





COMMENTARY


Migration crisis: the worst might still come?

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Background

The European migrant crisis, which had its start in 2013 with the arrival of an exceptionally large number of migrants and refugees in Europe, was characterized by the greatest mass displacement of individuals since the Second World War.

Earlier in March, the Migration Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos made definite comments regarding the phenomenon¹, stating it was no longer a reality. This was motivated by the spread of “misinformation and untruths” in campaigns for the 2019 European Elections which were focusing on migration policy. Particularly, it came as a response to Viktor Orbán, Hungary’s Prime Minister and leader of the nationalist Fidesz party, who launched in February a campaign containing misleading claims regarding migration and several other subjects².

On the same day, the European Commission released a report scrutinising the current state of migration to Europe, this way supporting the Commissioner’s remarks. As it can be read in the statement³, the reasoning for this affirmation is that arrival figures have been continuously falling for three consecutive years, with the number of individuals crossing to Europe now being lower than before the crisis. In fact, the Commission showed that only 150 thousand irregular immigrants had reached European domains during 2018, a value quite discrete when comparing to the peak of the crisis back in 2015⁴.

It is undeniable that the current situation in the Mediterranean Sea does not resemble the calamities of previous years. The number of casualties in 2019 so far is, for example, the lowest in five years when comparing homologous time periods⁵. Nevertheless, one could still easily argue the report comes as an institutional effort to mitigate nationalist and populist tendencies and not as a rational and weighted declaration of victory. The migrant crisis might have been temporarily attenuated, but is it wise for European leaders to bluntly state its end?

Can a case for success be constructed when the sources which lead to the phenomenon remain existent? It is necessary to understand if the factors motivating individuals to leave their homes are still there.

The Commission’s report does proclaim the continuation of procedures intended to keep fighting mass migration. Nevertheless, it focuses on measures which reduce the amount of individuals able to reach the European shore instead of the root causes leading to migration. While working on border security is important, one might think not enough emphasis is being given to the long-term sustainability of the continent.

Therefore, it is important to remember the roots of the crisis and to evaluate its alteration in the last few years. A lower inflow of individuals does not mean we will not have a similar trend in the near future. Taking all of this into consideration, an essential question takes shape. Is the migration crisis really over?

¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/migration-crisis-is-over-says-eu-chief/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/06/eu-declares-migration-crisis-over-hits-out-fake-news-european-commission>

³ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-1496_en.htm

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20190306_managing-migration-factsheet-step-change-migration-management-border-security-timeline_en.pdf

⁵ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>

The Problems Are Still There

It goes without saying that a large part of dealing with a situation in policy-making, independently of its social or economic nature, implies preparing for possible difficulties in the future. The phenomenon of migration to Europe is the embodiment of the necessity for countries to implement preventive measures.

There are reasons forcing individuals to leave their hometowns behind and experience grave risks in reaching a certain destination. Extreme violence and poverty, war and oppression all play a role in the situation, with its weight varying from case to case.

Violence in the Middle East

During the crisis, the most discussed case in the media was the Syrian Civil War⁶. With more than 11 million people becoming either refugees in foreign countries or internally displaced individuals in an incredibly short period of time, it constituted an atrocious sight and resulted in mass migration towards the European Union.

Several countries experienced analogous internal issues. Afghanistan, one of the largest countries of origin for refugees in Europe, has been devastated by armed conflicts since the Soviet invasion of 1979⁷. While media attention regarding the issue is much lower than it was at the beginning of the century, the situation is far from being solved. According to the United Nations, more than 10 thousand civilians died in 2017 due to war related violence⁸.

It is pivotal to acknowledge the millions of internally displaced individuals in countries around the Middle East⁹. As we can observe, the numbers are not negligible. Iraq, for example, individually harbours approximately 5 million displaced people.

The possible consequences of the situation in this region make it imperative for European leaders to address it. If they fail to act based on their consciences, they should do so because of the potential threat it represents for Europe's border security. While these conflicts generally seem fairly distant, what happened in the recent past proves the opposite: an escalation of problems could turn into a revival of the refugee crisis.

The absence of rule of law and the existence of profound social scars, together with continuous interference from foreign powers pushing their interests, make it extremely complex to solve situations such as the present ones in Afghanistan and Syria. With an escalating proxy war between Israel and Iran among numerous other factors, the number of displaced people and refugees can increase exponentially and result in disastrous migration-related consequences for the European Union.

Lack of Economic Development and the Population Boom in Africa

It is indispensable to clarify the importance of stability in Africa for the future of Europe. For African countries, the main issues might not be violence or problems of the sort (which still are very present). Extreme poverty and lack of living conditions are driving millions of African citizens out of their homes. Forced to find a new place to live a secure and dignified life, one of their main destinations

⁶ <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts>

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12024253>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45507560>

⁹ <http://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2018/>

is Europe. Major progress has been made in erasing extreme poverty, with the percentage of people around the world living in that condition having decreased in the last decades. However, inside the African continent, the trend has been tremendously different. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the number of people living in poverty increased from 278 million in 1990 to 413 million in 2015¹⁰.

Ruthless living conditions and general lack of welfare have created a large humanitarian crisis, forcing millions of individuals to leave their homes behind. Sudan retains nothing less than 6 million internally displaced individuals¹¹. When looking at the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the number had surpassed 4 million as of December of 2017¹².

While it is more ordinary for African migrants to move within the African continent, the European Union still represents an important destination. Data from the European Commission with concern to 2016, for example, showed that around a third of Nigerian migrants came to the European Union¹³. When it comes to refugees, the number approximated 10%.

Alarming, the number of African migrants and internally displaced individuals are prone to increase. The African continent already has a large population, counting around 1.2 billion individuals¹⁴. Nevertheless, its population will increase exponentially in the coming decades¹⁵. Nigeria, for example, is expected to have reached 440 million citizens by 2050¹⁶. Taking into consideration its population only rounds the 200 million individuals at the moment, the concern is clear.

African governments are not prepared to deal with such a problematic issue. European leaders, while recognizing the situation, persist to continuously neglect it in their speeches. With the population rising at such a fast pace, lack of economic development and, as we saw, increasing levels of poverty, the situation will become uncontrollable.

The already limited resources available for the population will become even more scarce. Moreover, the situation will be aggravated by natural disasters related to climate change. The concept of “climate refugee” has been widely accepted and the tendency is expected to increase dramatically¹⁷.

Taking into consideration all the factors, there will be profound consequences for the European continent. If the situation in Africa results in the number of migrants and internally displaced individuals it currently does, can one make predictions about the future and have a positive mind-set? Dealing with these problems later might prove to be unsustainable.

Only structural reforms and direct action concerning the root causes can contribute to long-term stability in the areas. Improved strategies need to be developed and implemented. There already are some plans being executed, such as the EU External Investment Plan¹⁸, which tries to promote inclusive growth and job creation in a sustainable environment, and the EU Emergency Trust Fund For Africa¹⁹, which tackles irregular migration and displacement of individuals. However, these strategies are not being efficient enough, demonstrated by the evolution of poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa.

¹⁰ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2018/11/21/figure-of-the-week-understanding-poverty-in-africa/>

¹¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/displacement-in-the-muslim-world/>

¹² <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/68340.pdf>

¹³ https://ec.europa.eu/knowledge4policy/sites/know4pol/files/mp_nigeria_3.2_a4_3_2.pdf

¹⁴ <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/countries-in-africa/>

¹⁵ http://www.foundation-development-africa.org/africa_development/africa_general/africas_population_2050.htm

¹⁶ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268107/countries-with-the-highest-population/>

¹⁷ [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/621893/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)621893_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/621893/EPRS_BRI(2018)621893_EN.pdf)

¹⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/external-investment-plan-factsheet_en.pdf

¹⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/content/homepage_en

The European Union and its member states already are the world's leader providers of development assistance²⁰, with most of it going to African countries. Nevertheless, they must acknowledge that investing additional money towards economic development and demographic control in Africa is not only a matter of moral responsibility but also an urgent matter in the process of ensuring long-term peace and general stability in Europe. It is imperative for leaders to start focusing more on preparation and less on reaction.

Conclusion

It all comes down to a reality most policy-makers have been trying to avoid: Europe as we know it might not survive another migratory disaster.

The welfare of citizens in countries representing the main source of migrants in Europe is not improving and, while that number is currently lower, a new conflict of great dimension could give origin to new migrant waves. Moreover, demographic pressures combined with lack of development will enhance difficulties for the European Union when dealing with the phenomenon in the future. While border security is pivotal, it is rather unrealistic to believe it will fully work, as we have observed in recent years.

Although the European Union does acknowledge the necessity to control migratory pressures on a long-term basis, it is not enough. The strategies pursued at the moment may be currently working but that proclaimed success is not a guarantee. Problems should be tackled at its roots. Instead, the European Union is relying on countries such as Niger and Turkey to act as barriers, hoping the solution works.

It is the responsibility of European leaders to act in those countries. The migration crisis created deep rifts in the European project and a new one may have unpredictable consequences for the future of a united and prosperous European Union.

Consequently, it is necessary to prepare for the future. Increasing the funding of development programs and supervising its efficiency is crucial, both for the European Union as whole and for each member state. While European countries are worried about further economic growth and international influence, they are simultaneously neglecting a situation that will result in catastrophes.

A point is reached where morality is out of the picture. It is not a matter of ethical responsibility to ensure a certain outcome in places where perhaps our conscience does not reach. Looking into the near future, it is a matter of survival.

From one perspective or another, we all witnessed the damage left in Europe by years of turmoil and apocalypse-like events. Europeans must face the scary reality that we might not be able to resist another trial of this kind.

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/news-and-events/eu-remains-worlds-leading-donor-development-assistance-eu757-billion-2017_en

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