The Syrian conflict has become the cause of the world’s largest humanitarian and displacement crisis since World War II. Over 65.6 million people worldwide are in urgent need of safety and aid, as a consequence of conflict and natural disasters. During just 2016, 31.1 million people were internally displaced—the equivalent of one displaced person every second. These displaced people include refugees, internally displaced persons, and asylum-seekers. In order to find adequate solutions to the issue that affects individuals on local, regional, and global levels, it is essential to distinguish between the names and classifications of these groups:

Refugees are people who have involuntarily left their native country, and cannot return because of ongoing war, conflict, or a direct threat of persecution or death. Refugees are protected under international law by the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which defines what refugees are and outlines the basic rights afforded to them. Asylum-seekers are refugees who have made a claim and are waiting for it to be accepted or rejected; internally displaced people are, like refugees, people who have unwillingly left their home, but who have not crossed their country’s state border.

Migrants, on the other hand, are a group that is not forced to flee their home country, but rather do so in order to improve their standards of living by seeking, for example, employment or educational opportunity. Migrants are not protected by the same laws as refugees, since they do not face any direct threats, and in the chance of their return home, will continue to receive the protection of their own government.

Strict distinction among these classifications is integral to solving the central issue. Since each group must be treated within different legal realms, states can only guarantee their maximum amount of support if correct identification takes place. Merging refugees and migrants into a single group and using terms interchangeably affects the implementation of legal protection: national governments deal with migrants under their own immigrations processes,
whereas refugees have to be addressed through norms of refugee protection and asylum that are defined in both national legislation and international law.

**Relevance and Recent Developments**

The European Union, a hub for refugees, continues to be a leader in combating forced displacement. During the previous year, it donated over €1972 million to humanitarian assistant projects, and created a special trust fund for Africa, due to a consistent refugee influx from across the Mediterranean, which has approximately €3.3 billion. Member state contributions have, however, been largely disproportionate, with Norway and Switzerland contributing around €375 million, while Bulgaria, which will soon take on EU presidency, contributed merely €50,000.

Disparities in contributing efforts have not just been seen in funding for dealing with this crisis, but also in sharing the burdens of 2015 redistribution quota system. Most prominently, the Visegrad Group (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) remain reluctant to take in refugees. Because of geography, the burden is put on Italy and Greece, which have suffered from the overwhelming majority of potential asylum seekers. This has resulted in inhumane conditions at refugee camps, due to the lack of facilities, resources, and access to basic services. Hence, equal redistribution and the improvement of these facilities remains a consistent and evident issue.

The most difficult aspect of the problem to tackle is its ever-shifting nature. Recently, Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, published a statement on mandatory quotas, calling them “highly divisive” and “ineffective.” This act caused a negative response from the European Commission, saying that quotas are mandatory in order to ensure the practical implementation of Europe’s founding value—dignity. On December 7, the commission further issued a statement against the Visegrad Group, stating that it was taking Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland to court over their defiance to comply with the EU decision to relocate refugees based on a quota.

**Policy Recommendation**

The abolishment of mandatory quotas has the potential to cause even further negative consequences, as member states may now, within legal norms, follow the example of Visegrad Group countries. It would further undermine the efforts
that countries, such as in Scandinavia, have put into relocating refugees, granting them asylum, and initiating programs for their integration and inclusion. What the European Union needs is an innovative framework that provides an alternative to meeting the mandatory quota: a policy that can contribute to lifting the burden off border countries, namely Italy and Greece, yet be flexible enough to account for disparities in national political views and circumstances.

If the European Union fails to alter its current policies, then it risks the potential of a further political fallout. Border countries require assistance with two main areas: the “transferring” of refugees from their territory to other member states, and the lack of physical resources and facilities to house and protect future asylum seekers. Bearing these two issues in mind, a more flexible policy can suggest the following: If a country refuses to house refugees, then it has to provide monetary support to better the conditions at refugee camps. These financial alternatives would have to adequately match the number of refugees a national government is reluctant to relocate: the fewer refugees they are willing to take, the bigger their monetary contribution. Financial contributions, however, would also have to be set in accordance with the member states’ GDP and economic stability levels. The new policy would portray monetary contribution as a feasible alternative, rather than a punitive sanction, which is the form that it takes as of now.

Donald Tusk argues that the European Union should make migration a part of the union’s long-term budget, rather than rely solely on ad hoc contributions. In light of Tusk’s agenda and the concerns raised by the commission, the above policy seems a feasible middle ground—contributing further to an increase in financial assistance, while keeping mandatory quotas in place.

Disparities among member states, and disagreement between EU institutions and national governments, cannot be avoided. Hence, altering policies to more flexible alternatives, while benefiting the refugees, lifting the burden off of border countries, and giving more autonomy to the member states, is vital in creating a unified policy agenda.

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Endnotes