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The gap between expectation and reality

The EU cannot close its eyes to the deaths in the Mediterranean. It has to find a humane response to migration patterns

The European Union was initially sold on a mere practical foundation to the nations in the bloc: free market, prosperity, security, and easier travel. Early on, however, it seemed that the EU was entitled to become something larger in the view of its founding leaders. The European project was conceived as an experiment to transcend the race-based identity and zero-sum competition of nation-states, since it had brought disaster twice during the past generation.

Post-WWII, Halvard Lange, the Norwegian foreign minister, made a comparison with early American colonies and Europe at the time: Europe would be regional blocs that over time would cast off their identities and autonomy to form one unified nation. In 1949, the French foreign minister, Robert Schuman, called the initial stages of the Union '*a great experiment* that would *put an end to war* and *guarantee eternal peace*.' The current landscape of a fragmenting European Union would be hard to believe for Schuman and Lange.

The financial crisis, the debt crisis in Greece, the crisis in Ukraine, the Brexit crisis, and most obviously, the so-called refugee crisis have, with the hybridisation of the Schengen deal and inapplicability of the Dublin regulations – the minimum common rules on asylum seekers –, been challenging the legitimacy of the EU's foundations.

Even before the so-called refugee crisis, the increase in asylum seekers to EU member states has made the refugee regime waver. The number of asylum seekers to Europe rose from 20.000 in 1976 to 450.000 in 1990. Immigration fast became a vast concern; and refugees and asylum seekers were used as scapegoats for increasing under- and unemployment, rising crime rates, and fundamentalist terrorism.

The radical right parties began to appeal to the population who felt

threatened by globalisation, modernisation and economic integration. The French Front National was already gaining ground in the mid-1980s on the basis of addressing fears that refugees and immigrants would threaten the national and continental cultural homogeneity. A political turn to the right has been evolving ever since and especially in times of 'crisis'.

It's hard to maneuver with closed eyes

Today, more than 68 million people are displaced worldwide, fleeing ongoing and protracted conflicts, persecution, and climate change. The relatively small influx of refugees into EU – a mere 0,2 per cent of the total population – has been labelled 'the European refugee crisis'.

However, the so-called crisis was not new to the EU, despite the difference in the underlying causes and symbolic politics. The dissolution of the Soviet Union started a range of conflicts all over Eastern Europe, as states collapsed and new ones were formed. The migration from Eastern to Western Europe in the 1990s was welcomed and treated as an ideological victory of the liberal West. The contemporary situation, on the contrary, is being told as a foreign siege of Muslims who, with their different culture, are taking over Europe.

The crisis in Syria was on the way as early as 2011 – but only for those willing to observe it. Syria had by 2015, reached alarming four million refugees and eight million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Despite warnings from immigration experts, the EU was caught paralysed by the inflow of migrants. In an ongoing attempt to avoid a coherent response, the EU has continuously misjudged the real symptoms and underlying mechanisms of contemporary mass-migration.

In the beginning of 2015, the EU was primarily focused on the migration pattern it already knew – the economic migration from Africa over Spain, or over the Mediterranean to Italy and the islands of Sicily and Lampedusa. The rising numbers of migrant deaths and concerns of human smugglers made the EU stay focused on the African 'problem', while a larger crisis with a different and more complex migration pattern was playing out in the Middle East.

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The Valetta Summit in 2015 laid the grounds for the externalising Khartoum Process, and later the EU-Turkey deal and EU-Libya deal. It brought together the heads of the African Union (AU) and the EU. Simply put, through Khartoum Process the EU funds African

globalised world, which has taken the shape of a tragic and compulsive nature in recent time.

countries to keep migrants in their countries of origin, in return for development aid. While the Valetta Summit again focused on the traditional patterns of migration towards the EU, the second wave of migrants from the Middle East was peaking.

The EU's solutions to the crises have been inspired by short-term ad hoc symptom treatment, such as the closure of the route through the Western Balkans, the various deals Turkey and Libya, along with the increasing dissolution of the Dublin regulations put forward by the Italian interior minister Matteo Salvini's closure of all Italian ports for disembarkation of refugees and migrants.

The policies that have the official objective of disrupting human smugglers – the externalisation deals (the Khartoum Process, the EU-Turkey deal, and the EU-Libya deal) – are in reality fueling their very cause, while closing the eyes to death and deterrence. They are part of keeping the anti-immigration narrative of the far-right project alive, while at the same time comprising international laws and humane obligations.

The EU-backed million Euro Italy-Libya deal is, by funding the Libyan Coast Guard, detaining refugees in inhumane camps, and actively avoiding any responsibility towards the people in need.

This deal is symptomatic for the general response of the EU, of keeping migrants in their countries of origin by aiding strict migration control, while at the same time pushing the responsibility of human rights back to the sending countries. This means that most refugees and migrants are without legal rights to apply for asylum in Europe, since the only way to possibly get asylum granted, is to reach Europe through illegal means and dangerous routes.

Solving the real problems

The real problem, the ongoing crises in the Middle East and in Africa, however still remains. Domestic political tensions have created divisions among the EU member states, and concentrically vice versa. Despite these obvious tensions, the EU leaders have kept the real challenges on hold – and on distance.

In 2018, more than 2000 people died in the attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea, as a result of the EU imposed increasingly dangerous routes and forced illegal means for migrants. Despite that the numbers of

migrants reaching Europe are decreasing, the death rates are continuing to rise.

But the EU cannot close its eyes off future migration patterns. There is no doubt that refugees will keep coming to Europe from the protracted conflicts of the Middle East and Africa, or at least attempt to do so by risking their lives.

Human migration is a symbolic manifestation and a vector of transformation of the globalised world, which has taken the shape of a tragic and compulsive nature in recent time. We are witnessing the increase of the nation state's security apparatus and politics of fear on a larger scale, especially around 'Fortress-Europe'. The contemporary nature of these phenomena – globalisation and migration – are getting fueled by an increasing integration of trade, capital, goods, services, and communication networks. But despite this vast global interconnectivity, there's an antagonism to the free movement of people – especially if they flee for their lives, are poor, culturally different, or just holders of the wrong passport.



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