

The changing Face of Migration Flows

Stefano Bertozzi

Migration continues to be an integral part of the political landscape in several European capitals, especially at a time when national or local elections are approaching. Nearly all EU member states are under pressure in one way or another from external challenges, but some are under constant pressure from migration flows.

Potential migrants have seemingly managed to defeat even the most arduous of conditions on maritime routes throughout the winter. In January and February 2015, for example, the number of illegal crossings detected at some border hotspots, including the Central Mediterranean, the Western Balkans and the land border between Turkey and Bulgaria, reached new records.¹ Compared with the same period in 2014, illegal crossings increased by over 40% in the Central Mediterranean,² by over 123% across the sea border between Turkey and Greece,³ by over 160% across the land border between Turkey and Bulgaria⁴ and by an astronomical 990% in the Western Balkans.⁵

The main reasons behind these figures are quite clear. Syrian and Afghanistan nationals are travelling via the land border between Turkey and Bulgaria as a result of the deteriorating security conditions in Libya. Before Greece built a wall in 2012, these migrants used to reach the Western Balkans via the land border between Greece and Turkey. Then they did it via Bulgaria, which reacted by starting to construct a long fence along its border with Turkey, in turn having a knock-on effect on the number of border crossings. The porous nature of Bulgaria's borders was one

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ISBN : 978-2-36567-371-6
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¹ See <http://frontex.europa.eu/news/situational-update-on-migratory-flows-in-february-2015-R7H>

² 7,834 illegal border crossings registered

³ 4,474 illegal border crossings registered

⁴ 561 illegal border crossings registered.

⁵ 26,647 illegal border crossings registered.

of the reasons why other Schengen member states turned down Bulgaria's application to accede to the agreement, as they also did with Romania's. This gate to the EU, however, seems to have gained strong currency again as recent changes in migration routes show an increased use of the Greek sea border. Kosovans also look for an escape route and seek asylum⁶ in EU countries.

This analysis also highlights the fact that the ramshackle boats setting sail off the coast of Libya in an attempt to cross the Mediterranean, therefore, are not only composed of Syrians or potential refugees from other Middle Eastern countries. Syrians also face the additional challenge of visas now that Algeria and Tunisia have introduced more rigorous entry requirements for them. These boats in actual fact carry people from many Sub-Saharan countries, whose numbers are growing - this in spite of the end of the Mare Nostrum safe and rescue operations, which were perceived as a pull factor. Instead, these migrants are flocking *en masse* to the shores of Libya. Hell-bent on getting to Italy, they endure forced labour and tremendous hardship while staying in Libya. Serious security concerns do not deter these desperate people from pursuing their goal of reaching Europe. Unless Europe can reduce the number of boats landing in Italy and block other EU land cross-border points, the flow of migrants will increase even further. For those migrants who do make it to the EU's shores, fair and efficient asylum procedures need to be quicker to detect those who are in need of international protection. A swift and more humane return policy for those who are not entitled to asylum should then be implemented in close cooperation with third countries. However, member states should promptly consider practical and politically consensual ways of addressing the heart-wrenching humanitarian crisis currently unfolding at the EU's southern external borders, including via increased solidarity among themselves and the opening of legal migration channels to the EU.

A further aspect of current migration flows is the changing attitude of smugglers, who have become not only more brutal and violent than before but also better organised. They treat migrants as chattels and force them to board unseaworthy inflatable dinghies even in perilous weather conditions. They carry guns to attack any vessel that attempts to prevent them from recovering the boats used to carry the first load of migrants. All the encounters between the Italian Coastguard and armed smugglers have occurred close to the Libyan coastline. This is because they need to hold on to their "fleets" so as to be able to service the growing number of customers and to minimise any outlay on other boats. Smugglers have also taken advantage of the lawless situation in Libya to step up their efforts to ferry migrants across the Mediterranean. They have more inflatable craft as these can be found more easily and they have revised their departure timetables so that they can transport more migrants at shorter intervals. The entire smuggling enterprise is therefore designed to maximise profits over the shortest period of time at the expense of both migrants and those EU member states bordering the Mediterranean.

There is also a potential new migration front. The terrible situation in Ukraine could turn into a source of population movement. At present, there has been a drop in regular passenger flows from the Russian Federation, mainly due to the sharp economic downturn and the marked depreciation of the Russian rouble and Ukrainian hryvnia. This reduction has been particularly noticeable at the Finnish-Russian border and at the Norwegian and Polish borders. On the other hand, in 2014 regular passenger flows from Ukraine increased at the EU's external borders, this increase being predominantly related to the purchase of goods such as tobacco, alcohol and fuel.

⁶ Asylum encompasses both the Refugee status under the 1951 Geneva Convention and the EU highest standards of subsidiary protection.

These migration trends reveal not only how daunting the migration challenge has become but also how unsatisfactory Europe's response to this challenge has been. Even viewed through the rosier of spectacles, European initiatives have been operationally patchy and politically half-hearted. Europe's political reluctance to put together a coherent and robust migration policy has had the unintended effect of turning a blind eye to ever-growing migration flows and led to bitter recriminations between the member states. As I have said in another article,⁷ the financial and human resources, including operational means, made available by Europe for the period 2014-2020 to cope with the migration, integration and asylum challenges are embarrassingly meagre, amounting to less than 0.33% of the EU's total budget or €3 billion. Frontex has been left stranded with the same level of resources and tools even though it is obvious that these are not enough to address this growing flow of asylum seekers and irregular migrants. Migration flows are less mixed than in the first decade of the XXIst century since asylum seekers are far more numerous than irregular economic migrants.

This is a point that needs stressing. According to Eurostat, asylum applications in the EU increased from under 200,000 in 2006 to 626,000 at the end of 2014. In 2014, the highest numbers of applicants came from Syria, Afghanistan and Kosovo. In the third quarter of 2014, asylum seekers lodged 177,000 applications in the EU, a 50% rise over the same period in 2013. In the fourth quarter of 2014, the number of applications from Ukrainians increased twenty-fold on the last quarter of 2013. During this last quarter of 2014, Germany (65,100 applicants), Hungary (28,600), Italy (21,100), Sweden (21,100) and France (16,800) accounted for 75% of the 211,000 applications received in all EU member states. It is worth noting that while for Italy these figures are double the number of applications received, for France the numbers are slightly down. Germany received more asylum applications than Italy, France and Sweden put together (59,000), which may be due to several factors including higher acceptance rates and rosier economic prospects. Asylum is another area where Europe is divided into 28 different asylum systems and even the establishment of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), which came on stream in June 2011, has yielded less than satisfactory results in terms of creating a consistent, harmonised and fair asylum policy. In the United Kingdom, the main issue concerns irregular migrants, and the Home Office recently released figures showing that forty illegal immigrants are detained each day as police have raided Chinese, Indian and Pakistani restaurants, petrol stations and car washes. This figure has doubled since 2010 when the number of arrests was 20 a day.

All this information is available in all the important decision-making bodies of EU countries. However, other political and economic considerations tend to prevail. While making some headlines and being the subject of selected TV programmes, migration issues remain a topic that politicians prefer to avoid unless obliged by pressing circumstances. Migration touches upon domestic and foreign policies (security and integration and relations with third countries and parties, as well as relevant EU institutions and international organisations), reflects the status of a country's economy (an increase in highly skilled migrants is a measure of a country's economic might and attractiveness), indicates the quality of higher education on offer (again, an increase in the number of foreign students is a measure of the quality of your universities) and helps countries whose fertility rates are gradually diminishing to sustain the financial soundness of their public finances. A look through the migration lens highlights a number of political and economic developments and some of them seem to be less positive than others. Continuing to put off the migration challenge will not make it go away. It will merely make it worse.

⁷ S. BERTOZZI, Are Europe's migration funds adequate to meet growing challenges? IFRI, September 2014.