

The “European Migration Crisis” in reality

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HRWF (17.12.2019) - After the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011, Europe has experienced an influx of asylum seekers. This reached a peak during the so-called “long summer of migration” in 2015, when over 1 million people reached the European Union (EU). (1)

Migrants, most of whom were fleeing Syria (49%), Afghanistan (21%), and Iran (9%), (2) escaped war and destruction by embarking on the deadliest migration route - the Mediterranean Sea - where 1603 people have died since 2014. (3)(4) Initially, countries such as Turkey, Greece, and Bosnia were countries of transit, but the EU-Turkey agreement in March 2016, transformed them into countries of destination. As of 2019, Turkey has continued to host the world’s largest number of refugees. It hosts 3.6 million Syrian nationals and close to 400,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers of other nationalities, mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. (5)

This migratory phenomenon very quickly caught the attention of the EU public regardless of whether they lived in countries along the external border or not. This was partially due to the media coverage it received. Migrants themselves contributed to this increased visibility by recording their journeys and sharing them on social media. (6) For the first time, the general public had live access to this mass movement of people via all media platforms. (7) Despite some media framing the arrivals as a benefit to host societies, research conducted for UNHCR about the media coverage found that, overall, refugees and migrants have tended to be framed negatively as a problem. (8) According to a report published by the Ethical Journalism Network, most media covering issues on migration and refugees often failed to tell the full story and instead promoted anti-migrant sentiments. (9)

In the beginning, some EU member states demonstrated openness and hospitality. In 2015, Germany suspended the application of the Dublin regulation -which establishes that the first Member State in which a person arrives is responsible for the examination of their asylum application- so as to rapidly receive asylum seekers. On the other extreme, some states voiced their strong opposition, with a few building fences along their external borders. (10)

States with more open migration policies faced strong criticism when the terrorist attacks occurred in Paris in 2015. This was exacerbated by the assaults perpetrated in Cologne on New Year’s Eve of that same year. (11)

The media coverage of these two attacks inferred a connection between newcomers and the violence, which provoked this general shift of opinion about migrants and asylum seekers.

However, other than the first jihadist terrorist act in Europe in the 2004 Madrid bombings by Al-Qaeda, 72% of the perpetrators of subsequent attacks have been EU citizens. (12) This demonstrates that European jihadism is home grown instead of a result of “outsiders”, and so should not be linked to the 2015 “migrant crisis”. Despite this, even the EU countries that had initially welcomed migrants adapted much stricter migration policies. (13)

The migratory flow, which saw its peak in 2015, has received the name of the “migration crisis” and it has been described as “the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War.” (14)

Indeed, over the past five years the EU has received a large amount of asylum seekers (1.8 million since 2014), (15) but it is by no means the greatest crisis since WWII. The alarmist rhetoric used by the media and politicians alike has created a general sense of panic and the inaccurate framing of this issue has enabled the growth of far-right political parties.

The so-called “migration crisis” has often been compared with the crises of 1990 and 2000 after the war in Yugoslavia and its dismemberment. Even though the number of people arriving in Europe from the Middle East and Africa has recently been very high, the comparisons between these two phenomena have been based on total numbers instead of being proportionate to the population at the time. (16)

As recently as in 1991, the number of people arriving in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland from the Balkans was over 1 million. Germany received 663.000, Austria 198.000, and 141.000 individuals arrived in Switzerland. (17) Additionally, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, West Germany witnessed the arrival of 3.2 million Aussiedlers. During the Kosovo war of 1999 and 2000, the EU received around 1 million asylum applications, which is as many as in 2015.

However, in 2015 there were 743 million people living in Europe, 20 million more than in 2000. Thus, when examining it through the context of the total population of Europe each time, there were more migrants in 1999 than in 2015. (18) Therefore the impact of asylum seekers in Europe has been much lower than in the 1990 and 2000 crisis. (19) Moreover, in 2015 and 2016, the total asylum applications in EU countries, was only representative of 0.2% of the total population of the EU. (20)

The inappropriate use of the term “migration crisis” to describe this influx of people has contributed to the erroneous perception that migrants are overwhelming the EU as a whole. Unfortunately, due to many flaws within the Common European Asylum System, especially the Dublin Regulations, external EU States such as Italy and Greece have not had the resources to cope with the incoming migrants.

It could be argued that it is more appropriate to call this migratory phenomenon the “migration reception crisis.” The numbers and context highlight that this was and still is a failure in the EU’s ability to receive asylum seekers. Despite warning signs with escalating conflicts in the Middle East, the EU did not prepare for the amount of people who would arrive in dire need of protection and assistance.

For example, Spain received 102.000 asylum applications in 2019, making it one of the top three EU states to receive the highest amount of applications. However, it continues to use a computer programme from the 1990s and the same permanent staff since it was created in 1992. This is despite the Spanish Ombudsman warning Spanish authorities six years ago that the asylum system needed updating. Spain has now taken on 40 times more applications than in 2012 with almost the same resources. (21)

This example is a reflection of political unwillingness and extreme division within the EU rather than a sign of the EU altogether being incapable of receiving these individuals.

The general sense that these newcomers pose a threat has led to policies such as the externalization of borders with the EU-Turkey agreement, the criminalisation of aid provided to migrants, and the building of fences.

These responses have had direct consequences on the lives of asylum seekers and migrants, as well as for the EU itself. One alarming result of the crisis rhetoric since 2015 is that right-wing political groups have attracted more supporters and become emboldened, jeopardizing the foundational values of the EU.

The lack of a unified strategy created a humanitarian crisis at the EU’s external borders and a general culture of xenophobia in many Member States. Without serious reforms to the EU’s migration policies, fortress Europe will continue to have overwhelmingly negative consequences on the lives of millions of people, both outside and within EU borders.

It is a clear contradiction for the EU to position itself as a champion of human rights at a global level while simultaneously closing its borders to those most in need of protection. Europe cannot pretend to be the land of the most developed states and at the same time close its borders when it is the cause of part of the damage of this world.

Is this the Europe we want to build together? A Europe in which full enjoyment of basic human rights are restricted to a privileged minority?

Sources

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