

THE MIGRATION CRISIS: ISSUE OR OPPORTUNITY?

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Due to its gigantic dimension, the current migration crisis is the most important political and public policy challenge the EU and its neighbouring countries are facing today. Nowadays, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey alone host 4,423,278 Syrian refugees. In EU countries, first time asylum applications passed from an annual average of 280,879 in 2010-2013 to reach 563,345 in 2014 and peak at almost one million (907,480) in 2015 (Eurostat). In the same period, irregular migrants arriving on EU southern borders passed from an annual average of 124,035 in the period 2010-2013 to peak at 252,384 in 2014 and skyrocket at more than 1 million people in 2015 (MPC; UNHCR). The number of dead at sea also increased from an annual average of 1,430 in 2010-2013 to 3,317 and 3,416 in 2014 and 2015, respectively (IOM).

Accordingly, from its beginning in the 2011, the migration crisis consistently worsened in 2014 to collapse in 2015. Why have EU policies been inefficient in addressing the crisis? What are the potential alternatives today? These questions are addressed here with a focus on the six countries concerned (namely, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Italy and Spain), aware that there is no unique recipe and that not even the end of the Syrian war would put an end to current migration flows – at least those including economic migrants.

So far, the EU has approached the migration crisis in three ways: a) cooperating with Eastern Mediterranean countries, namely Jordan, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey (Eastern route); b) fighting against smugglers (Southern route); and c) bargaining

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redistribution quotas between EU Member States (MSs) while installing hotspots in Southern Europe. However, all of these approaches have been inadequate to face the magnitude of the phenomenon.

Initially, the former approach was the most efficient in containing the migration pressure of Syrians and other migrants. Nevertheless, since mid-2015, the Eastern route has become the preferred way to try to reach the Schengen area, while the Southern route has diminished in its importance. This happened for two main reasons. First, the conditions of migrants staying in Eastern Mediterranean countries consistently worsened. In Turkey, since September, possibly hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers have been transported by Turkish authorities to isolated detention centres. Some of them reported being shackled for days on end, beaten and forcibly transported back to the countries they had fled (Amnesty International, 2015). Meanwhile, the worsened socioeconomic conditions of Syrians and refugees in Jordan and Lebanon have progressively led national authorities to further reduce refugee inflows from Syria while – in the Jordanian case – deporting a number of refugees who are already in the territory (Lucente, 2016). Second, migrants have started to opt for the Eastern route, which is less risky – with a lower probability of dying¹ – and controlled than the Southern one.

At the time of writing, a new plan of cooperation between EU and Turkey is being debated. To address the migration crisis, in addition to the speeding up of the EU payment of an undefined amount of money to Turkey, it contains the following two proposals: all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to Greece will be returned to Turkey; in exchange for every returned Syrian, one Syrian from Turkey will be resettled in the EU. However, many doubts remain: what will happen to returned people, as Turkey is not a full member of the Geneva Convention? What is their legal status? What about people in need of international protection other than Syrians (e.g. Afghanis)? Will Turkey be able to return them to their home country? Will all EU MSs agree to redistribute Syrians arrived from Turkey in exchange for other migrants? Overall, what is clear on the Eastern side is that

¹ In the second half of 2015, the probability of death at sea on the Eastern route was 0.9‰ vs. 10.7‰ of the Southern route (MPC).

Turkey – and Jordan and Lebanon – are no longer able to receive further flows as this would exacerbate their already precarious internal stability.

On the Southern route, where there is no government to cooperate with, fighting against smugglers was also unsuccessful. In fact, as soon as the control of smugglers increased, migrants opted for another route, namely the Eastern one. Fighting against smugglers' activities has never been the solution to stop irregular migration because as long as the demand exists new smugglers will replace old ones and old routes will be substituted by new (less controlled) ones.

As to the latter tool, bargaining quotas between EU MSs has not worked for well-known reasons. First, numbers are too low. The quota of 160,000 refugees to be redistributed between EU MSs is insignificant, especially if compared with more than 4 million Syrian refugees hosted and assisted today by Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq or Turkey. In addition, one should consider all other people in need of international protection coming from other areas of the world, such as Afghanistan, Horn of Africa, and so on. Second, notwithstanding the low number, the majority of EU MSs have said no to "migration quotas" due to internal pressures. Such a situation is not likely to change in the short term as the growth of right-wing movements and parties in many EU states demonstrates.

Accordingly, EU policies today seem short-sighted and driven by national electoral pressures. In contrast, only the efforts of some EU states have guaranteed a temporary solution to the gigantic crisis. It is worth mentioning the German initiative to guarantee prima facie recognition to Syrians; and the spectacular efforts of Italian but especially Greek authorities to save, help and host thousands of refugees reaching their coasts. Meanwhile, civil society, NGOs and European citizens are increasingly engaged in giving assistance to migrants.

Now it really is the time for the EU to react. Beyond numbers, the EU needs to adopt a common and solid political strategy towards such a gigantic phenomenon. The absence of a clear and rational strategy in terms of foreign politics has indeed contributed to the rise of xenophobic and nationalist parties and movements everywhere. Building up a common strategy within a new

perspective is absolutely a priority now. Closing borders to migration means losing a big opportunity in demographic and economic terms, and it seems that Germany well understood this. Due to the combination of increased longevity and a fall in fertility, the EU (and its Member States) is facing unprecedented population ageing with strong negative effects on welfare spending, innovation and labour market productivity. The EU needs a young workforce with both high and low skills. This is – paradoxically – especially the case of these Eastern EU countries that today are closing their borders for ideological and electoral reasons. In contrast, in Germany, half a million refugees *per year* would allow – at least in the short term – to compensate for its demographic deficit. And it goes without saying that Germany will become more and more the leader in the international scenario confronting the EU and its nearest geographical areas. Adopting a new perspective thus means looking at migration more and more as a resource rather than a problem. An opportunity and not an issue.

In the long term, the only feasible solution to take advantage of migration while saving thousands of lives is to allow people to enter legally in Europe within a relatively managed context at origin. Refugees and migrants should be enabled to travel by air with valid documents and visas. The *prima facie* recognition should be applied to Syrians following Germany's example. It is essential to face this enormous human tragedy. This solution had already been applied in the past – see Eastern Europe, Albania, the Balkans and, further afield, Indochina and also Latin America – and there has been no migrant invasion to date. The positive benefits in terms of circular movements are worth mentioning. The same should apply today to migrants from Syria. Meanwhile, creating safe corridors between Europe and unstable areas and secure specific segments of the journeys are part of the solution.

Moreover, regular channels should also be opened to refugees other than Syrians and economic migrants who risk their lives to reach Europe. Many of these asylum seekers are genuine refugees who have difficulty asking for humanitarian visas in the embassies of their country of origin. Obtaining a Schengen visa is also very challenging for those “economic migrants” who often find no other way to reach Europe than risking their lives. Giving everyone the possibility to ask for

humanitarian or other visas at the origin – rather than the destination – and increasing their protection is again part of the solution. Accordingly, the hotspots should be better located and moved from EU southern states to EU neighbouring countries, before migrants cross the Mediterranean (Fargues, 2015).

Adopting a new positive long-term approach would allow not only the current migration crisis to be managed but also the rise and spread of racist and nationalist movements to be fought against. To this end, investing in migrant integration is another priority. Integration is clearly a major challenge but we have to be fully optimistic. Over time, EU MSs have developed – with successes and failures – several good practices for improving integration conditions. European countries have been historically confronted with immigration flows, through which they learned how to facilitate integration practices. In the meantime, it is worth recalling that immigrants themselves are a select population. This means that those who arrive are – on average – more determined to succeed and integrate within host societies than those who stay at home. They are ambitious with strong human and social capital resources to use for their own and their children's integration trajectories. This frequently permits them a fast and rapid integration into European societies, i.e. successful stories which are too often not reported.

However, we frequently hear that additional migrants cannot be hosted because of the high levels of European unemployment, especially in southern countries. However, some facts allow for a better understanding of the relation between the presence of migrants and natives' employment performances. Empirical evidence confirms that migration is not correlated with unemployment: migrants are rational agents and go where employment opportunities exist. This also applies to Southern European states, where high levels of labour market segmentation by sector ensure that migrants and natives do not compete with each other for the same type of job. Not only is there no competition but complementary behaviours are observed (Di Bartolomeo & Marchetti, 2016). For instance, the large presence of migrant women employed as caregivers has long pushed native women to enter the labour force and search for desirable employment opportunities. This has particularly been the case for countries such as Italy or Spain, characterised by *familistic* welfare states which put a high social burden on families, in terms of

time and costs. Investing in new arrivals, increasing their skills, also at a high level, and creating new European citizens are the challenges of the EU societies of tomorrow, which will not only need caregivers but also graduates from abroad.

In summary, recognising the economic and demographic need of migrants in EU societies by adopting a new rational policy, opening regular channels of migration to the EU, managing migration flows at origin, pursuing rational and long-term integration policies, enhancing migrants' resources with specific attention not only to labour but also to family migrants (the latter constituting today an important portion of European labour markets) and strengthening cooperation programmes with countries of origin are key aspects of successful migration and integration stories. Last but not least, the role of the media is fundamental. No one is born racist but everyone can become racist when they are continuously bombarded by the negative effects of migration and diversity.

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