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# Beyond the “Migrant Crisis”

The European Union’s Deep and Multifold Crises

Since it was officially set in the 1950s, the “European project” has aimed at developing tools and practices that would contribute to leaving wars and tragedies behind. While it expanded gradually, jumping from its six original members to a total of twenty-eight countries today, what has now become the European Union developed a myriad of policies and tools that were also meant to favour good relations with its neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, the post-“Arab Spring” context highlighted the EU’s many contradictions. Looking at the way the EU has reacted so far to the so-called “migrant crisis”, it is easy to notice that Europeans have been defending decades long leitmotifs that sound now meaningless – and hypocritical.

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# BEYOND THE “MIGRANT CRISIS“ – THE EUROPEAN UNION’S DEEP AND MULTIFOLD CRISES \*

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## The EU as an (Alleged) Model

Understanding the essence of the “European project” requires first to go back to the origins of the “European idea”. Following the end of World War II (1939-1945), many European countries decided that the creation of a “European body” was required so that demons of the past remain part of the past. In 1951, the *European Coal and Steel Community* (ECSC) was created among six founding members (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, Netherlands); this model of an economic integration was meant to allow economic perspectives to contribute to peace. Six years later, both the *European Economic Community* and the *European Atomic Energy Community* followed; they were also meant to prove that through regional integration, countries would dedicate their efforts to development rather than peace. Through the years that followed, these treaties / structures were extended progressively to new members. The European dream was becoming a reality, though problems were never totally absent.

The main objectives of “the Europeans” were clear, as they were based on the (Robert) “Schuman Declaration”. In 1950, France’s minister of Foreign Affairs made an infamous

speech where he mentioned ambitions and ideas that would pave the way for creating what has now become “the European Union”. Schuman considered at that time that “the first concrete foundation of a European Federation” was “indispensable to the preservation of peace”. He wanted war between France and Germany to become “merely unthinkable” and “materially impossible”. This is how he suggested the creation of a community (to be understood as a body) that would facilitate the integration of the coal and steel industries of Europe, both elements being necessary to make weapons of war.

However good these intentions were, they should not make us forget that the “European project” was also, in part, an ideological project. Indeed, the six founding members as well as all of the members that will join the “European Union” afterwards also shared a strong common belief: their opposition to the USSR – hence, their rejection of the forms of communism that reflected the Soviet system. Similarly to the US and what culminated in 1845 under the idea of the “Manifest Destiny”, Europeans believed that they were united by democracy and the respect for human rights and the rule of law and that these same principles had

to benefit both them and the countries they would deal with. This contributed to the creation of a myth that made “Europeans” fierce defenders of noble values and principles. But while it would be unfair to accuse countries of the EU of being willing to contradict these same principles, it is also clear that many of the trends that we have witnessed within countries of the EU these last years indicate that authoritarian trends and / or temptations are part of several governmental approaches to contemporary crises. The “European model” still exists, but it also experimented several alarming cracks over the past months and years.

### **The EU’s Little Understanding of its Close Neighbourhood(s)**

The EU does care about finding accurate tools that allow it to deal efficiently with its close neighbours, both eastwards and southwards. Nevertheless, Europeans failed up to now in defining these same tools. While they got aware early of the strategic importance of the *Middle East and North Africa* (MENA) region, they kept in the back comparing to other international powers (namely, the US and, for some time, USSR).

Among what can be put at the credit of the Europeans, we find approaches and statements such as the *Euro-Arab Dialogue* (1970, then 1973 onwards) and the Venice Declaration (1980) that acknowledged at that time the Palestinians’ right to self-government and the *Palestinian Liberation Organisation’s* right to be included in peace initiatives. Later on, starting from 1995, the launching of the *Barcelona*

*Process* also sounded accurate since it was based on the idea of accompanying the MENA’s development at the condition for the region’s governments to commit to a series of reforms that would benefit political, economic and social perspectives.

On the other hand, one can also be critic towards the *Barcelona Process*. While it was created at a moment when European believed that giving money to their Southern neighbours would keep them safe from Southern-originated movements of migration and terrorism, the way relations went on between Europeans and their MENA counterparts revealed many mistakes. One of them was the fact that the EU – and its members – preferred abided by the will of the rulers and their very limited – if any – introduction of serious reforms to their own system.

This reality got the EU to earn the unfortunate reputation of being “a payer but not a player”. Neither the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004 onwards) nor the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM, 2008 onwards) compensated the EU’s weaknesses and awkward approach to a complex region. Indeed, the UfM that was initially promoted by then French president Nicolas Sarkozy, was based on the idea that by developing economic perspectives, MENA countries would end up making peace. This led to a further neglect of regional conflicts and their impact on the MENA stability, while not solving the region’s macro and microeconomic issues and their impact on societies. The result was the outburst of the so-called “Arab Spring”.

The EU tried to bring an answer to the “Arab Spring”, but to a large extent,



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it failed so far to find one. Ideas for changing the EU’s attitude towards the MENA region were there (such as with the SPRING Programme that was launched in September 2011) but its aim – supporting countries of the Southern Mediterranean region in their transition to democracy – proved ambitious. The EU remains engaged towards the MENA region, and it puts a lot of efforts and money in projects that are meant to

allow civil society empowerment and the consolidation of a better political and social order. Nevertheless, so far, the EU has not really proven that it was capable of achieving seriously any of its two official objectives: “encourage political and economic reform in each individual country in due respect for its specificities” and “encourage regional cooperation among the countries of the region themselves and with the European Union”.

### **When Human Migrations Reflect the EU’s Contradictions**

The EU started facing issues linked to human migrations a long time ago. But the tendency grew significantly with the “Arab Spring” in general, and with the evolutions of the Syrian conflict in particular.

The EU – or at least some of its members – cannot pretend that they are completely innocent towards Syrians and the reasons why they are fleeing war in their country. While the development by the Syrian regime of fierce, violent and unjustified policies against its opponents makes no doubt, two European countries in particular – France and the UK – have backed some of the “Syrian conflict”s’ actors, believing that they could contribute creating a new situation. As a result, the situation in Syria shifted from an internal conflict to a proxy war between several actors and their regional and international backers. Five years after, Syria has become a black hole where no solutions are foreseeable.

Many Syrians ended up becoming refugees in neighbouring countries while others tried to reach the EU to benefit

from what they believed would be decent conditions of living. But Syrians are not the only population to be willing to benefit from the myth of a “European welfare”. While they do constitute the majority of asylum seekers in the EU, people from many other national belongings have tried to follow the same path: Afghans, Iraqis, Kosovars, Albanians, Pakistanis, etc.

This “crisis” came at a moment when the EU was facing many other crises of its own: financial and economic slowdown, rise of unemployment rates in many EU countries (especially countries of Southern Europe), crises of political leadership (e.g. Greece, Italy) as well as the growing of movements of social contestation (e.g. Greece, Spain). Furthermore, the important number of people that managed to reach the European soil after long and risky journeys, and the emotion that has been provoked by the drowning of thousands of migrants in the Mediterranean, brought to the attention to the depth of the crisis.

The image of Aylan Kurdi, a young Syrian boy found dead on Turkish shores, got European governments stuck. While they could hardly dismiss the wave of popular emotion that had been created by this powerful image, they still had to find a way to cope with human migrations that organised towards their soil, especially at a moment when the rise of ISIS and the terrorist attacks that targeted European countries (France, Belgium...) further revealed the extent of the problem.

The rigid and harsh policies favoured by some countries towards migration issues (starting with Hungary), the refusal

(Austria) or the difficulties (Germany) some countries found into coping with the phenomenon, had to give birth to a solution. This is how the EU decided to consider a deal with Turkey, the Syrian refugees’ first destination that also happens to be the origin for many of the boats that are used by refugees and asylum seekers to try and reach the EU.

The problem with the so-called “EU-Turkey deal” is that it seems to create more problems than solutions. Indeed, the terms of this agreement are clear: it aims at limiting the movements of migrants and asylum seekers travelling from Turkey to Greece by allowing this latter to send back to Turkey all new migrants that tried to reach the Greek soil after the 20th of March 2016. In exchange, next to considerable financial incentives to the benefit of Turkey, EU member states would commit to three main conditions: the resettlement, on a “one to one basis”, in the EU of Syrian refugees that are in Turkey; an acceleration of visa liberalisation for Turkish nationals as well as a “re-energisation” of Turkey’s bid to join the EU.

The problem with this deal is that it gives the image of a European subordination to Turkey’s conditions. Indeed, while the EU has been resisting for years the idea of giving Turkey serious hopes for joining the EU, everything looks now as if Europeans would stand ready to dismiss their initial reluctance on the matter as long as this would save them any kind of commitment towards refugees and asylum seekers. Add to that the fact that the “one to one basis” resettlement would concern 72,000 persons, leaving

unsolved the question of what would happen with the “additional numbers”. Last but not least, while this “deal” does not take into consideration Turkey’s responsibility in allowing migrants and asylum seekers to leave its shores freely, it leaves the door open for further complications in the future. Indeed, what would happen if the EU failed to fulfil one or several of the conditions mentioned in this agreement? Most likely, this would leave the door open to a new and voluntary Turkish “liberalisation” of the movements of people that leave its shores towards the EU, getting us back to square one.

### **There are No Easy Solutions...**

Pandora’s Box is open and a lot of time will be needed before we end up solving – at least in part – the current refugee dramas. Putting things in perspective easily makes us aware of the fact that the EU is going through a multifold crisis, which includes an identity crisis. The future of the EU is in jeopardy and nobody knows what this ensemble will look like by five or ten years.

Nevertheless the issues and problems that concern refugees are way more important for the time being, especially since they interact with the EU’s own set of crises. The human and the humanitarian drama that millions of Syrians live today have an origin that deserves to be faced and solved. Syria is experimenting indeed an unbearable situation where an authoritarian rule is exerting fierce and violent policies against its population; at the same time many of the local actors and opponents to this same rule are also acting in a way

that may qualify them one day for accusations of “crimes against humanity”.

Facing realities requires us to say that while we hate the idea that the hundreds of thousands of victims of the Syrian conflict would have paid such a high price “for nothing”, the priority that stands goes to a stabilisation of this country. There is no easy or quick way for achieving this and the price for trying and bring more stability for Syria will also most likely require us to go for concessions that contradict the EU’s proclaimed “core values”. But after all, if easy and efficient alternatives to this sad assessment existed, they would have been applied already and we wouldn’t be standing where we are.

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