The Renationalisation of European Politics: Evidence from the Refugee Crisis

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Even before the ongoing crisis, migration management had always been among the most complex, politicized and least integrated policies in Europe. Together with common foreign and defence policy – another item on the European agenda that is becoming increasingly enmeshed with the refugee crisis – migration is the epitome of a highly sensitive issue that is threaded carefully at the domestic level by each EU Member State before it gets negotiated in the EU, almost always resulting in watered-down committments. The rather straightforward reason for this is that the assorted range of consequences which, rightly or wrongly, are associated to migration policy in the public debate – from the dissolution of the European welfare State to the rise of Islamic terrorism – are items that can decree victory or defeat in any European election. Because of this politicization, the ballooning migrant and refugee crisis has gradually moved the goalposts and changed today's standards of what is acceptable to say or do in Europe to address it. Policies and words that used to be taboos only a few years ago, for example in relation to border control, are now a constituent part of the lexicon and policy repertoire.

This article argues that the ongoing migrant and refugee crisis has effectively marked a gradual but inescapable renationalization of European policy making. I will problematise and exemplify this dynamic first by singling out two country cases, those of Italy and Germany, which I consider extreme and representative enough to showcase typologies of national responses. The article will then review what such national positions have entailed for EU policy

responses. I conclude by observing the consequences of the migrant crisis for the ongoing renationalization of EU policy and outlining available or imaginable options to overcome it.

Case 1: Swaying in the Italian Waves

There are several EU Member States that could serve as case studies worthwhile highlighting: in Hungary, for one, migration management has constituted a key instrument to generate and maintain political consensus. In June 2015, facing arrivals that were already numbering twice as high as the previous year, the Hungarian government built a 4-metre-high and 175-km-long fence along its border with Serbia. This and other measures, as well as the discursive correlation of the refugee crisis with issues such as unemployment and terrorism, have become one instrument of Prime Minister Victor Orban's illiberal project. Going in the complete opposite normative direction, arrivals into Greece since 2015 have averaged the astounding number of 2,600 per day. Strikingly, the dramatic images coming from islands such as Lesbos have not diminished the principally welcoming stance of the Greek government led by Alexis Tsipras and of the Greek people. In fact, it has brought forward a level-headedness that seems very far away from the unpredictability experienced just one year ago in connection with the euro crisis.

Yet, for the purpose of highlighting the idiosyncrasies of Europe's response as well as the range of options at the disposal of European policy makers, no case is more representative than that of Italy, for the reason that in the span of just a couple of years, Rome has effectively encompassed policy positions as extreme and different as those of Hungary and Greece.

Going back to the start of what was then known as the Arab Spring, the case of Italy, and particularly of Italian-Libyan relations, is symptomatic and representative of two unrelated tendencies: first, an overall strategic disorientation as regards the most effective course of action for migration control and second, an unrealistic or disingenuous expectation on the part of national capitals about the role and capabilities of the EU.

Italian-Libyan relations have always been central to EU migration management, as they concern one of the two most trafficked entry routes via sea into Europe (the other being the so-called Balkan route involving Greece). The status quo in this regard was based on a so-called 'Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation pact between Italy and Libya.' The pact allowed Italy's coastguard to deport incoming immigrants back to Libyan shores, skipping procedures for filing potential asylum claims. In the process, Italy agreed to pay Libya 5 billion dollars, formally for colonial reparation but in practice as a price tag for the repatriations. The so-called 'forced' repatriation became the most concrete outcome of this pact and led to international uproar. Several observers, including Human Rights Watch, considered Italy as being in breach of the Geneva Convention, insofar as it stipulates that contracting states cannot expel or return refugees or asylum seekers to states where their lives or freedom might be threatened. More than that, the pact was turned into something of a blackmail for Europe as a whole, with Gaddafi repeatedly threatening to turn the Continent 'black' unless EU countries paid the amounts requested. Notwithstanding its ethical and legal acceptability, the deal paid large political dividends. Then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi declared in the immediate aftermath of the signing that the pact was about "fewer immigrants and more oil." In that respect, he delivered: according to Eurostat, entries into Europe via Italy during the Berlusconi years amounted to a mere 7,300.

After the fall of the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, still only 30,000 arrivals had reached the shores of Lampedusa. At the time, Italian officials noted privately that these numbers were manageable, but the political backlash had already begun. Critics on the Italian right warned of an impending 'human tsunami.' French authorities unilaterally closed their borders with Italy in an attempt to prevent migrants from travelling onward to France. Even traditionally open nations, such as Denmark, talked about reintroducing border controls.

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Then, in October 2013, Italy performed an abrupt about-turn. A boat carrying some 500 migrants sank off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa. The Italian coast guard was only able to save about 150 passengers. In response to the tragedy, the Italian government launched Mare Nostrum which was a vast search-and-rescue operation that reached out into international waters. Through Mare Nostrum, in 2014, Italy saved more than 130,000 lives at a monthly cost of some 10 million euros. Laura Boldrini, a former spokeswoman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and current speaker of the Lower House of the Italian Parliament, put the price at roughly €500 per saved life. That was apparently too much: citing its high costs, the Italian government axed the project after just a year.

The background for this decision is that Italy had expected that Mare Nostrum's costs and responsibility would be shared by other states and institutions in the European Union, as the high influx of migrants was a continent-wide problem. However, this transference did not quite materialize. A replacement EU mission, denominated Operation Triton, was granted a third of Mare Nostrum's budget, fewer assets and a more restricted mandate. (Whereas Mare Nostrum operated in international waters, Triton is active only up to 30 miles off the Italian coast.)

Mare Nostrum represented a complete reversal from the Libya-Italy deal. To picture it, one only needs to imagine the Italian coastguards sailing in

two completely opposite directions: under the Berlusconi-Gaddafi deal, they would go back to Libya with boatloads of migrants and possibly refugees; with Mare Nostrum, the migrant boats would be intercepted and escorted to Italy. However, the operation proved politically untenable. As a further testament to the political toxicity of migration management, it might be worth pointing out that during the time of Mare Nostrum, Italy was not ruled by an elected government, but a caretaker and technocratic one in power to deal with the euro crisis. In other words, the government did not have to face elections and yet, after one year only, the operation was shut down.

Case 2: A Determined but Disoriented Germany

The case of Germany is representative at several levels. First as the largest European country and the de facto hegemon of post-euro crisis Europe, Germany has had a default position as leader of the European pack. The more significant reason for its representativeness is that Germany has struggled with realistic and pragmatic policy positions, far from the populist extremes of the countries mentioned and reviewed above.

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Even before the current crisis, Germany was receiving more asylum applications than any other country in Europe, amounting, in 2014, to 202,000. Backed by these numbers, Berlin was proving predictably dismissive of requests and pleas for support coming from southern Europe. "I'd like to remind you that we have quite a large number of asylum seekers that we have accepted [in Germany] by European comparisons," Chancellor Angela Merkel said in late 2013. "We need to add some

short term measures on Lampedusa [but] we have today not undertaken any qualitative change to our refugee policy."

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In 2015, the situation shifted dramatically. The worsening conditions of the Syrian civil war, as well as the rise of the Islamic State in parts of Syria and Iraq, pushed the issue of the millions of refugees to the top of the German political debate. A particularly awkward episode involving Merkel occurred in July 2015, when, in a televised meeting, a young Syrian girl asked about the prospect of family reunifications. The typically pragmatic answer delivered by the Chancellor, about the limits of European states in welcoming migrants, backfired and was widely perceived as needlessly cruel. In August, Berlin decided to waive EU rules for Syrian refugees. By most accounts, this was a momentous move, unmatched by any other EU state. But reality quickly set it. By September, Germany had reinstated temporary border checks, and conservative estimates put the number of arrivals at 800,000, later corrected to 1.2 million. Of course it immediately raised the question of the gigantic response that this would require.

In mid-October 2015, Merkel undertook a historic visit to Ankara, only two weeks ahead of controversial snap general elections in Turkey, to seal a migration deal endorsed by the whole EU. This deal was meant to address the entries coming through the so-called Balkan route from Syria, Iraq and Central Asia, via Greece, and then onto Europe. The lynchpin of the accord consisted of a readmission agreement: anyone unlikely to gain asylum – according to the UNHCR, about half of the daily arrival in Greece – would be returned to Turkey. And Turkey, which was already coping with some 2.6 million refugees on its own, would receive aid, quantified at 3 billion euros, to manage the unexpected additional influx. While we

are light years away from Italy's 'forced repatriations,' the Turkey-EU deal may also look like a Faustian pact, measured against Europe's own criticism of the deteriorating state of the rule of law in Turkey. Moreover, Turkey has been offered the possibility of a visa-free agreement. Movement of Turkish people to the EU has long been one of the sticking points in the EU's chequered relations with Ankara. Any proposal relaxing visa requirements would be an absolute game-changer in EU-Turkey relations, which have long been tarnished by a lack of trust because of Europe's perceived double standards.

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At the time of writing, Merkel has expressly excluded a 'Plan B' to solve the crisis. She seems determined to stay the course, telling Germans "Wir Schaffen Das" (*we can do this*). However, critics both at home and abroad are growing, and Merkel's own popularity rating, from the sky-high levels she has enjoyed over the past decade, are dwindling at a rapid rate. This raises serious questions about the political acceptability of the German response. If anything, however, the range of different measures laid out or recommended by the German government shows that Merkel is not driven by a simple-minded idealistic vision that lacks alternatives, as her critics would have it. She is refining tools, some more questionable than others, as the agreement with Turkey shows, in order to realize a long-term vision about the resolution of this crisis, which for Germany is ultimately a European vision. And it is here, in the common and coordinated European policy, where the major deficiencies of the European response seem to coalesce.

European Response: Behind the Curve

Curiously, the governments of Italy and Germany have in recent months joined forces, by sending common letters pressing for a European solution to the crisis. Such a solution would include a revision of the now outdated Dublin declaration stipulating that refugee applications should be filed in the country of first arrival in Europe, a provision that would bring countries like Greece to collapse. Also in light of this, the two case studies sketched here underline the broader and more fundamental challenges facing the EU in the refugee crisis: Member States change the facts on the ground, decisions are taken nationally and EU institutions are presented with a *fait accompli*. National capitals have produced a reality made of unilateral actions, which leave little room for consultation, let alone coordination, and determine what has been dubbed in the popular media as a 'domino effect' of national reactions. In this vein, Italy launched *Mare Nostrum* before coordinating with its European partners and shut it down the following year only once it realized that the expected support was not forthcoming. Similarly, Berlin's welcoming of Syrian refugees has had a knock-on effect on Germany's neighbours, almost all of which have re-imposed border controls as a result.

Despite the countless emergency EU summits at the highest level during the course of the last year, a widening gap has emerged between European ideals and European actions. The most striking example is precisely the scheme meant to redistribute refugees across EU Member States. In May 2015, with arrivals already in the hundreds of thousands, the EU agreed to relocate 40,000 Syrian and Eritrean refugees over a period of two years. By September 2015, at a time when Germany alone had welcomed some 800,000 migrants, EU Member States agreed, after painful negotiations, to redistribute 160,000. As of early January 2016, EU countries had made little over 4,000 places available, and a mere 272 people had actually been relocated. "At this rate," European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said, the programme "will take until 2101."

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ample, the European Commission summoned the governments of Sweden, Denmark and Germany to explain their almost simultaneous and yet uncoordinated decision to reinstate border checks. All three governments, despite visible grudges about each other's decision, convened and repeated in unison that the only way to protect the so-called Schengen system of free movement of people in the EU, increasingly challenged by border checks, was better protection of the EU's external borders. In the event, as in several other instances before and since, the European Commission resigned to rubberstamp the decision of the three governments as corresponding to the kind of extraordinary situation that justifies the re-imposition of border checks.

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However, while nobody in Europe disagrees that the protection of the external borders is vital to the survival of Schengen, the EU is in disarray as to how to do it. Some governments play up the role of so-called 'hot spots,' first reception facilities aimed at streamlining identification and fingerprinting. Another recent proposal, by the European Commission, suggested turning FRONTEX, the hapless EU border agency, into a full-fledged European border and coast guard. But in line with the resistance on coordinating border control as described above, some European capitals have been reluctant to give up sovereignty on such a key national prerogative. Entirely missing in this discussion is that the hype surrounding the protection of the EU's external borders runs counter to much of what European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has stood for. For over a decade, the ENP towards countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe has been about extending the benefit of EU integration by means of lowering trade barriers and, crucially,

opening borders. Visa facilitation and eventually liberalization measures remain to this day the top price for a large pool of countries, which have little or no hope to ever gain membership in the EU. The fact that, in the midst of the most controversial European decision as regards Turkey's involvement, the EU has offered Ankara the prospect of visa-liberalization for Turkish citizens testifies to all the contradictions of EU policy circles.

Conclusions: the Making of an Existential Crisis… and of a Way Out

The conceptual spectrum on which we can place the responses described in this article is very clear. On the one hand, there is a vision regarding citizens' security as best attained by opening up borders, lowering trade barriers or joining a single currency; the other vision believes that security is better attained by protecting borders, keeping sovereignty in national hands and by reversing supranational integration. Schengen is possibly the most symbolic example of the first vision. And whether or not the scheme is, in fact, unravelling, Europeans need to ask themselves whether the Europe that produced Schengen, the euro and even the enlargement towards Eastern Europe, which are the three main achievements of post-cold war European integration, is still the Europe we have and can have today.

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Evidence from the refugee crisis, as well as unrelated developments such as the euro crisis or the travailed process of Britain's renegotiation of its membership with the Union, points to a negative answer to the question. More specifically, it points in

the direction of the vision that regards the renationalization of European politics as the best way forward for the EU. It used to be that Eurosceptic voices needed to explain their argument to a centrist, cosy consensus overwhelmingly in favour of ever closer European integration. Now the tables have turned: Eurosceptic positions firmly occupy the centre of the debate in many European countries and ever-more timid pro-EU forces have to present their arguments.

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That said, renationalization of European politics need not necessarily entail a securitization of the State and a militarization of borders. It must also mean reclaiming the role of the State as a motor of EU integration, and above all as a catalyst of a nation's civic resources and as a community of purpose. This is what makes the German experience in the refugee crisis so consequential. The hard-headedness with which Angela Merkel is pursuing a European solution to the crisis is not driven by idealism, but by the same principled pragmatism that has provided the moral compass of her decade-long tenure in government. In the same way as Merkel used to repeat obsessively that if the euro fails the EU fails, she is now saying that if the EU fails the refugees, the existential raison d'être of European integration fails. As a result, the current crisis has ignited an unprecedented level of mobilization

in the German government and civil society, and has awakened the volunteer spirits of the population at large. Merkel's "Wir schaffen Das" does not refer only to the government, but to Germans as a nation. As deputy Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel has argued: "It's about all of society." Critics have grown louder, even in the chancellor's own camp; and the disturbing incidents on New Year's Eve involving apparent asylum seekers harassing women in Cologne and other cities may well spell the end of Germany's new *Willkommenskultur.* But at a time when EU institutions appear in disarray, the German approach represents the most genuine attempt at rekindling the forces of Europe's liberal ideal from the bottom up.

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