



The “Refugee crisis” in Greece (2016-2017)

Skype: The first step to be recognized as an asylum seeker | Statistics & Observations

By Silvia Giulini

Abstract:

This report focuses on the Greek Asylum Service and, in particular, on Skype, which is the first step for a Third Country National (TCN) in Greece to be recognised as an asylum seeker. This report is based on the data collected by our organization, Generation 2.0 for Rights, Equality and Diversity¹, in 2016 and from January until April 2017. As we will see, there are different problematic issues connected with this service, issues that change depending on the period but which are always present. One particular focus will be on the difference between the situation pre and post the EU-Turkey Deal, as well as on the 2017 situation. First, we concentrate on explaining how the system works, programmes included. Then, we focus on the general problematic aspects. The analysis of the data follows it.

Skype: What is it and how it works

Skype is the first step for a TCN to be recognized as an Asylum Seeker in Greece. In fact, the TCN does not have to go physically and directly to the central asylum service of Greece, based in Athens, but has to get in contact with it through Skype, the computer program that we use every day to speak with people who live faraway.

The idea behind Skype is the need to reduce the pressure that the Asylum Service had to face during the so called refugee crisis, when many people were out of the building waiting for a permission to stay legally in Greece. For this reason, as an emergency measure, TCNs stopped being accepted physically in the Asylum Service and started being pre-registered through Skype. This means that the person has to try calling the Asylum Service either on his/her own with his/her mobile phone or by going in one of the few NGOs that are offering this service².

Once the Asylum Service picks up the call, a woman and a translator ask for the basic info of the TCN (name, surname, father's and mother's name, date of birth, nationality, country of origin and telephone number) and give two appointments: the first one allows the TCN to get a card that protects him/her from the police and gives him/her the possibility to go to the hospital; the second one, instead, is for the registration.

The card that the TCN receives after the pre-registration was introduced on the 16th of March 2016 because of the high number of people that had been arrested, despite them having already done a successful Skype call. In fact, when a TCN arrives in Greece he/she receives a “paper” that allows him/her to stay in the country for a certain amount of time. However, this amount of time depends on the nationality of the person: for example, the paper lasts for 6 months if the person comes from Syria and 1 month if the person comes from Afghanistan. After the “paper” expires, the person can be arrested because he/she becomes undocumented. With the introduction of the card, even if the number of

¹ Generation 2.0 RED is a Greek NGO consisted of people who fight for the rights of socially vulnerable groups, regardless of their origin, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Originally born for the rights of second generation, along the years, it expanded its mandate to refugees and asylum seekers as well.

² Generation 2.0 RED has never stopped offering this service, even if it had to stop some Skype Programmes, due to the difficult situation it had to face, and always accepted all categories of people, from under aged to women and from families to single men.



undocumented people continued to be very high and, consequently, so did the number of people arrested, at least TCNs, after the successful Skype call, are protected for as long as the card is valid.

Skype Programmes

There are different Skype Programmes, changing over the years. The programmes are based on the language and, in limited cases only, on the wish of a TCN to stay in Greece or to go to another European Country. The languages available in Skype Programmes are: Arabic, Farsi-Dari (for those coming from Iran and Afghanistan), English-French, Kurdish languages (Sorani and Kurmanji), Albanian, Urdu-Panjabi, Bengali.

Except the family reunification, which is possible for all nationalities and during all the Skype Programmes, there is the Relocation Programme, which allows TCNs to go legally to another European country, even if they do not have family members there. This is valid only for those who arrived in Greece before the 20th of March 2016, and come from a limited number of countries³. A TCN that is applying for relocation cannot choose the destination country, but he/she can choose some countries he/she would prefer to go to. This choice, however, is not binding. This Skype Programme was only in the Arabic language and stopped existing on the 13th of March 2017, almost a year after its beginning, because of the very low number of calls (linked to the limited number of people who had arrived before the 20th of March 2016 and had not done Skype, yet).

Concerning family reunification, the notion of family is very strict and, at the moment, is usually confined to very close relatives such as husband/wife, underage/parents. It is much more difficult for siblings to be reunified. In the case of an 18 years old teenager, the person cannot do family reunification but has to be relocated, not necessary where his/her family is.

Finally, a peculiar Skype Programme is the Syrian Fast Track, only for those Syrians who have passport and wish to stay in Greece. In this case they have a faster procedure but there is only a limited number for each Skype call. In 2017 a Skype Programme for people coming from Georgia was added.

Skype Programmes have a strict timetable and there are from 1 to 6 hours a week for each language. For example, there has always been 3 hours a week for Arabic; for Farsi-Dari there has been from 3 to 4 hours a week; for English-French 2 hours a week before, and 1 hour a week now; for Kurdish languages, it started in March 2016 with 2 hours a week (1 for Sorani and 1 for Kurmanji) and now it reached 7 hours a week (6 for Sorani and 1 for Kurmanji); Relocation Programme, instead, started the 21st of March 2016 with 8 hours; in June there were 12; in 2017, until the 12th of March, there was only one hour; now it does not exist anymore. Syrian fast track, instead, passed from two to one hour a week.

The general problems connected with Skype

There are, however, many general problems connected with Skype. First of all, not everybody knows what Skype is and how it works. We had, for example, a case of a Syrian woman born in 1932, who alone, for sure, would have had some difficulties. TCNs can call on their own with their mobile phones but, at least last year, they had more chances if they went to an NGO that offered this service.

Secondly, the very strict timetable. In fact, during the few hours a week available for each Programme, all the speakers of the same language try to connect, hoping to have an answer

³ For example, people coming from Afghanistan or Yemen cannot be relocated.

from the Asylum Service. To this, it has to be added the main problem: in the Asylum Service there is *only one computer that answers*. The strict timetable, the high number of people calling at the same time, together with the internet connection problems can easily explain the difficulties for a TCN to get through. We must not forget to mention that sometimes, due to the high number of calls, there is a complete block of Skype in the Asylum Service.

Moreover, due to internet connection problems, a call that could last three minutes per person, many times lasts 15 or more and, consequently, the number of people that are able to do Skype in an hour is drastically low. Finally, for every single call, the Asylum Service usually accepts only a family or a single person; then drops the call.

The difficulties we had to face in 2016 and in 2017 are very different, as we will see later, but these general problems have to be kept in mind in any case, since one year later, they still exist.

Skype statistics in 2016

Before going on, it is necessary to give a short frame concerning the numerical situation of the TCNs in Greece. In fact, Greece received the majority of TCNs on its land in 2015, with a very high number: 856.723 people⁴. Between September 2015 and February 2016 there were 762.258 new arrivals. This data is even more impressive if we consider the decision of many countries to close their borders and, consequently, to oblige TCNs to be stuck in Greece. After the EU-Turkey Deal there has been a drastic reduction of people coming everyday to Greece⁵.

It is necessary to point out that the numbers in the tables and charts below concern only the people *we were able to register* as an organization. The number of people coming every day to the office, in fact, was much higher. The following table shows the number of people coming every month of 2016, divided by Country of origin. March is divided in three parts: before the application of the EU-Turkey Deal, after the application of the EU-Turkey Deal and the total amount of people coming in the whole month.

As it can be easily seen, from the 20th of March on, when the EU-Turkey Deal started to be applied, things changed completely. In fact, if in January and February came respectively 52 and 77 people, in March they were 163. The decrease of the number of people coming each month after March 2016 is due to the decision of our organization to stop doing Skype in some languages. In fact, the number of people coming everyday was too high (100 in a day, on average) and the situation was unmanageable.

	JAN 2016	FEB 2016	MARCH 2016			APR 2016	MAY 2016	JUN 2016	JUL 2016	AUG 2016	SEP 2016	OCT 2016	NOV 2016	DEC 2016	TOT 2016
			Before 20th	After 20th	Total										
PAKISTAN	7	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	23
BANGLADESH	6	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	22
NIGERIA	8	10	6	5	11	0	2	2	7	1	4	0	2	0	47
UGANDA	11	3	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15
ALBANIA	2	10	3	3	6	8	11	13	25	3	2	14	13	13	119
GHANA	6	2	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	12

⁴ See: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83>,

⁵ *Ibidem*



MOROCCO	0	8	4	2	6	3	2	0	0	0	2	7	4	1	33
SIERRA LEONE	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	7
CAMEROON	1	4	0	17	17	6	10	1	5	0	4	2	5	2	57
IRAN	1	2	6	7	13	0	9	11	11	2	7	22	14	3	95
AFGHANISTAN	0	0	0	22	22	18	1	2	18	1	4	18	7	4	95
SYRIA	1	2	13	61	74	54	49	36	18	1	5	4	2	7	253
LEBANON	0	2	0	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	6
ETHIOPIA	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
GAMBIA	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
KENYA	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
LIBERIA	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
IRAQ	0	0	0	2	2	22	6	0	5	0	0	5	1	1	42
SUDAN	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
CONGO (not specified)	0	0	0	5	5	1	0	1	22	0	0	0	2	0	31
CONGO K	0	0	0	3	3	3	10	21	4	0	0	9	0	0	50
CONGO BR	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	4	1	0	16
HAITI	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
TOGO	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
SRI LANKA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	3
COTE D'IVOIRE	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
SENEGAL	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
MALI	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
COMOROS	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
GUINEA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
BURUNDI	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
CHAD	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
ERITREA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
EGYPT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
ALGERIA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	5
YEMEN	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
LYBIA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
TOT	52	77	33	130	163	116	102	91	123	9	40	88	56	36	953

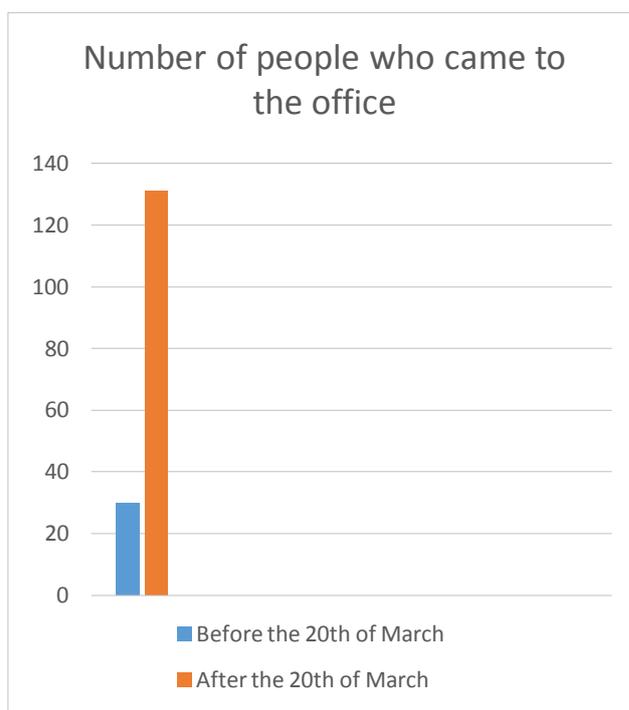
An important data to keep in mind when we compare the 2016 and 2017 situation, is to consider also the number of people that had the appointment (that means a successful Skype call) among the 953 people. Due to the lack of information for January 2016, we are not going to consider this month. Among 901 people (February-December 2016), 870 received an answer. Among the 31 people that did not have answer, 15 were from Pakistan. This is why we decided to stop doing the Urdu Skype Programme already in February.

The change: the 20th of March 2016

As the table upon suggests, in March, from the 20th and on, with the application of the EU-Turkey Deal, the situation drastically changed. In fact, as already mentioned, if in January and February only 52 and 77 people came respectively for Skype, in March they were 163.



The EU-Turkey Deal was signed the 18th of March 2016 and started to be applied in two days' time. The target of the Deal is to try to stop the arrivals of irregular migrants in Greece. The Deal is not divided in articles, but enlists some points needed to achieve the goal. It states that irregular migrants arriving in Greece from the 20th of March and on, will be returned to Turkey. The costs of this "temporary and extraordinary measure (...) needed to end the human suffering and restore public order" are covered by EU. Moreover, "for every Syrian being returned to Turkey from Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled from Turkey to the EU taking into account the UN Vulnerability Criteria". The Deal underlines that the UN vulnerability criteria will be respected and the whole procedure will be in full accordance with EU and international law, so "excluding any kind of collective expulsion". Turkey, on the other hand, has to prevent the illegal migration in order to stop or reduce the irregular cross boarding. In exchange, Turkey will have an accelerated visa liberalization for Turkey citizens and 3 billion Euros; in case the commitments are met, other 3 billion Euros will be given to Turkey in the end of 2018.



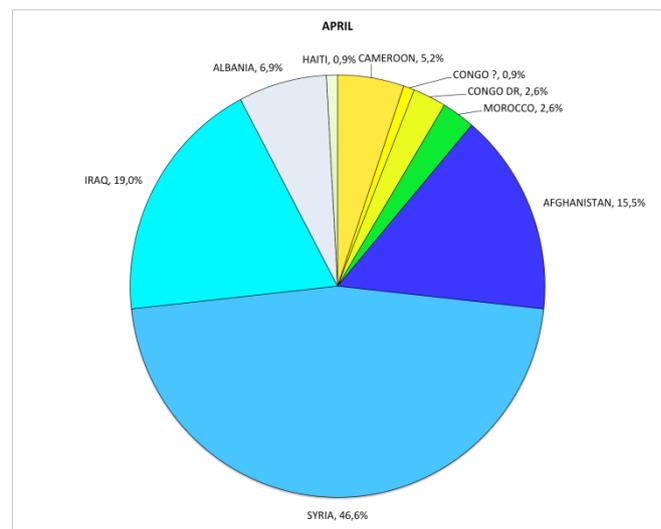
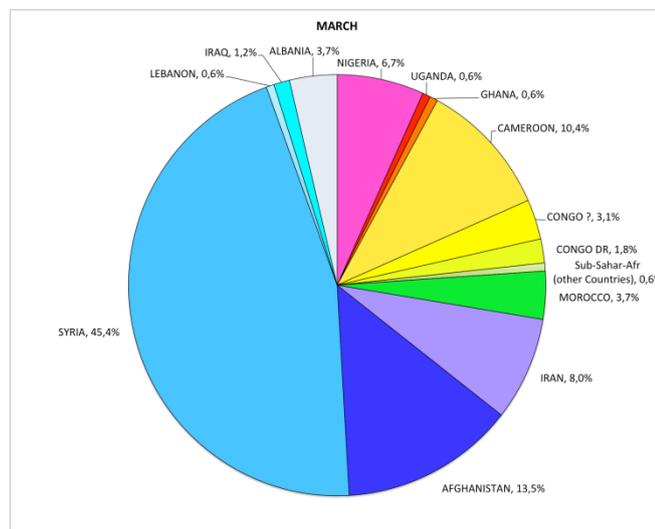
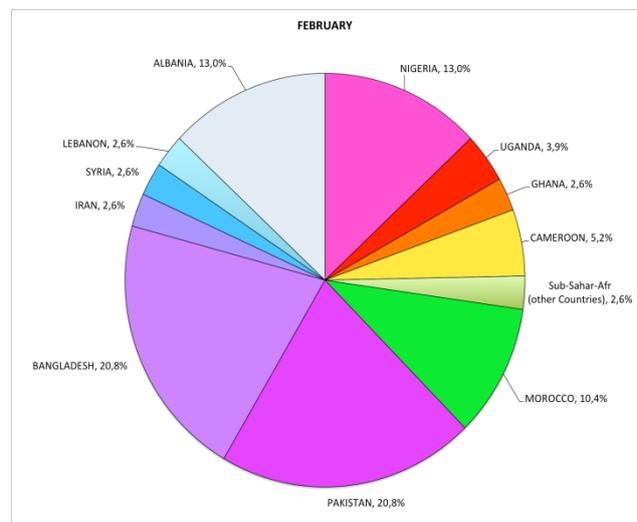
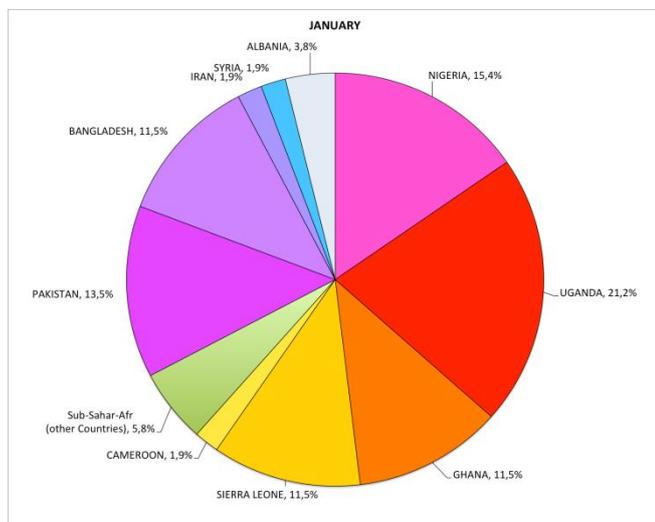
Looking more deeply into the data, we also notice that the most impressive difference is between the first 20 days and the last 10 days of March: in 20 days only 33 TCNs asked to apply for Skype, but in the following 10 days they were 130. This means that the number of people who arrived in this period (from the 20th to the 30th) was more than 4 times the number of people who came in the first part of the month. That is, in half time (in only 10 days) we registered 130 people, more than four times the number of people who came in the first 20 days of the month, that totally were 33.

Moreover, as we can see from the previous table, also the nationalities of people coming to the office changed a lot. We analyze it shortly:

Looking at the scheme below, we notice a big difference in the nationalities of people coming in the office to register for Skype in January-February and in March-April⁶. This is particularly true in the case of the Syrians: if in January and February they constituted respectively 1,9% and 2,6%, in March and April they were more than 45,5%, almost half of the total amount of people coming in those months. Another significant example is the Afghan one: if in January- February no Afghan came in the office, in March and April they constitute between 13,5% and 15,5% of the total amount. Iraqis started to come only after the beginning of the Kurdish languages Skype Programmes. On the other hand, the percentages of TCNs coming from African Countries (Morocco excluded) was drastically reduced: if in January they constituted the 67,3% of the total amount, being the majority

⁶ The case of Bangladesh and Pakistan is different from the others because we had to stop their languages Programmes.

group, in April they represented only a 8,7%. These aspects are particular relevant because they prove the difficulties from some groups to have access to the Asylum Service.



A last important note about 2016 concerns the high number of Farsi Dari speakers arrested. In May 2016, 8 out of 10 people coming from Iran and Afghanistan had been arrested in the previous months. This does not have to bring to false conclusions but can be easily explained. In fact, before the 16th of March 2016 the Asylum Service did not give the card that protect TCNs from the police but gave only the appointment for the registration. However, the time between the successful Skype call and the appointment was very long lasting and, as already mentioned in the beginning, the “paper” given to Iranians and Afghans once arrived in Greece lasted only for one month. Since, for the example, the Afghans had a long time of waiting -on average for 67,4 days for families and 30,6 days for individuals, with a maximum of 124 days- it is clear why many of them were arrested in the previous months. We had the case of one Iranian couple that came in February for Skype and that, after a while, was arrested because the papers were already expired. In fact, the

appointment was given 36 days after the Skype call, which, for sure, was not done the day of their arrival in Greece.

However, in 2017, things have changed for the Farsi Dari speakers. In fact, even if it is really difficult to get through, the Farsi Dari speakers will have the appointment in only a few days. This is due to the fact that now, people coming from Afghanistan and Iran do not get the appointment in the main building of the Asylum Service, located in Katehaki, but get it in Pireas. In this sense, this allows a faster procedure.

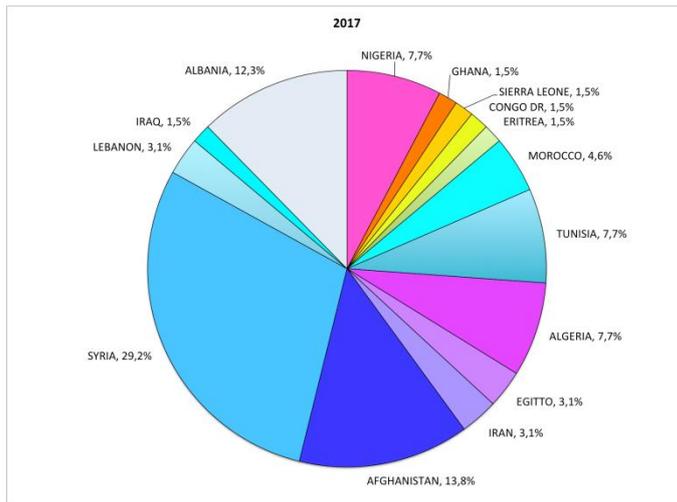
Skype statistics in 2017

After a frame of the situation in 2016, we now move on with the situation in 2017. The number of people coming everyday to Greece has dramatically decreased since the EU-Turkey Deal. It seems that almost 60.000 TCNs are in Greece now, and even if the situation is still difficult, from a numerical point of view (concerning new arrivals only), we are not anymore in a emergencial moment. We are not talking any more about more than 800.000 people reaching Greece; in fact, until the 7th of May 2017, only a little bit more than 3.000 people arrived in Greece⁷.

However, there are still many different problematic aspects. As it is clear from the table below, the number of TCNs we registered is very low: in 4 months we were able to register only 65 people (and the majority has not succeeded in the calls).

Country	January	February	March	April	Tot
Albania	5	2	1	0	8
Morocco	3	0	0	0	3
Algeria	2	2	1	0	5
Syria	4	5	4	6	19
Tunisia	1	4	0	0	5
Lebanon	1	1	0	0	2
Egypt	0	1	1	0	2
Iraq	0	1	0	0	1
Eritrea	1	0	0	0	1
Nigeria	0	3	2	0	5
Congo DR	0	0	1	0	1
Sierra Leone	0	0	1	0	1
Ghana	0	0	0	1	1
Afghanistan	1	1	5	2	9
Iran	0	0	0	2	2
TOTAL	18	20	16	11	65

⁷ <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83>



Since the number of TCNs we registered is very low, the graphics do not have much relevance in our report. As the chart suggests, however, the majority continue to come from Syria (29,2%), followed by TCNs from Afghanistan (13,8%) and Albania (12,3%). Differently from before, a consistent percentage comes also from Algeria and Tunisia (7,7% each).

Despite the low number of people registered, we still have a long list, there are still many people coming everyday to the office but we are not able to accept them. To understand the reason behind it, we have to move to the next table, concerning the number of answers we had each month.

Language	January 2017	February 2017	March 2017	April 2017	Tot.	Tot. Post March 13
Arabic	4	4	1	0	9	1
Fast Track	2	2	0	1	5	1
Farsi-Dari	1	1	2	0	4	2
English-French	0	2	2	0	4	1
TOT	7	9	5	1	22	5

In 2017, the Asylum Service picked up our calls really few times. In particular, after the last change in the timetable, occurred the 13th of March 2017, things became worse, culminating in April, when we had only 1 answer in 30 calling hours, that means that in 29 hours we did not have any answer at all. From the 13th of March until end of April, we had one answer for every 10 hours and 36 minutes. This is something completely different from last year: in fact, to give an example, collecting together Arabic, Farsi-Dari and English-French in March 2016, the Asylum Service picked our calls 18 times.

Despite the low number of answers, people continue to come, many of them saying that the Asylum Service told them to come to our office.

Conclusions

We now move to the conclusions of this report. We want to remark some important aspects, which we decided to separate from the analysis of the data.

First of all, the possibility to apply for the international protection is a fundamental human right, that has to be guaranteed. Skype, with all its problematic aspects, does not allow people seeking international protection to have easily access to their rights.

Moreover, since a person has to come many times to have an answer by the asylum service - with the "record" being held by an Afghan guy who has been coming 4 times a week, for four weeks now and he is still waiting for an answer- he/she can be arrested or deported even if he/she is trying to stay legally in Greece.



Third, the number of people calling the Asylum Service every day continues to be high, also because of people who arrived many years ago, but have no longer the permission to stay in Greece and have to do the same slow procedure.

All these aspects make TCNs even more vulnerable: not only because people that do not do Skype can be arrested at anytime and cannot go to hospitals, but also because there has been cases of people -conmen- who exploited the situation and asked money from TCNs to bring them to NGOs, which offer this service for free. Moreover, many TCNs come repeatedly to the city centre to do Skype, even if they live in shelters that are faraway from it; in this way, they put themselves more at risk to be arrested.

Skype, preventing people from going directly and physically to the Asylum Service, allows a higher percentage of mistakes by the TCNs: in fact, due to the complicated system, people who call by themselves, they do it on a wrong time, out of schedule or during other Programmes because they think there are more chances to get an answer. But this makes the service even less efficient, depriving chances for those who are calling at the right moment, for the right Programme.

There are also some nationalities that have more difficulties in getting through: for example there is only one hour in total for people speaking English and French. Since English-French is mainly for African Countries, probably one hour a week for two languages is considered enough. And think about Afghans and Iranians, who have to come repetitively. Last year they were coming minimum four times, this year we arrived at 14 times and there was still no answer! Well, probably the situation in Nigeria or in Cameroon -taking the two African Countries that mostly came to our office- together with the Afghans and Iranians are not considered enough problematic in order to take action and change the system.

Moreover, the fact that the Asylum Service gave – more than once- separated appointments for members of the same family, and sometimes it gave an appointment to the underaged (example, a baby and a very young child) and one separated from the rest of the family (mother, father and another child) is also a proof of the difficulties of the whole system, and not only of Skype.

TCNs continue to come to our office even if they know we are not able to accept them. Last year because there were too many people coming everyday and this year because the Asylum Service is not answering to our calls. The situation changes, but the problem remains the same: it does not matter how many arrivals there are every day in Greece, it is always difficult for a TCN to exercise his/her fundamental right to ask for international protection.

A long time has passed and now the situation is no more an emergency -from a numerical point of view- but the Asylum Service continues to have only one computer answering, also using the same system that everybody know is not working. They pick up- on average- 50 calls a day in the whole Greece and they do not have interpreters in languages such as Hindi, Chinese or Indonesian.

Moreover, from the EU-Turkey Deal and on, things became worse for TCNs and for us as well. After the Deal, in 2016, we had to face crowds of afraid people out of the office that wanted to do Skype. But, due to the system, we could not – and still cannot- accept everybody. I had- and we still have- to choose who can do and who cannot do Skype- aware of the risk that this choice could bring a TCN to prison, and aware of the conditions in which they are living here in Greece. These decisions should not be left to people working in small NGOs, but should be of the public sector. The fact that NGOs want to help and, for this



reason, offer services for free, does not mean that they have to substitute the competent authorities. And it does not mean -a priori- that NGOs have the right skills to do it. We were left without guidelines and everybody was saying that it is important to give priority to vulnerabilities. But what does vulnerability mean in this situation? Is it vulnerable to be an accompanied child, an orphan? A family? A pregnant woman of 1-5-7-9 months? A person with health or mental problems? A person who has already been arrested and risks to be deported?

When the number of TCNs you can accept is much too low, you know that the majority of them fulfil the criteria. And, following the criteria, the people excluded will enter the "vulnerable list" in a few months. This is why we accept also male adults, that so many times are excluded by other organizations.

But what is more important, is something really simple: all decisions have consequences. In 2016 when the Deal was signed, EU probably did not think about the situation this decision would create in Greece, not even to the lack of human rights TCNs would have to face. As if they did not know the problems that Greece was already facing. Now, as a humanitarian NGO, aware of the situation, we advocate that fundamental human rights -actual access to international protection included- should be guaranteed by the competent authorities.

For all these reasons, and since we must be ready for the future, we advocate that Skype procedure should stop and should be substituted with a more efficient and safe system. In particular, we suggest to decentralise the system in other offices of the Asylum Service, with the one located in Pireas included, allowing TCNs to go personally and directly there. In this way, on the one hand it would be easier and safer for the TCNs to ask for international protection and, on the other hand, the central Asylum Service based in Katerhaki will not face the same pressure it did in the past.