flows, this should not come at the price of human rights. Democracy and its institutions, he concluded, should be the principles guiding all states in their actions to address the challenges they face today.

45. **Nikolaos Toskas,** Minister of Citizen Protection, immediately followed Mr Kourouplis with sobering statistics for the delegation. He noted that 900,000 migrants and refugees crossed Greece in 2015, well over a 1000% increase from 2014. The EU-Turkey agreement from 19 March 2016 had managed to substantially slow the flow of new refugees into Greece, but there were now 56,000 refugees stuck in Greece because of border closings throughout south-eastern Europe.

46. Mr Toskas noted that, “While our handling is not perfect, we are doing as best we can and there have been relatively few real security instances: Greece has proven it can combine humanitarian and military measures in response to the challenge successfully.” He concluded his remarks by warning of the dangers of inflating the associated risk of terrorism with the rise in refugee flows onto the continent.

47. **Deputy Minister of Defence, Dimitrios Vitsas**, echoed the statements of his colleagues by stating bluntly: “Let’s not let fear prevail as we see a rise of refugees and terrorism. We should remember that the first ones not to want the refugee crisis to exist are the refugees themselves.” When discussing the dilemma of the refugees stuck in Greece, he noted that the EU should be stricter when imposing penalties on those countries not taking up their share of the burden.

48. Defence Minister Vistas noted that Greece is currently maintaining 44 welcome centres, five dedicated medical facilities, and three detention centres dispersed throughout the country to handle the refugee challenge. Once the country was able to handle the immediate concerns of the refugees, such as health, food, and shelter, they were able to turn their attention to secondary, longer-term challenges such as education, entertainment, etc. for the camp populations – all of which required a massive mobilisation of resources by the entire country.

49. The Defence Minister then addressed the NATO maritime operation in the Aegean. He stated that the effectiveness of the operation has been due to the good levels of cooperation between Greece and Turkey, as well as the nations volunteering assets to the mission. He continued by stating that Greece is proposing that the mission encompass the entire coastline and expand its efforts to stop the human trafficking networks profiting from and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

50. Defence Minister Vistas told the delegation clearly that the Greek government would like the NATO PA’s assistance along the following three lines of effort. First, for parliamentarians to convey the reality they have witnessed on the ground in Greece back to their respective state parliaments. Second, he stressed the role parliamentarians could play to get European states to play their role in shouldering the burden of the refugee crisis. Third, he concluded, NATO member state parliamentarians must make a major push for peace and real democracy in the destabilised neighbourhoods surrounding the Alliance.

51. Taking up the question of theactions being taken to crack down on the illegal trafficking networks aiding and abetting rise in the regional refugee flows, **Dr Ioannis Theotokas,** *Secretary General of the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Insular Policy*, told the delegation that the number of traffickers arrested has been steadily rising due to more effective regional cooperation and resources dedicated to the problem. He told the delegation that 431 traffickers had been arrested in 2014 versus 120 in 2008. Dr Theotokas stressed that the actions of the Greek Coast Guard in dealing with interception, registration, and processing of human traffickers is in full compliance with all international legal frameworks and treaties. He also noted that Athens maintained effective, systematised cooperation with the Turkish government on the issue.

52. The Greek government, he continued, is currently dedicating 14 vessels for exclusive ISR purposes in the Aegean. He told the delegation that, while NATO vessels are not involved in the management of the trafficking issue, they do inform both the Greek Coast Guard and Frontex when and where they observe any activities related to migrant smuggling. He concluded by noting that all players involved in the Aegean to degrade and destroy the smuggling networks were consistently improving their effectiveness through better learning and cooperation.

53. **Rena Dourou**, Governor of Attica, then addressed the delegation to give the perspective of regional and municipal governance challenges in the face of the refugee crisis. She started by noting that the current refugee crisis should not be considered a “one-off problem”, but rather as a systematic problem with two underlying core challenges: first, the test posed to social institutions and unity when welcoming large numbers of refugees; and, second, the difficulty of coordinating a broader political response by all EU member states.

54. Ms Dourou continued by stating that, with the signing of the EU-Turkey agreement, attention is being paid to how states and organisations will have to deal with such challenges in the future – which will be key throughout the 21st century. Ms Dourou noted pessimistically that this situation brings to the surface all of the failings of the EU to date and this will either force a real reckoning, or the pressure will bring the EU asunder. For example, she stated, the EU needs a single, common asylum system across all EU states; there is none right now. She also stated that NATO was forced to come to the Aegean, because the EU did not have the capabilities to address the problem.

55. She continued by stating that the Attica region is a first link in a chain from rescue, care, to reception in the refugee crisis. Current efforts, she continued, were focusing on inclusion and integration, which meant attention to more substantial investments in education, health, social welfare, economic development, environment, as well as infrastructure. “By doing this, she concluded, we can try to give the refugees the dignity they deserve as human beings.”

56. **Philippe Leclerc**, Representative of the UNHCR in Greece*,* concluded the day’s briefings by noting that the 1.2 million people transiting through Greece has brought the UNHCR in to assist with a challenge in an EU member state – far from the norm of UNHCR missions. Mr. Leclerc noted that, by the time of the delegation’s visit, the arrival rate had fallen to 50/day, but that as many as 48,000 people still needed to be accommodated. He continued by noting that the UNHCR is working with 42 working sites throughout the country, and that it had received an EU grant to provide up to 20,000 living places in the country. Mr. Leclerc noted the agency was looking into other emergency procedures to accommodate the remaining people stranded since the border closing, noting that old hotels, centres no longer in use, etc. were all being converted into shelters.

57. Mr Leclerc continued by noting that most of the arrivals are ‘real’ refugees and would therefore be able to benefit from the asylum granting process. He also noted that the IOM has seen an increased willingness by some of the refugees to return to their country of origin. All agencies working with the refugees, he said, were working hard to make it clear to the refugees what are their realistic expectations are in light of the border closures, the slow EU asylum and redistribution process, and the EU-Turkey agreement.

58. Mr Leclerc lamented that EU funding in support of Greece has been inconsistent and less than hoped for – Greece had received 250 million to date, with the hope that an additional 70 million would be unlocked soon after the delegation’s visit. Mr. Leclerc told the delegation that feeding the refugees alone was coming at a cost of over €300,000 per day. As such, he stated that the current EU crisis‑relief funding processes need to be simplified. This should be a circumstance wherein it is much easier to receive funding quickly.

59. Throughout the briefings at the parliament, delegation members posed many questions related to all of the facets facing the Greek government in their current challenges. All pledged to bring the information gathered in Thessaloniki and Athens back to their respective parliaments.

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1. Turkey recognises the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)