Managing the Refugee Crisis: New Approaches

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The Refugee Crisis and the EU – New Challenges

The largest refugee crisis since the Second World War became a major challenge for the EU in 2015. The crisis is far from over and the need for managing the difficult tasks seems to be interconnected with a political crisis in the EU. The Brexit referendum can be seen as a symptom of the EU's own internal crisis, and there is hardly any doubt that the refugee crisis played an important role in the end result of the British vote. Whether the difficult internal political situation in the EU will create insurmountable challenges for EU-27 in tackling the refugee crisis remains to be seen.

In order to handle the challenges, the EU has to realize that it has become more dependent on partner states: Turkey, states in the Arab Mediterranean, and states in Africa and Asia. The EU's new bilateral, partnership-based policies, launching the concept of Compacts as a key component, seem to be relevant for the purpose. However, as is often the case, the devil is in the detail. Much will depend on the actual content of the migration partnership frameworks, and to what extent the EU-27 can mobilize consensus behind necessary, but also costly and maybe controversial measures in the bilateral agreements.

The tragic development in Syria since the start of the armed confrontations in 2011 has resulted in the displacement of more than five million Syrian refugees to neighbouring countries, in particular Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. This significant number of Syrians has obviously attracted attention in the hosting countries and in the international community, but it is important to underline that the refugee crisis is part of complex and uncontrolled migratory movements in the wider Mediterranean region and beyond (involving countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia as well), sometimes referred to as the Mediterranean migration crisis (Panebianco, 2016 and Jeandesboz, 2016).

Refugees and the EU–Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016

In the course of 2015, according to international organizations, more than one million refugees and migrants arrived in Europe, 300-400% more than in 2014. The number of refugees and migrants arriving in Greece increased dramatically and the eastern Mediterranean route surpassed the central Mediterranean route in numbers. Starting from November 2015, the EU and Turkey held meetings in which the foundation for cooperation related to the crisis was negotiated – and in March 2016 an agreement was reached. The deal was issued by the European Council and became known as the EU-Turkey Statement, 18 March 2016 (European Commission, 2016). The most significant element of the EU-Turkey Statement was that while all refugees and migrants crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek Islands should be returned to Turkey, for every Syrian readmitted to Turkey another Syrian should be resettled from Turkey to the EU. While the number of arrivals in Greece from April to August 2015 was 225,505, in the same period of 2016 it fell to 12,210. In addition to that, the number of people drowning in the Aegean Sea was dramatically reduced.

So even though some argued that the decline in numbers preceded 18 March 2016, the EU-Turkey Statement undoubtedly had a significant impact on the number of refugees arriving in Greece from Turkey. From the side of the EU, the ambition with the Statement was to reduce the inflow of irregular migrants into Greece and to prevent human smugglers from running a major business in the Aegean Sea. Furthermore the EU had political ambitions of promoting human rights standards inherent in international refugee regimes.

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With the EU-Turkey Statement an indirect link was established between the recent refugee crisis and the EU-Turkey accession negotiations initiated in October 2005. The benefits regarding these aspects of the negotiations seem mainly to have been reaped by the EU. One of the dimensions, accelerating implementation of the EU-Turkey visa liberalization roadmap, remains on hold, and very little progress has been seen when it comes to the opening of new chapters as part of Turkey's EU accession process.
Seen from the Turkish side, and despite these negative realities, the partnership with the EU concerning the refugees lies in Turkey's foreign policy interest. First of all, Turkey needs the financial aid from the EU to cover the substantial expenses related to hosting almost three million Syrian refugees. Secondly, the refugees endow Turkey with a strong asset in migration diplomacy with the EU, underlining the common interests of the two parties in dealing with the challenges related to the refugee crisis.

The Need for New Approaches

The EU-Turkey Statement constitutes a new and significant element in the international patchwork of regimes and practices attempting to regulate the movements of refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean. Since the EU-Turkey Statement has contributed to reducing the flow of refugees and migrants arriving in the EU, it is relevant to ask if the model can be replicated in other contexts in the Mediterranean. The fact that within a short time the 28 EU Member States were able to find internal consensus behind the agreement emphasizes how seriously the situation in late 2015 and early 2016 was perceived in the EU.
Obviously there are many differences between the situation in Turkey, with the country's relatively high level of economic development and its accession process with the EU, and the situation in the Arab Mediterranean context, with low growth and cooperation with the EU based on the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The need, however, for establishing institutional frameworks for migration management, where the EU works together with the partners south and east of the Mediterranean, is, in some ways, similar.
North Africa and the Sahel Belt are transit regions for large numbers of refugees and migrants, and at the same time, albeit at different levels, are themselves producers of potential migrants for the European labour market. Seen from the EU perspective, future migration diplomacy is about creating trade-offs, where the decisive element is that the partners agree to take back as many as possible of the irregular migrants arriving in the EU.
From the side of the southern and eastern partner states, the interests are about obtaining significant advantages from future talks and agreements. Similar to what was agreed on in the EU-Turkey Statement, the EU and the relevant partner states will initially have to agree on the conditions for the return of irregular migrants. The southern partners will probably be worried that by accepting binding agreements they might lose a strong negotiation asset.
Furthermore they will fear that if their neighbouring states do not accept similar agreements at the same time, they will stand in a weakened position in a regional perspective. A precondition for a well-functioning relocation system far from European soil will probably be that the EU Member States should be willing to accept higher numbers of refugees arriving and resettling in Europe. This part of the procedure has not been successful in the EU-Turkey context, partly due to a lack of solidarity among the EU Member States.

To sum up, if the EU-Turkey Statement is going to be implemented with southern partner states, significant financial packages will be necessary from the side of the EU in order to persuade the given states to accept the return of irregular migrants. The fact that the EU-Turkey Statement has been relatively successful gives no guarantee for acceptance or workability of similar agreements elsewhere in the Mediterranean region.

New Tendencies in Mediterranean Migration

The Bratislava Summit of 16 September 2016, where the 27 EU Member States as a result of Brexit met without the UK, was devoted to "diagnos[ing] together the present state of the European Union and discuss[ing] our common future," as was said in "The Bratislava Declaration." Despite this broad description of the intentions behind the meeting, it was obvious that the challenges from the situation in the Mediterranean constituted the main focus. The ambitions of the meeting were to restore control of the external borders, but also to ensure internal and external security and to fight terrorism.

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The roadmap from the summit stipulates that it is a main objective "never to allow return to uncontrolled flows of last year and further bring down the number of irregular migrants" (Council of the European Union, 2016). The "uncontrolled flows" have, as mentioned, had severe consequences for the EU. It is therefore important to keep the EU-Turkey Statement afloat, but at the same time, it is necessary to ensure that the statement is not undermined by new developments in other parts of the Mediterranean. According to the UNHCR, the tendencies concerning refugees in the central Mediterranean in 2016 meant that this route again became the largest in terms of numbers.

Compared to 2015, when 153,000 refugees and migrants reached Italy, in 2016 there were 181,436 arrivals. Almost 60% were from Nigeria or Eritrea, and Syrians were not represented among the 10 largest groups of refugees. The "closing" of the eastern route in other words did not lead to a significant transfer of Syrian refugees to the central route.

In 2017, as noted by the European Commission, the effects of the EU-Turkey Statement were consolidated in the eastern Mediterranean, so that relatively low numbers of refugees and migrants arrived in Greece. Furthermore, reduced numbers of deaths in the Aegean Sea were confirmed (European Commission, 2017a). However, in the central Mediterranean higher numbers of refugees and migrants arrived in Italy, primarily via Libya as a transit hub.

Due to the fragmented political situation in Libya, it seems realistic that these tendencies will continue. Libya is continuously unstable and for the foreseeable future will probably be a country where widespread human smuggling and trafficking take place. The political and social realities in the Sahel Belt and south of that are not improving – the same is the case in Asian and Middle Eastern countries involved in the migratory movements.

In the western Mediterranean, the overall figures regarding refugees and migrants in 2017 are still sizably lower than in the central and eastern regions. However, according to Frontex the number of illegal sea crossings to the Spanish mainland from North Africa was significantly higher in 2016 than in 2015, and this tendency seems to be continuing in 2017 (Frontex, 2017).

Replacement Migration and Mobility Partnerships

As emphasized in the European Commission's White Paper on the Future of Europe, the overall populations of the continent are ageing more than any other region in the world. By 2030 the median age in Europe will be 45 years. This long-term process is taking place while one of the important consequences of the financial crisis which began in 2008–2009, high youth unemployment, which is

declining only very slowly, is still playing a negative role for the socioeconomic conditions in Europe, in particular for young generations.

The relevance of this in the context of refugees and migrants has to do with the fact that the EU Member States are only missing replacement migration for their ageing workforce to a certain extent. The young populations south and east of the Mediterranean, where high unemployment rates have been a reality for decades, would, given higher economic growth rates in Europe, be able to fill the gap of a missing labour force in Europe. However, as long as the labour markets in several of the EU Member States are lacking jobs for young Europeans, the need for labour migration towards Europe is relatively limited.

High unemployment in countries in the south is at the same time one of the root causes for tendencies towards radicalization of the youth. Both north and south of the Mediterranean there is an obvious interest in cooperating to address the negative social and political consequences of youth unemployment. Common interests tend to lead to a growing interdependence between the EU and the Arab Mediterranean states.

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Youth unemployment is one of the social problems which the EU has attempted to tackle by launching the so-called Mobility Partnerships, so far resulting in agreements between the EU and Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan – and an agreement on the way with Lebanon (Seeberg, 2017). The Mobility Partnerships can be seen as stepping stones on the way to more elaborate cooperation between the EU and its partners, making it possible in the future – through well-defined partnerships – to control the amount and character of labour migration, young Arabs travelling to Europe for studying purposes, etc.

Managing the Refugee Crisis: A New European Agenda?

With the new Migration Partnership Framework of June 2016, migration has become a fully integrated and decisive part of EU foreign policy. In a short-term perspective, it is the ambition to continue all current efforts in order to counteract human smuggling and trafficking and to prevent deaths at sea. Furthermore, the policies are aimed at increasing the return of migrants without a legal claim to stay in Europe and at the same time support activities enabling migrants and refugees to remain closer to their country of origin, thus avoiding the often dangerous journeys towards Europe. In the longer run, the EU will also attempt to address the root causes of migration through an approach where the partner countries are supported in their social and economic development.

As stated by the European Commission in March 2017, the "Partnership Framework is now established as the EU approach to address the challenge of irregular migration as part of the broader cooperation with third countries" (European Commission, 2017b). In 2017, the EU is focusing first of all on the central Mediterranean route, since this has become the main field of attention following the drastic fall in migration across the Aegean after the launch of the EU-Turkey Statement.

The Compacts as the key component of the new partnership-based EU policies have in some cases been developed to a level where relatively elaborate agreements have been formed. This is, for instance, the case in the context of Lebanon and Jordan, where compacts are presented as annexes to Partnership Priorities (see the abovementioned Partnership Framework). In other cases the partnership approach has more of a character of a statement of intent. This is the case in Libya, where the security conditions (still) prevent most activities, and also in Egypt, where a formalized migration dialogue has been underway for years.

Beyond the Mediterranean, in Africa as well as in Asia, the Commission, in cooperation with the EEAS, has initiated a number of activities in order

to work together with relevant partners to address the problems related to the flows of refugees and migrants. In Sub-Saharan Africa, cooperation with Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, and Ethiopia deals with locally relevant aspects of the migration phenomenon, but with a main focus on fighting human smuggling and trafficking. Furthermore, initiatives aimed at fighting illegal migration and opposing radicalization and terrorism stand out as central activities for cooperation between the EU and states in the Sahel region.

The EU also receives a significant number of refugees and migrants from countries in Asia, in particular Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, and Pakistan. Major poverty challenges and political repression constitute the background for the migratory movements towards Europe from these countries, but also significant security issues are attached to the complex realities there. The EU has initiated cooperation with the four countries with an overall focus on preventing illegal migration and developing economic and social partnerships.

Conclusions and Perspectives

The EU, in the coming years, will also face challenges related to large numbers of refugees and migrants attempting to reach Europe. As shown, a relevant keyword – both analytically speaking and when it comes to the operational level – is interdependence. The EU has become more dependent on the partner countries in the south, in particular third countries taking care of refugees and migrants from their neighbouring states. For their part, the third countries have become more dependent on financial aid from international donors, the largest of which being the EU.

The launch of the compacts indicates that EU policies are developing in this direction – the central element of the new policies concerning refugees and migrants being partnership. However, when attempting to develop what in optimistic EU jargon has been described as "win-win relationships to tackle the shared challenges of migration and development," a range of different measures become relevant.

Firstly, the bilateral approach inherent in the compacts will tend to result in trade-offs, where the Arab Mediterranean states, and partners in Africa and Asia, will argue that in order to deliver on agreements where they accept a role similar to Turkey in connection with the EU-Turkey Statement, they insist on receiving funding on a larger scale than what used to be the case – to cover the expenses related to integration on local labour markets, education, healthcare, etc.

Secondly, specific bilateral measures related to economic development will probably become increasingly relevant, like the EU compact with Jordan. The agreements reached at the London conference "Supporting Syria and the Region" (4 February 2016) focused on economic development, and one of the EU commitments according to this framework is to ease customs regulations for specific goods produced in industrial zones, where both Jordanians and Syrian refugees work. The aim is to provide jobs for up to 200,000 refugees. As part of the agreement, Jordan has agreed to provide the work permits.

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Thirdly, the EU's ambition of supporting as large a proportion of the refugees and migrants as possible in neighbouring states close to their countries of origin will demand significant amounts of financial aid. Furthermore, a kind of guarantee that the solution is temporary and will not end up as a permanent situation for the involved neighbouring states will also be sought. In connection with this, it is important that these countries are able to ensure the refugees are treated in accordance with international protection regimes.

Fourthly, the question of resettlement appears to be an important element in the partnership frameworks – both in the existing and potential future agreements. In connection with the EU-Turkey Statement, the resettlement plans are lagging, resulting in

strong criticism from the Turkish side. Resettlement schemes inherent in coming partnership frameworks with Arab, African or Asian partners will be controversial in the European context, but at the same time difficult to avoid in order to appear as a credible partner.

Fifthly, the fact that the suggested measures will be based to an increasing degree on the implementation of partnership frameworks between the EU and Arab Mediterranean, African and Asian countries emphasizes the need to establish a higher level of consensus among the 27 EU Member States. Even though the intentions are already written into the EU's plans for the ongoing and coming work with the southern partners, there is no guarantee of solidarity within this field among the EU-27.

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