**Crisis in the eastern Mediterranean and COVID-19**

*In this discussion with Vassilis K. Fouskas and* *Bülent* *Gökay, Biljana Vankovska explores the complexities of the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean centred around the issue of refugees/migrants/asylum seekers. Fouskas argues that the Turkish government has weaponized the refugees in a hybrid warfare against a hypocritical Europe and NATO, with Russia being the real winner in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East. Further, he believes that Europe’s future, following the massive crisis of the first semester of 2015 when Syriza capitulated to Germany’s pressure, is once again played out in Greece. As a solution to the crisis, he argues for a Balkan solidarity pact allowing the refugees/migrants to go where they want: northern Europe. Gökay shifts the debate to human security and humanitarian concerns and points to the desperate situation of tens of thousands of refugees, which requires a Europe-wide response, especially in conditions of Corona virus pandemic. He claims that placing the blame squarely on Greece or/and Turkey rather misses the larger context, and focuses on the responsibility of the EU and its ineffective asylum system and health provision mechanisms. The articles edited for this issue provided the crucial underpinnings for this topical discussion. We thank all the contributors to this special issue of JBNES that have informed our points of view laid out below.*

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**Biljana Vankovska (BV):** Can you give some background information about your joint work and how long have you been working together?

**Bülent Gökay (BG):** I met Vassilis in 1998 through some Italian friends we had in common. At the time, Vassilis had completed a monograph on the history of the transformation of Italian communism and the crisis of the Italian political system. I had already published the *Clash of Empires*, a work that place the Greek-Turkish conflict of 1919-1922 in a global context. At the time, Vassilis was also running some post-graduate seminars on the Balkans and southern Europe at LSE. I should also mention that it was about that period of time that I had met Peter Gowan, when I was teaching at the University of North London (UNL) on a part-time basis. I later found out that Vassilis was teaching Peter’s courses at UNL, but we did not meet in Holloway Road.

**Vassilis K. Fouskas (VKF):** Yes, that’s correct. We started those seminars at LSE on the occasion of the Bosnian crisis, then we established an Association, the Association for the Study of Southern Europe and the Balkans (ASSEB), which became a charity in education in the UK. Lastly, we began looking for publishers for a journal, what became *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*. The first issue was published in May 1999, amidst NATO’s bombing of Belgrade. In this collective effort – dozens of PhD students and academic helped pull this venture off the ground – I want to single out the support of Donald Sassoon, Ilaria Favretto Toby Abse, David Felsen, Philippe Marlière, Stevan K. Pavlowitch and the late Peter Gowan. In 2009, we renamed the journal into *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, following a protracted Editorial discussion.

**BG:** It was just after the disastrous NATO intervention in former Yugoslavia over Kosovo, we were among a small number of British leftists campaigning for peace and against war in former Yugoslavia. Soon afterwe were already in 1999, when America’s “unilateral moment” was approaching. It followed 9/11 and Afghanistan and then the disastrous invasion of Iraq, completing “the work” that began in 1990-91 in the region. We were strongly influenced by those events. I began working on the politics of oil and the debt crisis in Eastern Europe. Vassilis was also doing similar work on America’s foreign policy in the Balkans and the Middle East, so somehow our research interests began converging. Our first joint monograph, *The New American Imperialism*, was published in 2005 with a preface by Peter Gowan. It was a defining moment because we both began realizing that America is in decline and it does what it does not because it is strong but because it is weak. Influenced by the late Andre Gunder Frank’s work, *ReOrient* (1999), we began theorizing our approach along the lines of a geo-logical metaphor, “global fault-lines”, by which we intended to place the global instance at the centre of our analysis in order to decipher the specifics that are happening within that global instance as symptoms of a number of determinants – economic, cultural, geo-political, civilizational etc. – without any of these being the decisive “in the last analysis”, which is Marx’s own classic thesis. Once we had this common theoretical platform, we moved on to write two more monographs, *The Fall of the US Empire; Global Fault-lines and the Shifting Imperial Order,* published in 2012, and *The Disintegration of Euro-Atlanticism and New Authoritarianism,* which appeared last year. The former provides an analysis of the global financial crisis and the power-shift to the “global East”, as we call it. The latter examines the enduring austerity in the Euro-zone and the way in which China’s global policy disrupts European integration while intensifying the crisis of Europe’s policy contours, which rest on a specific form of neo-liberalism, the German-Austrian policy infrastructure of *ordoliberalism.*

**BV:** Perhaps it is now time to go back to the Balkans and the Near East. As you insinuated earlier, America’s invasion of Iraq opened Pandora’s Box. With ISIS and the Arab Spring, the crisis began shifting westwards to Syria and southern Europe; and now, with these masses of population movements towards Europe whereby Greece and the Balkans provide a major transit route, a route that the 2016 agreement between Turkey and the EU tried to contain. Can the Balkan states, potentially, amass a joint response to the migrant crisis, having in mind their mutual differences over a range of issues?

**Vassilis K. Fouskas:** Yes, they do and it is high time now to leave aside their differences. The refugee issue is vastly more important. The stakes involved are much higher in terms of human life and regional peace. I don’t appreciate at all Turkey’s attitude and the way in which manages the refugee issue. I also don’t appreciate the hypocritical attitude of Germany and the EU, who make deals with Turkey and then they fail to deliver them. I tend to believe that Turkey is right in claiming that the 2016 agreement has not been honoured as very little money had been delivered and no relaxation of visa happened for its citizens. Turkey, however, at least since 2014, has been using the refugees as a bargaining chip to negotiate with NATO and the EU a pact that would help her to deal with Russia, Assad and Iran in Syria and maintain, in order to establish its presence in Syria’s northern zone. Turkey’s proclaimed aim is to house and shelter some 3 million refugees, although an undeclared goal is the prevention of the establishment of an independent state structure there by the Kurdish element. This is what is all about: a hybrid warfare. But we should not forget the human dimension of the issue, which I believe is Bülent’s key point. Greece and Bulgaria were wrong to seal their land and sea borders against innocent people. What should be done is, first, management of borders and careful registration (selection/de-selection) of refugees according to international and EU law; second, construction of provisional structures providing human conditions to refugees/migrants; third, facilitating their travel north of the Balkans (Austria, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Scandinavia), where they want to go. The refugees do not want to stay in the region. They want to settle in prosperous EU countries. This is the cooperating platform of all Balkan states that can easily agree on. Germany and the rest of the EU must assume full responsibility for their acts of omission and commission all these years, including the appalling austerity imposed on Greece and the Balkans, which destroyed their capacity to deal with this sort of emergencies. That’s why the Balkan states must cooperate. Can you think of Greece’s fourth army in Thrace facing tens of thousands of refugees wanting to cross the border? Are you going to shoot at them? No. But this means war between Greece and Turkey as Greece will close the Aegean, then Turkey will retaliate and so on. Some critics say that this proposal is unrealistic. Well, yes and no. I propose it because what I have in mind is possible deterioration of conflict in Syria and inability of both the West and Russia to rein in Erdogan’s plans, which is not impossible. This is the most probable scenario: any serious tension between Greece and Turkey in the Aegean or Cyprus because of Erdogan’s relentless use of refugees as a bargaining chip to enlist western support, Greece, under this type of pressure, would declare a state of national emergency and deport all refugees/migrants in conditions of harsh austerity. The first recipients of this deportation to suffer would be Greece’s immediate neighbours, Bulgaria, Albania and North Macedonia, followed by Serbia, Croatia and Hungary. Land borders are very porous. Once they left Greece, the refugees can be in Germany in a week. This is what is going to happen and it is on this basis that I propose the Balkan Pact, however unrealistic it looks at first sight. Remember, also, that all Balkan states, including Greece and Turkey, have no capacity to absorb any additional refugee wave. They are broken states. Erdogan knows that. He’s the chief manager of the crisis in the region but the pendulum of the crisis also shifts according to the deals he manages to strike with Russia and the West – yes, Turkey continues to be squeezed between the “Empires”, as Bülent argued long ago. History is haunting us and only history exists.

**BV**: Do you see any danger for the Balkans to turn into a ‘parking slot’ (ghetto) for millions of migrants remaining in western Europe’s doorstep?

**VKF**: Oh yes. This is my fear and this is the reason why I propose what I propose. The ethnic-religious ghettoization of the Balkans and the Near East is German and, to a certain extent, NATO policy. In Greece today, the refugees are also ghettoized, albeit in an appalling and inhuman manner This is one of the reasons why NATO and Germany supported the Dayton accords, sold as an “Agreement for Peace” in the Balkans to end the war of Bosnian-Serb aggression. The real reason is the containment of refugee waves in the Balkans and the ethnic ghettoisation of the region, as Tolis Malakos argued in a splendid article he wrote for the *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*(then, as I said earlier, called *Journal of Southern Europe and the* Balkans) back in 1999-2000 on the occasion of NATO’s war over Kosovo. Creating ethno-religious enclaves in the Balkans and sponsoring them in all sort of ways, you embed them in the region, deter their movement towards the core of Europe and transform them into consumers via borrowing from your banks. To do that, you create client states by anchoring their economies and currencies to the Euro-zone and serve them your model of enduring austerity and ordoliberalism on the plate. That’s the European model for the Balkans. Austerity, as the Greek example shows, intensifies when German economic surpluses are not re-cycled in order to support the weaker economies of the periphery but the rich ones of the core. Amidst the Corona virus crisis today, Germany pursues the same policy of selfishness. All this is both neo-colonial and racist camouflaged with a humanitarian narrative. Of course, this is not the only reason why Bosnia was created out of nothing. It was also due to America’s drive to control Germany’s influence. At the same time, Bosnia represented NATO’s soft underbelly as NATO was expanding eastwards against Russia – impossible to leave the area under the control of Serbia, seen as Russia’s client state, or under Croatia, seen as Germany’s client state. The case of Kosovo was very similar: it had nothing to do with the human rights of the Albanians there. It just happens at certain times in history geopolitical plans of imperial powers to coincide with other factors on the ground, such as domestic nationalistic agendas and so on. Same goes for the name issue of Macedonia.

**BG:** These are very important points, which nevertheless abstract, to a certain degree, from the welfare of the refugees. I would like to switch, therefore, the discussion to the area of human security, the welfare of refugees, especially in the face of an unprecedented global pandemic, COVID-19. The intolerable hygienic conditions in the internment camps are far from even the most basic preventive measures adopted everywhere in the world nowadays. For instance, in Moria camp, there is just one water tap for more than 1000 people and no soap is available. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)/Doctors Without Borders, warned on 12 March that there is a real danger of an uncontrollable spread of the coronavirus in the camps after a resident in Lesbos was diagnosed positive with COVID-19. Considering the Greek healthcare system was already devastated under EU-imposed austerity, the country is in no position to provide an effective response of any kind to the COVID-19 cases.

**BV**: Absolutely, and it is great you mentioned Moria in Lesbos. Let us then have a look at this major flashpoint in the Aegean Sea, the island of Lesbos. For quite some time, the island has been home to more than 19,000 migrants and refugees. What are the biggest challenges for the local population and can you see a solution both for the people held hostages and the locals?

**VKF:** It is interesting you are asking me about Lesbos. Lesbos is the hotbed for many things, including breeding racism of the locals. Indeed, we must monitor the situation on the island very closely because it’s a kind of a microcosm that reflects wider issues in Greece. Lesbos has, as we speak, nearly 22,000 refugees – legally they may be called “migrants” or “asylum seekers”, but that should not concern us here as all agreements and the Dublin process are dead. They are *human beings* and must have human treatment. The local population is around 70,000. The refugees live in appalling conditions and, as Bülent said, the Corona pandemic could well decimate them. The camp in the village of Moria has capacity for some 3000 people, yet almost all refugees are packed there. There is massive tension with the locals, but this was not the case in 2014-15. When they first arrived, the locals – most of whom, like myself, are from refugee families themselves – embraced them warmly: they offered them shelter, food, company, everything they could offer in conditions of harsh austerity. Lesbos was even short-listed for the Nobel prize! But the refugee waves continued after a short lull following the agreement between Germany and Turkey in March 2016. The locals became intolerant and tensions grew. Now the locals, given the tension between Greece and Turkey over the Aegean and Cyprus on a number of issues, began seeing the refugees as Erdogan’s Trojan horse for the creation of Islamic enclaves on the islands in order to use them against Greece’s political-ethnic cohesion and in a future conflict with Greece. It doesn’t take long for things to change, especially in conditions of harsh austerity. Effectively, it does not take long for a peasant or a fisherman to become racists in conditions of austerity. I want also to mention that the locals see that the refugees who have legal papers and successful asylum applications receive income support of 400 Euros per month. Now, imagine the local’s transformation: they are unemployed, they pay so many extra taxes, tourists no longer come from western Europe and small family hotels are empty all year long. That’s how racial/religious hatred grew and this is what western media are incapable of capturing. The conflict between the local and the refugee became unavoidable. Everything seems to have conspired for that: the EU and government-led austerity; the collapse of tourism; and Turkey’s use of refugees as a weapon to serve its own interests. I must also say that the role of NGOs, especially FRONTEX, was not helpful at all – although not all NGOs played the same role. Their aim – hidden behind a humanitarian narrative typical of neo-colonialism since the end of the Cold War – was to prevent refugees from leaving the island reaching out to continental Greece and thereon to Europe. That’s the reality. I have outlined the solution by answering your first question. My solution straddles the humanitarian and security concerns of both the refugees and the locals. There is only one serious obstacle to implement such a just solution fostering peace: the dependent nature of Balkan polities on NATO and the EU. Imperialism has always been good at “divide and rule”. The strategy I propose will be successful only if *all* Balkan states cooperate. Bulgaria, for the time being, is in bed with Erdogan. Not a single refugee went to cross Bulgaria’s land border with Turkey in eastern Thrace. They all amassed on the Greek side of the border, the so-called Evros/Maritsa river. Recent media reports, however, tell us that the Corona crisis forced Erdogan to relocate the refugees from the Turkish-Greek border to the interior.

**BV:** Bulent, would you agree to that? Does this embrace all NGOs? Do you have a different or differing solution to that proposed by Vassilis about a Balkan Pact and facilitation of the refugee population to reach western Europe?

**BG:** The welfare of the refugees, this is for me the paramount priority. And, also, in the current conditions of the pandemic the welfare of the Greek citizens, should be the priority. These are not Greek or Turkish problems, these are primarily European and global problems. But because of geographical proximity and the institutional and other links between South-east Europe and the EU, I would say that it is, more than anything else, a European problem. This is an exceptionally difficult period, and the EU, like all others in the world, is facing an unprecedented global pandemic. But this should not push its other responsibilities to the secondary level. The March 2016 agreement with Turkey was never meant to be a permanent one, it was a temporary solution. The real solution to the current refugee situation and the security risk in the region between Greece and Turkey is an urgent and effective reform of EU’s asylum system. Think also of the fact that the EU does not have a “common health policy”. Had you mentioned this phrase to a European bureaucrat before, say in 2010, he/she would have said “Common health policy? What is that? This is the responsibility of member-states!”.

**BV:** Very important points. We know what kind of assistance and help Turkey is looking for from NATO and the EU, we don’t know whether she’s going to get it, though. Turkey, in my view, has even more serious security problems, especially in Syria, and nearly four million refugees. But what type of assistance and help is Greece hoping for? And what are the risks for this crisis spilling over towards North Macedonia?

**VKF:** For the time being, Greece hopes to get money only. This also is not certain. But if money ever arrived in Greek coffers, we won’t be in a position to know the strings attached to them. State elites do not disclose these types of deals. Many things also depend on how Greek diplomacy would be able to capitalise on the conflicts taking place within other elites in NATO and EU countries, and especially conflicts within the Turkish elite. It is wrong to believe that the Turkish state is a coherent organism without contradictions. As Turkish scholars have acknowledged many times, there is a powerful anti-NATO and pro-Russian/Eurasianist faction within the Turkish apparatus pushing for a security alliance with Moscow. So – I hope you understand – I cannot answer with precision the first part of your question as many things depend on unpredictable moves from the various agencies involved. As regards the position of North Macedonia, I have a straightforward answer. The refugees do not want to stay in Greece, Macedonia or anywhere in the Balkans. Only core EU countries, especially Germany and Austria, want that. But the situation will be critical for North Macedonia and all Balkan states if there is no agreement between Turkey and Russia over Syria, and Greece continues to block off the selection/de-selection of migrants/refugees by refusing to manage an orderly passage of them from its territory and in agreement with all the neighbouring countries as I propose. In this perspective, truly independent NGOs can of course play a decisive role.

**BV:** What would be the effect of this migrant crisis on the Greek-Turkish relations and on the relations of the EU member states, and the EU as a whole?

**VKF:** In my view, it all depends on whether Russia and Turkey find a middle ground for cooperation over the Syrian issue – they seem to have agreed on some elements of their dispute, same as Turkey and the EU seem to have begun a new dialogue about the Idlib crisis and the refugees. But all this are short-term paper exercise in the service of the domestic audiences of each state involved. Russia will continue backing Assad’s regime; the Kurdish issue will remain unresolved; and remnants of Al Qaeda will be operating in Syria and elsewhere. There are reports that the Turkish militia fighting in Libya are not Turkish soldiers but various splinter groups from Al Qaeda that Turkey has armed. We should not forget that Turkey has experienced massive growth over the last two decades and is considered, together with Brazil, South Africa and other peripheral countries, as a new developing, middle-income country, as Bülent is arguing in his forthcoming book, *Turkey in the Global Political Economy.* Turkey’s economy is currently experiencing an overcapacity and export of capital is paramount. Turkish business and banks are not only active in Central Asia, Middle East and the Balkans, but also in Africa. Turkey has drafted its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) with Libya at the expense of Greek interests. This is not because Turkey is bad and the others good, but because the country is over-heated and seeks expansion and jurisdiction beyond its borders. War is and remains, primarily, an affair of dominant capital formations, whether regional or global and it is in this sense that Turkey’s actions should be opposed and thwarted, but by whom? Personally, I don’t believe that Turkey will back down in retaining a permanent chunk of land in Northern Syria, the same way as it is after Northern Iraq. When EU official asked Erdogan when he thinks Turkish troops would leave Syria, he responded saying that no EU country borders with Syria. Turkey does. Turkey has the security problem and what Turkey does today will outlived Erdogan. I don’t think there is anything wrong with that answer in terms of *realpolitik*, which is how state elites think*.* State elites are not socialists or philanthropists. They are realists. In terms of human suffering, whether these humans are Yezidis, refugees or Kurds or Shii, then I think these realist undertakings are wholly wrong and, I repeat, it is in this sense that Turkey has to be contained as it is the strongest peripheral power. Further, Turkey should be contained because what is in jeopardy is regional and global peace. Now, if conflict breaks out between Greece and Turkey, then one eventuality is that it remains localised, lasting only a few days, yet without solving any of the aforementioned issues, including that of refugees. It may also involve more and more states in the region and more globally, in which case we are talking about a total disaster that I don’t want even to think about. Needless to say, the EU would cease to exist in the form and shape it has today. So back to 1914, the unthinkable future!

**BV:** In my view, a solid condition for peace and cooperation in the region is the establishment of socialist democracies in Turkey and the Balkans. A social democratic regime would socialise the social produce and re-distribute the value in favour of the people. This would push back Turkey’s peripheral neo-imperialism, as Vassilis insinuates. But what are the prospects of socialism in Turkey after Erdogan?

**BG:** I regret to say that there are no such conditions in Turkey and the Balkans. I mean there are no socialist movements upon which a new socialist agenda can flourish and press for socialist solutions, whether from opposition or from positions of government. For the current situation around the refugees, and dealing with the security challenges at the border, both Turkey and Greece have a common interest to express loudly that this is an Europe-wide problem, and to find yet another temporary solution by paying some more money to Turkish and Greek governments will bring neither security to the region nor safety to the thousands of desperate refugees. Currently, Europe’s asylum system does not work, that’s why we are in this situation, not because the Turkish and the Greek governments are not socialist. We urgently need a pan-European asylum system and a pan-European health initiative and policy. In the context of the current pandemic, these are overlapping and hugely important measures. Nothing sort of this can work and this is the immediate priority serving the needs of all peoples on the ground: the refugee, the worker, the unemployed, the under-employed, all the victims of imperialist wars and austerity. In short, I do not agree with any solution which puts the blame on regional powers, in particular Turkey and Greece, simply because it does not produce these immediate solutions we desperately need.

**BV:** Vassilis, can one make a comparison between today’s developments and the 2015/16 migrant crisis, both from a humanitarian and a security perspective. Also, you mentioned the use of refugees by Turkey as a weapon to strike deals. Can you say more?

**VKF:** Yes, I can and I also believe a comparison can be made. I want also to say that Bülent’s points on European asylum policy and health policy are hugely important. The first refugee crisis came amidst a serious crisis in the Eurozone, which was somewhat sealed with the capitulation of Syriza, following the referendum of July 2015. At the time, as everybody was busy with economics, neither Greece nor the Europeans could conceive of the refugee problem as a serious humanitarian and security issue of tremendous importance for the future of Europe and the Balkans. But Erdogan’s Turkey knew, because Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian crisis dates back to the beginnings of the crisis in 2010-11. I must say that various western agencies played a very malicious and totally inept role in Turkey, trying to disrupt Erdogan’s project to smash the Kemalist apparatus, a power struggle that Erdogan won, strengthening his authoritarian grip over the state and society. Everybody should understand that the West is not innocent in what the Erdogan regime has become in Turkey. Erdogan and his ruling group were always conscious of the fact that the refugees could be weaponised in a hybrid warfare against Europe in order to serve Turkey’s power-politics ends in the region. *It is in this sense that I would argue that Europe’s future, for a second time in less than five years, is once again played out in Greece’s borderlands.* Erdogan also sends refugees to Cyprus. The Cypriot government in the southern part has recently closed the crossings that separate the Turkish sector from the internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus, the pretext being the Corona virus, but we know it’s not that. The Greek-Cypriots, same as the mainland Greeks, act in accordance with developments and decisions taking place in Brussels. So, overall, one can easily diagnose a continuity on the part of Turkey as regards the weaponization of the refugee issue, whereas the Europeans began only recently to come to terms with this reality. The agreement between Germany and Turkey in March 2016, which was against international law and human rights, failed simply because no agreement can capture and block the political will and determination of a belligerent state, such as Turkey, to use unarmed population movements on the ground to serve its own power-political ends.

**BG:** As I said earlier, the 2016 agreement was a temporary one to stop migrants flooding Europe. It was never meant to be a long-term solution. Both the EU and Turkey agreed on this for their own selfish reasons at that time. When Turkish President, Erdogan, announced early this year that he would not stop refugees to travel on to Europe any more, the Greek government declared to suspend the right to asylum. This was soon after supported by the EU. Just like the 2016 agreement, this decision to suspend the right to asylum for refugees represents a gross breach of international law, the Geneva Convention on Refugees, and even a violation of the EU’s founding charter. Portugal, an EU country, took the courageous decisions to grant to all foreigners in Portugal with pending applications as permanent residents until at least 1 July 2020, so all migrants and refugees can have access to health services during the pandemic. Why the EU does not impose such policy on its member-states? In these exceptional times the rights of migrants must be guaranteed, otherwise is not worthy of your appellation as “Union”. My first point to conclude here is that our priority should be the welfare of the refugees. Second, the tragedy we are experiencing today is the direct result of western imperialism’s genocidal and never-ending wars on the peoples of the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. US and European imperialisms are the root cause of the “refugee crisis”, not regional powers, such as Greece and Turkey.

**BV:** Many thanks to both of you. I’m sure the readers will enjoy this special issue.

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