

'FORTRESS EUROPE' AND ITS IMMIGRATION CRISIS: A DISCUSSION THAT'S NOT ENTIRELY NEW

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Europe has historically been an emigrant continent. Millions of European citizens emigrated from Europe over the centuries in search of new opportunities and new lives. Forced migration also shaped the continent's demographics, as a result of multiple wars fought over the centuries. In recent times Europe has been transformed from an emigrant to an immigrant continent. Decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s was marked by a substantial influx of people from Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia to their former colonial powers. At the same time, a rise in intra-European migration flows was recorded, especially in the periods following the end of the Cold War, the Yugoslav war, as well as the Eastern Enlargements of the Union in the wake of the new century.

The discussion concerning migration flows in and out of Europe is thus not entirely new. What is different however is that the current flow into Europe combines a mixture of economic immigrants and asylum seekers from Africa -especially Eritrea due to human rights abuses- the Middle East -most notably lately from Syria- and South Asia -mainly from Afghanistan. In fact, the majority of those who have reached Europe by boat so far this year are from these three countries. Other main countries of origin currently include Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Libya, Sudan, Nigeria and Somalia.

In their attempt to cross to Europe in flimsy rubber dinghies and unsafe wooden fishing boats, a lot of these people die at sea. Tragedies such as the April shipwreck off Italy's Lampedusa Island that killed about 800 people, the August wreck involving two boats from Libya carrying about 500 people, are just some notable examples among many, with the number of dead now reaching at least several thousands.

It is undoubtedly the most significant migration flow into Europe in the continent's history and it is affecting many different EU countries in a frenzied and overwhelming capacity. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that at least 350,000 migrants crossed the EU borders between January-August 2015, compared with just 280,000 during the whole of 2014. The statistics are however rather murky, as they do not include the many who crossed the borders undetected.

EU countries were not prepared for this massive influx and the gravity of the problem is greater than ever before; and as its scale puts insurmountable pressure upon them (both economic and political), they are unable (and in many cases unwilling) to handle the situation. Pre-

existing economic problems, concerns over national security and growing xenophobia, are dominating the discussion. Indeed the already floundering economies of many Eastern and Southern European countries are threatened with further burden.

In relation to Greece, where concern about immigration reached record heights after a summer of chaos, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recently called for urgent reinforcements of personnel and resources in order to effectively deal with the challenges posed by the large number of refugee arrivals, especially in Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Kos, Rhodes, Leros and Evros. The UNHCR called for the urgent improvement in reception conditions and the need for additional accommodation for refugees, the distribution of sleeping bags, mats, soaps and other relief items, as well as the provision of legal information and counselling. And while across the Atlantic Donald Trump is proclaiming that if elected President he will build a wall to solve US' immigration problems, Hungary has built a 175km razor-wire fence along its border with Serbia, while at the same time instructing its EU neighbours not to send back immigrants who have already crossed from Hungary to other EU countries.

All these have laid bare the many shortcomings of EU immigration policy. Even though under the Dublin regulation refugees are required to claim asylum in the member state in which they first arrive, a lot of destination countries -like Hungary- are allowing (or forcing) migrants to pass through to other EU countries. Opinions on how to respond to the crisis are divided, with EU states currently at each other's throats over disputes concerning immigrant quotas.

It is unlikely that the migration wave will abate in the months ahead, while it is equally unlikely that the EU will find a solution to its problem. Will it try to integrate the many who have penetrated 'Fortress Europe' so far? Will it try to consolidate its 'fort' by finding yet more elusive solutions to stem immigration? Or will it continue exporting political (and economic) chaos by overthrowing another Ghaddafi regime in the future?