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PREAMBLE: AFGHANS AS SECOND-CLASS REFUGEES IN PARTS OF EUROPE

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After the Syrians, Afghan became the largest group of refugees in Europe in 2015 – with 14 per cent (178,000) of the 1.26 million refugees who literally reached the continent's shores after perilous journeys through Iran and Turkey, where they were shot at by border guards and harassed by way-layers and the very smugglers they were paying to ferry them to their destination. Among them, 51 per cent of the 88,300 under-age, unaccompanied refugees that made it into the EU (45.295) were Afghans.

After a short period where refugees were welcomed, many EU countries have meanwhile closed their borders and migrations routes as well as tightened asylum laws and increased hurdles for accepting asylum seekers. In some cases, governments gave in to the pressure exerted by the soaring wave of semi-fascist populist movements who particularly see refugees from Muslim-populated countries as a 'threat to European culture'.

In Germany, the biggest recipient of refugees in 2015 in absolute terms, for example, asylum applications by Afghans were put on the back burner and the applicants excluded from language courses - (they are excluded from entering the legal job market anyway) - in order to create an atmosphere in which they would see a 'voluntary' return to their country as the only remaining option. This political about-face started in November 2015 when the government argued that the Afghans' *Bleibechancen* (chances to stay) were too low. (The number of Afghans who received any protection status was 47,6 per cent in 2015 and remained at that level in the first quarter of 2016 – around 2 per cent below the level were "good chances" begin.)

Those practices have not only undermined the individuality of the right to asylum but also threaten a return of the political asylum quotas of the 1980s and 1990s. Then, Afghans fleeing the pro-Soviet regime had very high chances of being given full political asylum (37 per cent in 1991), while this rate dropped to 10.9 per cent (1993) for those fleeing the mujahedin regime.

Plans for the deportation of rejected Afghan asylum seekers and the use of aid as leverage to pressure the Afghan government into accepting Afghan deportees (which it currently does not do), both in individual countries and EU-wide, have been publicly pondered by politicians. In March 2016, an internal draft EU policy documents, in preparation for the October 2016 Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, surfaced, stating that “more than 80,000 [Afghans] could potentially need to be returned in the near future”. (The EU later denied that such proposals were on the table.)

A number of governments, including those of Germany and the UK, have either started suggesting that there were “safe zones” or “safe provinces” in Afghanistan into which deportees could be sent or already do so.

All these measures, however, have not significantly decreased the number of Afghan refugees in the first months of 2016. The number of arrivals, combined for Italy and Greece, was 194,845 by 25 May – with 21 per cent of them Afghans.

This is not surprising, as it reflects the actual security situation on the ground. There, the Taliban are expanding territorial control after the withdrawal of most western soldiers, the Afghan government forces are struggling to contain them and western governments have halted the planned withdrawal or even increased troop numbers again. For the first time, the Taliban captured a provincial capital, Kunduz, in 2015, and other cities are under imminent threat. This combines with a deepening socio-economic crisis (with almost half of the Afghan population below the poverty line) and a crisis of confidence in the widely paralysed National Unity Government.

It is difficult to distinguish security-related and economically-driven motives for Afghans to leave their country. But the timing of the sharp increase of Afghan refugee numbers in Europe in 2015 suggests that the acutely worsening security situation was the trigger, while the dire socio-economic situation, that exists since decades, provide the substrata on which the decision to leave ripens.

The two CIDOB reports on Afghan migration issue – by Susanne Schmeidl and Hameed Hakimi and Barin Haymon – provide valuable additional insights into these dynamics, that will likely continue for at least the foreseeable future.