

**THE MIGRATION IMPACT OF NORTH AFRICAN REVOLUTIONS AND WHAT IT  
REVEALS ABOUT EUROPE***Ferruccio Pastore\**

North of the Mediterranean, the dominant media message and the prevailing public perception has been that the migration impact of the North African upheavals has been mainly felt in Europe. This is a deeply flawed perception. As a matter of fact, from mid-January till end-June 2011, almost 43,000 people, including around 24,000 Tunisians and others mostly from Sub-Saharan Africa, reached Italy by sea. By recent European standards, this is a considerable number but not a historical peak, which in the Italian case was reached in 1999 with 50,000 arrivals from war-torn Kosovo.

Those who landed in Sicily in 2011 only represent a tiny share of the total wave of refugees that the Libyan conflict has pushed towards neighbouring countries: as of 20th July, according to national statistics compiled by the IOM, over 630,000 migrants had left Libya. Slightly more than half of them were nationals of the country where they took refuge. The others (around 295,000) were nationals of third countries. To this massive outflow, one has to add the vast movements of Libyans who have temporarily fled across borders. These are more difficult to count due to a more intense and often unregistered circulation but, according to existing estimates, as of the end of June over 320,000 Libyans had crossed the Western border to Tunisia while some 173,000 had sought safety in Egypt.

The sum of these different streams make for very substantial numbers, especially for countries which are going through a most difficult political transition. In particular, for a country of 10 million inhabitants like Tunisia, hosting over half a million forced migrants and returnees – although many of them only temporarily –, it is as if Italy received more than three million in a few months.

This kind of “migratory Euro-centrism”, in other words, the distorted perception that we are the epicentre of the emergency, has uncovered a few important and generally unpleasant facts about the European politics of migration.

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### Uncovered Weaknesses

The first fundamental revelation (or rather confirmation) is that contemporary Europe has a very low and still decreasing capacity to deal with unexpected inflows, even when these are clearly driven by political factors and deserve international protection. Such a declining capacity to manage unforeseen population movements has obviously to do with the spiral of hyper-mediatization and hyper-politicization of migration in contemporary Europe: the more alarmist the dominant representation of immigration, the lower the threshold in our collective capacity to face unforeseen and unplanned flows. In other terms, the harsher the discourse on migration, the more vulnerable we are to it.

The second hidden fact which was mercilessly revealed by the migration impact of what is somehow optimistically and partially called the “Arab Spring” (it is not just Arab, it is unfortunately not full Spring), is the intrinsic weakness of the European migration control regime as developed over the past twenty years. At the end of 2010, the “fight against illegal immigration” across the Mediterranean seemed to be close to a successful conclusion and the landings on the southern coasts of Europe were reduced to a few hundred. But that control system, however expensive and complex, rested on brittle foundations: it was based on quid pro quo agreements with the autocrats in power on the other shore, and it was ultimately conditional upon their readiness and capacity to impose exit controls and systematic readmission of their own people and of transit migrants, mostly stemming from poor and diplomatically weak countries of origin.

Our migration management partners in North Africa only had the appearance of solidity and reliability. The EU's much celebrated integrated border control system was directly affected by their fall. The sudden collapse of exit restrictions in Southern Tunisia in the early phase of the Jasmine Revolution is the most evident example.

However, it should be added that, at least as far as Italy is concerned, the web of cooperative international relations on which effective migration controls are necessarily based was quickly restored. New agreements were signed between the Italian government and its new Tunisian counterpart on 5th April 2011, and with the Libyan National Transitional Council on 17th June.

Within a short time, new arrivals from Tunisia were effectively curtailed. Problems and perplexities, however, remain: in the first place, there are doubts about the long-term political wisdom and sustainability of such agreements. As a matter of fact, for a transparent and democratic government (as we officially hope our North African partners will soon be), enforcing restrictions on out-migration is generally more problematic and potentially delegitimizing than for a dictatorship.

Even more specific and serious perplexities arise from the new agreement between Rome and Benghazi, which has not been made public nor submitted to any scrutiny by the Italian Parliament. Like the pre-existing bilateral agreement signed with Gaddafi in summer 2008, in this case the compliance with basic international standards on international protection also seems highly dubious.

### **Trust under Stress**

The third and perhaps most disturbing aspect revealed by the European reactions to recent migration from North Africa concerns the weakness of the bonds of trust among Member States in the field of migration and mobility management. This was rather spectacularly highlighted by the row between France and Italy in spring 2011 over the interpretation of the Schengen provisions and the balance between free mobility and border controls within the common space.

Among the key European projects of the last decades, Schengen was apparently one of the most successful: perhaps less fundamental than the euro, but certainly less controversial; less deeply symbolic than the Eastern enlargement, but much less expensive. Until recently, Schengen was unanimously praised as a European success story. Yet, 20,000 young Tunisians rushing out of a country in chaos have been enough to shake the system to its foundations.

Italy, made fragile by years of propaganda depicting “illegal migrants” as a fatal threat, has not been able to keep the emergency under control. Or rather, it has been able to manage it well at humanitarian level, substantially reducing the number (in any case still unacceptably high) of migrants dying at sea. But, in political terms, the challenge has been circumvented through the expedient of humanitarian residence permits granted with the awareness (and the unconcealed hope) that the holders would use them to travel further to other European countries. The fact that European institutions and the other Member States have granted little more than nominal solidarity to Italy, which guards the external borders in the name and on behalf of the 27, is only partially an extenuating circumstance.

The short but sharp crisis burst in Rome-Paris relations has been overcome only on the basis of a reform hypothesis of the Schengen system which entails – although only as a last resort – the possibility of reintroducing internal border controls “in a truly critical situation where a Member State is no longer able to comply with its obligations under the Schengen rules” (as phrased in the Conclusions of the June European Council). Craving such an outcome (and the expected internal consensus boost associated with it), in May, the Danish government unilaterally reintroduced border controls with Germany and Sweden, with a move deemed “unjustified” by the Commission.

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The forward-looking and very tangible kind of European solidarity which, although merely calculated, governments have fielded in the face of the risk of a Greek default with the costly and painful decision to upgrade the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) has not been triggered off here. The reason for such a different approach is probably associated with the perception that the “migratory risk” can be contained within defined boundaries more effectively than the financial risk.

Perhaps this is true in the short term but in the long term interdependencies among Europeans are deep, including in the field of migration and mobility management. If a “fortress Europe” represents a hardly sustainable model, a cluster of small fortresses looks like a sure recipe for a rapid and contentious decline.

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