Europe’s Migration Dilemmas

Unavoidable and Unresolved

By Michael S. Teitelbaum, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, May 11, 2017

Over the 60 years since the creation of what is now the European Union, the aspirations of its founders have mostly been achieved. No disasters akin to the catastrophic violence and political collapses of the first half of the twentieth century have occurred within the EU, which has instead enjoyed decades of stability and prosperity.

Since around the turn of the century, however, the union’s problems have been growing: sluggish overall economic growth accompanied by deep recessions and high unemployment in some member states; instabilities in the euro; and growing criticism of the alleged democratic deficits of EU institutions. These and other challenges have given rise to anti-EU forces across the continent, exposing the conflict between many Europeans’ hopes for deeper integration and many others’ aspirations toward national identity, sovereignty, and independence.

In early 2015, as the European migrant crisis emerged, most EU leaders failed to understand how their responses to it would add to the bloc’s existing problems. Few anticipated that razor-wire fences would reappear along Europe’s internal borders; that the Islamic State (ISIS) would take advantage of chaotic refugee flows to send some of its militants into Europe; that polarizing cultural clashes would follow from such episodes as the mass sexual assaults in German cities committed in December 2015; or that a leading cause of the 2016 British vote to exit the EU would prove to be the union’s immigration entitlements for non-British nationals. Migration and the policies used to address it have widened the fissures afflicting the European project.

Fewer refugees and migrants are arriving in Europe today than in 2015, but the potential for another surge remains high. It will grow higher still if Syria’s civil war intensifies, if the deal struck last year by the EU and Turkey to limit migration collapses, or if the chaos troubling states such as Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq worsens. In this context, it is disquieting that the moral and political challenges posed by the migrant crisis have not been resolved. The European Union needs new strategies to protect refugees and to assure skeptical voters that its migration and integration policies are effective.

FAILURES OF FORESIGHT

The EU’s appeal as a destination for international migrants is due in part to its own success. As Europe grew more stable and prosperous over the decades after World War II, the economic and political disparities between the continent and the regions around it increased, creating an imbalance that held a massive potential for migration. That latent power was activated in the years after the 2011 Arab Spring, as states in Europe’s neighborhood, such as Syria and Libya, fell into disarray and civil war. Rising political turmoil in these and other countries mobilized large numbers of their citizens to flee and made it easier for smuggling networks to send large numbers of migrants toward Europe.
In 2015, tens of thousands of people per month paid smugglers to transport them to the Mediterranean coasts of Turkey, Libya, and Tunisia, and from there by sea to EU territory in nearby Italy and Greece. Most then took advantage of the EU’s open internal borders to move toward the richer states of northern Europe.

Europeans were understandably shocked by the images of suffering and death these voyages produced, which were widely disseminated in the media: unseaworthy and overloaded boats capsizing or sinking; bodies washing up on beaches; thousands stranded at European train stations and borders or trekking en masse along roads and through fields. As the number of Syrians arriving in smugglers’ boats or drowning at sea began to rise sharply, governments began to take action. In August 2015, German officials announced that Berlin would allow all Syrian nationals to apply for asylum at or within Germany’s borders, regardless of how they had gotten there. The decision effectively suspended the EU’s 1997 Dublin Convention, which requires asylum-seekers to file their claims in the EU state they reach first. The German government apparently hoped to lead an EU-wide response to the crisis, under which other states would resettle Syrians as Berlin had promised to. Sweden followed Germany’s lead, but most other countries demurred.

Germany’s new policy did achieve some of its goals. It provided succor to the tens of thousands of Syrians who had already reached Europe. It eased the burdens on Greece and Italy. And it temporarily helped preserve EU and German commitments to open internal borders and the right to asylum. But it also provided strong incentives to emulate the recent arrivals—not only for the millions of Syrians still languishing in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, but also for the citizens of other countries, such as Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan. By the end of 2015, at least 890,000 migrants and refugees had applied for asylum in Germany and around 300,000 others had done so in other EU countries.

It now seems clear that Berlin failed to anticipate the magnitude of this outcome and the unwillingness of most EU governments to follow its lead. As the pace of the arrivals in Germany increased, the initial public support began to wane, especially after migration became linked in some voters’ minds to terrorist attacks and other crimes. Innocent migrants became targets for assault, and there were hundreds of arson attacks against hostels built to house asylum-seekers. Across Europe, mainstream political parties began to lose voters to euroskeptic, anti-immigration groups previously on the fringe, such as Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and France’s National Front, whose leader, Marine Le Pen, finished second in this year’s presidential election. That outcome was sobering: a far-right party opposed to the EU attracted the support of more than a third of French voters in a country that helped found the European project.

Over the past year, the flow of migrants from Turkey to Greece has been reduced dramatically, even as more people have died taking the longer and more dangerous sea routes from North Africa to Italy. One reason for the declining inflows has been the reestablishment of border controls between some European states—sharp reversals of the EU’s hard-won commitments to open internal borders. A second and perhaps more important reason was the March 2016 agreement between the EU and Turkey, under which the EU pledged to send people arriving in Greece by boat back to Turkey. For every Syrian returned to Turkey in this way, the EU agreed to resettle one Syrian refugee directly from Turkey. It also agreed to Turkish demands that the
EU provide a total of six billion euros to help care for refugees in Turkey, liberalize travel requirements for Turkish citizens within the EU’s passport-free Schengen zone, and revive Turkey’s long-stalled application for EU membership.

But the agreement is fragile. Its enforcement depends on the government of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which has threatened to abrogate it as its relationship with its European counterparts has deteriorated. It is also controversial in Europe, both among refugee advocates who argue that it violates a fundamental human right to asylum and endangers migrants sent back to Turkey, and among those on the populist right who see the EU’s acceptance of Turkey’s demands as acquiescence to international blackmail.

LESSONS LEARNED?

The EU-Turkey deal is the most prominent example of a trend in EU refugee policy toward what has become known as offshore processing. Under this framework, European officials hope to reduce the incentives for irregular migration, degrade smuggling networks to reduce deaths in the Mediterranean, protect refugees as near to their home countries as possible, and provide new and regulated opportunities for those unable to return home to apply for direct resettlement from outside the EU.

This approach is opposed by some European human rights and refugee advocates, who argue that it fails to provide sufficient protection for refugees and prevents access to what they see as a fundamental human right to claim asylum in Europe. But there is another vexing problem: offshore processing complicates the EU’s relations with the countries that it needs to control irregular migration flows toward Europe. Those states correctly see migration as a piece of valuable diplomatic currency.

Turkey, for example, successfully made large demands on the EU as a condition for its cooperation on regulating migration. In March, it threatened to terminate the 2016 agreement after several European governments barred Turkish politicians from campaigning in their countries for Turkish nationals’ votes in an April referendum that expanded Erdogan’s power. The EU’s negotiations over migration with Morocco and Niger have led those countries to demand concessions such as better access to European markets for their agricultural exports. (Morocco has also sought to link its cooperation on migration issues to the EU’s acknowledgment of Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed territory of Western Sahara.) Other such cases will likely emerge in the future, and countries that have urged others to admit more refugees and migrants, such as Germany and Sweden, will need to plan ahead. The political scientist Kelly Greenhill has identified more than 50 cases in which this approach has been deployed during the past half century.

On balance, however, offshore processing makes sense. Europe’s support for refugee protection in so-called third countries should be seen not as a burden, but as an investment. In humanitarian terms, such assistance can maximize the number of people receiving protection and support while minimizing the number dying in the hands of smugglers. In strategic terms, it can help support fragile states that might otherwise be further destabilized by large numbers of refugees, while limiting the growth of smuggling cartels and the official corruption that often accompanies
them. Within Europe, it may help limit the appeal of populist and xenophobic political movements.

It would be a false economy for international humanitarian agencies to curtail their assistance for refugees in third countries now. This has happened before, in mid-2015, as the European migrant crisis was expanding. Insufficient contributions from European and other wealthy countries compelled UN humanitarian agencies to sharply reduce food aid and to close health clinics for millions of displaced people. (At the time, António Guterres, then the head of the UN refugee agency and now the Secretary General of the United Nations, described the global humanitarian system as “financially broke.”) An austerity-oriented approach to the basic humanitarian needs of refugees would inflict further harm on them, empower and enrich smuggling networks, and bring more irregular arrivals to EU territory. That would have the perverse effect of undermining the EU’s efforts to save money because of the greater per-person costs of the public services to which refugees are entitled in most European countries.

There are a few other lessons that European officials should learn from recent experience. The first is that seemingly minor policy decisions and statements can set off major changes in migration flows, thanks to the proliferation of well-organized smuggling networks and digital communications technology. Governments should frame their choices carefully, and they should recognize that welcoming asylum claims from particular groups would probably strengthen smuggling networks and increase the numbers of people who die on their way to Europe. They should also recognize the risks attached to unilateral decisions about migration or refugees. The still-open borders in much of the EU mean that such actions can have major implications for other governments. States cannot assume that their decisions will be backstopped by others—a well-intentioned mistake that Germany and Sweden appear to have made in 2015.

Next, mainstream European leaders should demonstrate to their increasingly skeptical publics that they can regulate migration movements and enforce the return of asylum seekers whose claims are rejected after fair reviews. Their failures to do so appear to be major factors in the increased support for the anti-establishment political movements that claim to be the only parties willing to effectively manage migration. In recent decades, many Western governments have been confounded by unexpectedly large migrations that voters believed they either helped to stimulate or failed to control. The political weakening of Germany’s governing coalition is most evident at the moment, but there are many other examples: consider the damage the 1980 Mariel boatlift caused U.S. President Jimmy Carter, or the unexpectedly large migration flows under EU rules that undermined British Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and later contributed to the 2016 Brexit vote that forced Prime Minister David Cameron to resign.

As for the large numbers of asylum-seekers who have already reached the EU, EU member states should look for creative ways to more quickly process their claims while continuing to respect their fundamental human rights. Doing so would reduce the incentives for new arrivals to file weak asylum claims in order to secure residence in Europe while their applications are processed. What’s more, it would relieve those with strong asylum claims of an anxious and unproductive waiting period. States should also devote more high-level attention to integration, working to minimize discrimination and violent attacks against migrants and refugees, and doing
more to encourage new arrivals to quickly learn local languages, find jobs, and create their own businesses.

Finally, even though only a very small number of recent migrants to Europe have been involved in terrorist attacks, European leaders should honestly address the links that do exist, since failing to do so invites public skepticism. The brutal attacks in European cities in recent years demonstrate that it takes only a few committed terrorists to create mayhem and fear, and failing to deal with such matters forthrightly will lend credibility to anti-immigration and anti-EU forces’ claims that only they can be trusted on issues of migration and security. Although they weren’t terrorist attacks, the sexual assaults committed in Cologne and other German cities in December 2015 illustrated this dynamic. Far-right groups argued that German authorities’ initial failure to report on foreigners’ roles in those assaults revealed a broader duplicity about migration.

The humanitarian and political stakes of Europe’s approach to the crisis are high: the lives of millions, the stability of states bordering refugee-producing countries, the endurance of public support for human rights and humanitarian policies in Europe, and the future integrity and stability of the European Union hang in the balance. At the least, EU and government officials should take care that their actions, however well-intentioned, do not make Europe’s problems even worse.