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The populists' worst nightmare

The non-binding UN migration pact is nothing less than a historic first step to deliver global solutions to global problems

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Populists and nationalists in Germany often describe the UN migration pact as a secret agreement with the aim of changing the demographics so that Germany becomes a 'settlement area', a 'state without sovereign rights'. They claim that the pact would open the gates to floods of people moving to Germany and Europe. What's behind such an interpretation?

The answer is straightforward. It's the populists' worst nightmare that a majority of states talk about migration in an objective way and understand it as part of human history. Even worse, these states think it's valid to organise migration in an ordered, humanly dignified, fair manner – and, above all, make this transparent to the respective populations.

Based on the initiative of then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the heads of state and government of all the UN member states met on 19 September 2016 to discuss migration as a global problem and to find common approaches to regulate and manage migration. Hence the title of the pact that they're aiming for: 'Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration'.

It was the first time that so many states had met to talk about the various causes of migration and about their different perspectives: about destination countries as well as about countries of origin, about the causes and the motivations for migration and about the rights of migrants. They quickly agreed that, within the whole area of migration, the issue of people taking flight is a particular aspect. This was therefore handled separately in the Global Compact for Refugees. The UN Global Compact for Migration, however, will now be adopted in Marrakesh on 11 and 12 December.

Austria's disingenious course of action

A first version of the pact, the so called 'zero draft', has already been publicly available since February 2018. Since July 2018, the final draft has been publicly accessible. It's a mere 34 pages. Public attention was not particularly high and there is a reason for that. The proposal looks objectively at different aspects, in particular labour migration. It's about a declaration of intent – more than that would've not been possible with all countries' different interests. That was certainly clear to all the participants from the outset.

Presumably, the elaboration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is now 70 years old, served as a blueprint. The declaration was elaborated in a non-binding way and, unfortunately, today it's violated everywhere again and again. And yet a basis – above all after the horrors of World War II – was put in place, which today we consider as our values.

The pact is also not legally binding. That's stated explicitly in the text.

Despite all of this, numerous state actors have been pursuing a disingenuous course of action. On 20 September 2017, Austria's then Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz welcomed the elaboration of a global migration pact in his speech to the UN General Assembly. He said that the pact could support countries of origin to offer prospects locally to the young generation.

But three months later, Kurz became Chancellor and formed a coalition with the populist right wing Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). In October 2018, the coalition withdrew its support for the migration pact. This decision did not only elicit disappointment for a large part of the international community. It also threw light on the fact that the debate about the migration pact was not so much about its actual content. It was much more about an ideological and political instrumentalisation of fears in connection with migration to Germany and Europe.

Austria justified its decision with misgivings about the sovereignty of the nation state. This can be easily invalidated by looking at the text of the pact itself. In point 15c of the paper it says unambiguously: 'The Global Compact reaffirms the sovereign right of States to determine their national migration policy and their prerogative to govern migration within their jurisdiction, in conformity with international law.'

A starting point for international cooperation

The pact is also not legally binding. That's stated explicitly in the text. It remains a declaration of intent of around 180 states to approach the challenges of global migration movements together in the future. The elaboration of national implementation plans for the pact's 23 goals is entirely voluntary. But the declaration calls for further and more goal-oriented discussions – and action to be taken. How can you argue against talking more about children's and women's rights, about access to education, about tackling forced labour and human trafficking or the effort, in times of 'fake news', to build political action again on the basis of verifiable facts?

I will underline something once again: the goals and recommendations in their non-binding nature were shaped in knowing that, with all the different interests and preconditions of states as well as the diverse political streams, otherwise we would've probably never come to an agreement. But that's exactly why the pact is such a huge success. It defies populism and baiting against migrants, which has become socially acceptable in the meantime, and talks jointly about their prospects and about the different interests of the countries.

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What critics don't like to mention: Germany already largely meets the minimum standards that the pact is calling for. So the pact will not produce a higher level of welfare for migrants in Germany. But there's hope that conditions in other countries will markedly improve. What critics also don't like to mention: people are also being exploited in this part of the world. Reports about working conditions in slaughterhouses, in the construction or in the care sector as well as several court proceedings against companies make that abundantly clear. Frustrated, skilled workers have already left European and third countries.

The pact also doesn't want to promote 'brain drain', but rather give prospects to people in their countries of origin as well as in destination countries much closer to their homeland. It aims 'to mitigate the adverse drivers and structural factors that hinder people from building and maintaining sustainable livelihoods in their countries of origin, and so compel them to seek a future elsewhere.' And this concerns political, economic, social and environmental factors of living conditions. Of

course, the pact could've mentioned every single cause of migration, including free trade areas or arms exports, and tried to create a sort of all-encompassing, detailed plan for the improvement of the world. But such an overreach would've not have served the primary goal of building a broad consensus in the international community for common measures. In fact, the opposite would have been the case.

At the provisional end of a strenuous political effort, there's a historically unprecedented letter of intent by nearly all states to devote themselves objectively and constructively to the subject of migration. Companies, NGOs and migrant organisations also took part in this letter of intent. A conclusion of civil society actors, including *Brot für die Welt*, have closely accompanied the negotiations and credit it with many positive achievements. They rightly talk of a start for further important steps in terms of international cooperation and implementation of the goals that have been set. We should not let this beginning be damaged by cheap propaganda. Instead, we should follow up with an effort to create safer, more ordered and more regular migration around the world.



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