

Judy Asks: Is Migration Europe's Achilles Heel?

JUDY DEMPSEY

The EU's failure to forge an effective migration and asylum policy undermines European integration and benefits the far right. Protecting EU external borders cannot come at the expense of migrants' rights and lives.

MARTIN EHLCHIEF ANALYST AT HOSPODÁŘSKÉ NOVINY

Yes, because it exposes long-term weak spots of European integration, thus undermining integration itself. And it cuts across all levels of society and politics, which means the topic of migration is sensitive for almost everybody.

Firstly, it is a security issue but each of the EU governments—and the UK—view it differently. The threat perception may vary, but there is one common denominator: it is necessary to increase the protection of the EU's external borders. This is a crucial test of the union's common security policy. Secondly, it is a cultural issue within societies across Europe. There are vast historical differences when it comes to member states' experiences with migration. For example, the East of the EU does not have any colonial heritage, such as the one that influences the Western approach to migration. There is a difference between the perception of Ukrainian refugees and Syrian ones. It creates a lot of tension at local and regional levels.

Thirdly, this complexity makes it almost impossible for politicians to come to a solution that would be acceptable for the Southern and Eastern flanks of the EU, which perceive the problem quite differently. Any compromise—the traditional engine of EU integration—seems to be hard to achieve.

BLANCA GARCÉS-MASCAREÑAS SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW AT THE BARCELONA CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (CIDOB)

Migration could be the crisis among all crises facing Europe nowadays for the simple reason that it has become an intractable issue. While the economics of migration asks for millions of new migrant workers every year, the politics of migration demands a closure of borders.

Moreover, while a common migration and asylum policy is intrinsic to a European space of free movement of people (the so-called Schengen area), member states continue without reaching an agreement on shared responsibilities. Seeking to please everyone, the new proposals define a system of à la carte solidarity that risks creating more bureaucracy, new disagreements, and higher economic costs in a system that may end up being more inefficient than the current one. Finally, there is the question how to reconcile increasing border control with full respect for the rule of law and human rights. In an unequal and increasingly globalized world, Europe will have to choose between addressing the causes of migration or fortifying itself at the expense of its own liberalism. In fact, this would be the real crisis: when Europe's fear of another migration wave makes it willing to accept the unacceptable, from the normalization of states of exception to the violation of fundamental rights.

ANDREW GEDDES DIRECTOR OF THE MIGRATION POLICY CENTRE

Currently, it's difficult to identify within the EU's various actions and activities a clear thread that corresponds with a common European migration policy. Rather, there seems to be a conglomeration of paradoxes and contradictions.

There has been an open, welcoming approach to the millions of displaced people coming from Ukraine. At the same time, there's a deadly policy of repression of migration from Africa and the Middle East.

While the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the centrality of migrant labor to activities upon which Europeans depend, such as healthcare and food production, the EU is hamstrung by treaty constraints that limit its competence over admission of migrants.

Until the EU develops a migration policy—as opposed to a stop-migration-policy—this issue will continue to be the union's Achilles heel.

SHADA ISLAM MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE NEW HORIZONS PROJECT

The EU's restrictive approach to migration is discriminatory, seeped in pride and prejudice, and an insult to the bloc's constant lyrical references to safeguarding values and human rights. It is inspired by xenophobic narratives peddled for years by the far right and now embraced and amplified by almost all mainstream European political parties.

Today, as the EU seeks to build stronger international alliances with African, Asian, and Middle Eastern states, Fortress Europe, with its crude differentiation between "good" Ukrainian refugees who are welcome in Europe and "bad" racialized ones who are not, has also become a major obstacle in the EU's ambitions of becoming a more consequential geopolitical power.

Fact and fiction clash in the EU's attitudes toward migration. The EU undoubtedly needs foreign workers—both skilled and unskilled—to fill labor market gaps, but for political reasons is afraid to say so. Contrary to the prevailing narrative, not everyone wants to move to Europe. Most refugees, devastated by wars—often those in which the EU is directly or indirectly involved—find shelter in neighboring states. Those who embark on the treacherous journey to EU shores are often qualified professionals. As the EU's justified warm welcome of Ukrainians has shown, the bloc also has the money needed to provide shelter to refugees.

But as British author Hanif Kureishi [has written](#), the immigrant in the current public conversation has not only migrated from one country to another; he has migrated from reality to the collective imagination where he has been transformed into a terrible fiction. The EU's Fortress Europe policies are reinforcing that toxic perception.

JACEK KUCHARCZYK, PRESIDENT OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD AT THE INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, WARSAW

The EU has been slouching toward a common policy on migration for a long time and progress has been frustratingly slow for such an important issue. Still, it seems that the EU and member states have been able to learn from both mistakes and successes.

The so-called migration crisis of 2015 is mainly a lesson in failure as the hastily adopted refugee resettlement scheme alienated Central Europeans, who felt that the EU tried to force them to share the responsibility for problems with which they could hardly relate. Nevertheless, this failure led to presenting the EU [Pact on Migration and Asylum](#). Some aspects of the comprehensive common framework, however, have raised legitimate concerns from the human rights perspective.

On the other hand, the European reaction to the arrival of millions of Ukrainian refugees presents us with a positive example, on which we could try to build a new European approach to migration. Not only the EU reacted swiftly by introducing temporary protection for persons fleeing the war in Ukraine, but the societies of key countries, such as Poland and Germany, became engaged in assisting the refugees on an unprecedented scale. Such a change of heart about migrants encouraged the governments to adopt a similarly welcoming stance. This positive experience should re-vitalize a pan-European debate about migration and asylum, while the EU institutions and civil society should press the governments to apply the same high standards to other arrivals of people seeking protection, for example by ending the scandalous pushbacks on the Polish-Belarusian border.

ALENA KUDZKO DIRECTOR OF THE GLOBSEC POLICY INSTITUTE

The very fact that Vladimir Putin, Alexander Lukashenko, and Tayyip Recep Erdogan—presidents of Russia, Belarus, and Turkey respectively—have all instrumentalized migration is testament to the vulnerability of Europe on this issue. They realize that irregular migration is a polarizing issue in the EU that can create disarray for governments.

Yet Europe has surprised itself and the world through its resolute response in welcoming large flows of Ukrainian refugees. Look no further than Central Europe—the region that acquired an anti-migration reputation in 2015 is now hosting a disproportionate number of people fleeing Russia's war in Ukraine and the governments are generally backed by strong public support. This success will not automatically translate into functioning migration governance over the long term, as the EU must still iron out kinks in the system. This includes public disapproval toward migrant arrivals from other regions. Czechia and Austria, for instance, have introduced thorough controls on [Slovak borders](#) as southern migration routes grow in use.

The absorption of Ukrainians will still face considerable hurdles too. The social and health infrastructure in the region remains in disrepair. And women, children, and the elderly, who make up the majority of refugees, often encounter difficulties in finding appropriate work and/or schooling opportunities.

EU populations are also starting to raise questions. Majorities in the Visegrad (V4) countries, for instance, would prefer to see benefits for Ukrainian refugees reduced. Though most are content with Ukrainians taking jobs no one else wants, an economic downturn could change that. Europe's resilient response nonetheless indicates that the EU boasts the capacity to manage migration better—now we need to put in place mechanisms that facilitate this.

STEFAN LEHNE SENIOR FELLOW AT CARNEGIE EUROPE

It may not be the EU's Achilles heel, but among its many vulnerabilities, migration is probably the most dangerous. It combines political toxicity with a stark asymmetry of interests among member states. To mitigate its demographic decline—and to do the jobs most Europeans don't want to do anymore—the union needs massive immigration, but many white Europeans do not want to see people of color and unfamiliar habits in their neighborhood.

Populist parties have turned xenophobia into their main business model and are driving the political mainstream toward more and more restrictive policies. Passport free travel (the Schengen area)—one of the EU's greatest achievements—increasingly clashes with the political necessity for governments to control who is on their territory, which results in a proliferation of border controls.

The same revival of a “nation-first” mindset is preventing fair burden-sharing between the Southern countries where asylum seekers first arrive and the other EU member states. It is always difficult to solve a problem when some stakeholders are mainly interested in exploiting it for domestic political gains. The EU has faced other [major challenges](#), such as the financial crisis or the coronavirus, which in the end prompted governments to come together in search of common solutions. Dealing with migration has so far mostly driven them apart. Unfortunately, the current surge of irregular arrivals is likely to further reinforce this negative centrifugal dynamic.

DENIS MACSHANE

FORMER UK MINISTER FOR EUROPE

Migration has been the secret to Europe's success. The mass movement of southern Europeans to work north of the Alps during [les trentes glorieuses](#) rebuilt Europe. Britain after 1945 adopted freedom of movement for Irish citizens.

Germany opened borders to Turkish workers, France to Maghreb workers, Britain to Asian workers, including the parents of the current UK prime minister and other ministers.

27 percent of the population of Switzerland, Europe's richest country, were born outside Switzerland and the clever Swiss voted in a 2020 referendum to back freedom of movement.

The 1950 European Steel and Coal Community outlawed discrimination in hiring on grounds of nationality—the forerunner of today's freedom of movement. When Spain, Greece, and Portugal entered the European Communities in the 1980s, emigration from those countries slowed. The EU's failure to offer membership to the Western Balkan nations after the end of the wars in the Former Yugoslavia in 1999 means Albanians and others leave to find work.

Europe should be tougher and faster on returns of undocumented migrants. The global poor turn to Europe—and the United States—as they see no hope from their own politicians. Europe has given up making love to have babies. Immigration is the only way to keep Europeans rich. In 1958, John F. Kennedy wrote a book “America: A Nation of Immigrants.” Where is the EU leader who would dare write such a book today?

SAIME OZCUREMEZ ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AT BILKENT UNIVERSITY'S DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The new [pact](#) on migration and asylum and discussions on improving the protection of borders and advancing a solidarity mechanism are unlikely to solve EU's migration-induced challenges. Why? Because EU member states view migration as a persistent risk to their resources and values. Despite many tragic events and continuous loss of lives in the Mediterranean, member states' policymakers are unable to collectively commit to protecting human rights at the borders.

After managing the mass influx from Ukraine, the EU now has evidence that mass influx does not bring down EU institutions and/or deplete member states' resources. EU countries may seize this moment to also consider that migration does not constitute a threat to European societies. This might help them seek a middle ground for codesigning a coherent migration management informed by the human rights perspective, and consider migration as a facilitator of resilience while addressing Europe's demographic and economic challenges. Only then will the EU recapture its transformative capacity for shifting the restrictive direction, exclusionary discourse on migration globally, and preventing tragedy for migrants. The EU's responsibility for changing the migration debate while putting its own house in order is higher than ever because inaction on its part risks bringing tragedy for migrants and far right politics across the world.

GEORGE PAGOULATOS DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN AND FOREIGN POLICY (ELIAMEP)

Migration is putting Europe to shame. Thousands of desperate people, many fleeing war and persecution, are dying in the Mediterranean. This represents a humanitarian tragedy and a European failure.

EU entry points for migrants—Italy, Spain, Greece—are in the spotlight. They have a point when they request solidarity from other EU member states in developing a truly common migration and asylum system.

Part of the problem is Europe's weakness in its Southern neighborhood. Europe is impotent in conflict areas like Syria or Libya, where civil wars led millions of people to displacement. Europe is divided toward the MENA region.

Establishing a common European system of legal migration is an opportunity. It also responds to the challenges of demography and economic development of European societies.

A positive stance by governments is key. Finger-pointing at migrants and using poisonous terms such as "invasion" only delivers votes for the xenophobic far right. Governments should get serious about the integration of migrants, schooling and training, as well as social and employment policies.

The protection of EU external borders is vital. If ignored, it would surrender the public discourse to the toxic impact of the far right. But border protection should be implemented with scrupulous respect to the human rights of migrants and the rights of refugees under international law.

MELITA H. SUNJIC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF TRANSCULTURAL CAMPAIGNING

Migration is not Europe's Achilles heel, but rather its nervous asthma. Migration "crises" occur at times of heightened anxiety such as elections, falling popularity rates, or when diversion from unpleasant topics is needed. Migration debates then erupt in an emotionally divisive manner. A facts-based discussion would reveal two major weaknesses: firstly, member states are faced with mixed migration, yet force those who need to be saved (refugees) and those who want a job (migrants) into the same procedure. Two thirds of people in the asylum procedures never belonged there.

Secondly, the EU flaunts twenty-seven asylum apparatuses that are expensive and overblown, yet rather inefficient. If member states cannot get rid of asylum-seekers by pushbacks, border controls, or through the Dublin procedure, they process them for years. Applicants despair as their lives are put on hold. At the same time, right-wing demagogues paint them as lazy parasites to gain popularity.

The way out would be one-stop-shops upon entry to Europe with a single fast and efficient EU procedure at external borders. Recognized refugees would be allowed in and immediately be integrated in one of the twenty-seven countries. Rejected asylum-seekers would be returned home, thus sending a signal to copycats to choose legal channels over expensive and dangerous irregular routes to Europe.

MIRJANA TOMIC PROJECT MANAGER AT THE FJUM FORUM FOR JOURNALISM AND MEDIA, VIENNA

Which aspect of migration does the question address: border management, lack of political will to address the issue in its complexities, or the failure of most European countries to integrate

migrants and refugees? There is one constant, though: when numbers of new arrivals increase, political leaders offer quick solutions.

So far, most measures have failed, while revealing Europe's willingness to violate its own values by (a) supporting despotic and non-democratic regimes if they help detain migration flows; and (b) differentiating the treatment of migrants/refugees according to their ethnic origin. These double standards do not endear Europe with the [Global South](#).

On the internal front, most countries failed to integrate migrants and prevent the creation of parallel societies. In recent years, even the most migrant-friendly countries, such as Sweden, admitted their failure.

While the minority of non-European migrants, or European citizens with migrant roots, have managed to climb up the social, political, and economic ladders, becoming ministers and even prime ministers, the majority seem to be left behind, living in parallel societies. Therefore, the local population perceives migration as a problem. However, ideological prejudices impede addressing problems and offering constructive solutions. Even admitting problems was not woke for certain circles.

The main issue must be addressed: why is migration a problem? Is it about culture, demography, religion, or language? Is it about economy? Is it about discrimination? Are European societies ready for diversity? Are migrants ready to accept European norms?

PIERRE VIMONT SENIOR FELLOW CARNEGIE EUROPE

Europe has many vulnerabilities, but migration definitely stands out as the one challenge that Europeans cannot meet.

This is not to say that Europeans only failed when dealing with migration. On the contrary: in the midst of the 2015 crisis, they managed not without pain to restore order on the Balkans route and beef up their civilian force in charge of border controls. Additionally, they reached an agreement with Turkey that still holds today, despite criticisms from many humanitarian quarters. And, since the start of the war in Ukraine, Europe has shown a faultless solidarity in hosting more than 5 million Ukrainian refugees.

Yet, for the last six years, when trying to deliver a more integrated and efficient EU migration policy, Europeans have failed. At all stages of the migrants' itinerary, from tackling the root causes of migration in Africa to reinforcing external border controls, adopting relocation schemes and reviewing the European asylum system, the performance has been poor because the political will was never there.

Factually, the EU toolbox is replete with coordinating mechanisms, operational task forces, and voluntary solidarity schemes. But its implementation never gained momentum as governments balk at losing control of the political hot potato that migration represents in each of their nations. Still today, migration is too sensitive politically to be left to Brussels.

MYRTHE WIJNKOOP SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW AT THE CLINGENDAEL INSTITUTE

At first sight, it seems so. Despite the fact that a legislative framework has been established, more than two decades after the Tampere Council there is still no genuine common EU asylum system with harmonized national practices. The refugee crisis in 2015-2016 was above all a political crisis on top of a migration and asylum one, and the 2020 EU [pact](#) seems to be in deadlock.

Furthermore, any attempts at EU level to establish legal migration pathways are often blocked at the national level. There is great dissent among the various political blocks within the union and too many opposing interests to create an effective migration policy. Or so it seems.

Recently, however, the EU has shown resilience and the ability to act united. The [Temporary Protection Directive](#) in response to the huge Ukrainian displacement was directly and unanimously invoked—and prolonged. The Belarusian [instrumentalization](#) of migration in 2021 and the following national attempts to break down the right of asylum was swiftly addressed by new common EU legislation combined with amendments to the Schengen Border Code. The trick is thus to identify the right common sense of urgency and Achilles turns into Athena.

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