



The migration crisis in the European Union: mitigating long-term effects¹

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Introduction

The migration crisis which began in 2014 and reached its climax in 2015-2016 was eased in 2018 through a combination of preventive, deterrent and repressive measures taken individually by the EU's member states as well as at the level of the European Union's institutions and agencies. Far from accommodating the potential of migratory flows and effectively handling the root causes of immigration, the EU reached a relative stability in terms of strategic guidelines, the policy framework and methods and instruments of the management of immigration. Concurrently, the volume, structure and directions of the main inflows tended to stabilize according to patterns of migration which emerged during the migration crisis. This analysis aims to offer a general outlook of the main trends and processes which took place in the European Union in 2018. It underlines the dynamics and size of migratory movements and points to these features which probably will be continued in the near future.

The overall characteristics of immigration to the EU in 2018

The number of illegal crossings at Europe's external borders reached their lowest level in five years, falling by 27% to an estimated 150,000.² Likewise, the number of first time asylum applications decreased by 9% and was 581,000, reaching approximately the level of the year 2014 preceding the outburst of the crisis.³ Germany continued to be the most preferred EU country,

¹ This text is an extended part of a chapter "Migration and security in 2018" forthcoming in: Artur Gruszczak (ed.), *Security Outlook 2018*, Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2019.

² Frontex, *Frontex Risk Analysis for 2019*, Warsaw: Frontex, 2019, p. 8.

³ Eurostat, *Asylum Statistics*, 12 March 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics#Number_of_asylum_applicants:_drop_in_2018 (accessed 28 March 2019).

followed by France, Greece and Spain. A radical drop was noticed in arrivals to Italy, resulting from the protective and restrictive measures adopted in the Central Mediterranean as well as a hard-line approach adopted by the Conte government, especially a new decree on immigration enforced by the far-right interior minister, Matteo Salvini. Although Syrian nationals continued to prevail in numbers in immigration flows to the EU, their share in the total number of asylum applications lodged in 2018 decreased to 13.9%, followed by Afghanis (7.1%), Iraqis (6.8%) and Pakistanis (4.3%).⁴ This confirmed a tendency towards the diversification of refugee and migrant population, thereby making immigration to the EU a truly worldwide phenomenon. These general trends were confirmed by the data on the number of people granted protected status in the EU. The overall number of positive decisions was 333,400 (down by 40% from 2017) and the recognition rate dropped from 46% to 37% in the case of first instance decisions, although it remained on almost the same level (38% and 36% respectively) in regard to final decisions on appeal. Still, Syrians constituted the biggest group of beneficiaries (29%), though their share declined from 33% in 2017. Likewise, the percentage of other major nationalities decreased: 16% down from 19% for Afghanis, 7% down from 12% for Iraqis, 3% down from 5% for Iranians⁵.

What drew attention in 2018 was the further redirection of flows along the main migratory routes. While the Central Mediterranean maritime route to Italy saw lower migratory pressure due to the blockade of departures from Libya and deterrence by the Italian authorities, the Western Mediterranean path, connecting Morocco with Spain, rather unexpectedly became the major channel of irregular migrant flows to the EU. The situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially around the Greek Islands in the Eastern Aegean Sea, remained relatively stable, at least in comparison to the turbulent and dramatic period between mid-2015 and mid-2016. The geography of migratory movements towards Europe reflected in 2018 certain patterns which had been established in the early 2000s, concentrating on maritime routes stretching across the Mediterranean Sea and exploiting a specific ecosystem formed by state authorities, non-governmental organizations and criminal groups. The shifts in the numbers and intensity of migratory flows between the three main corridors - eastern, central and western - reflected a natural search for opportunities to find a best-chance route towards the EU's territories. Concurrently, security measures applied by Turkey and transit countries in north Africa and the Balkans as well as the changing *modi operandi* of migrant smugglers and facilitators, including criminal traffickers, generated opposite tendencies which channelled the streams of migrants into unexplored trails, often exposing the travellers to risks and direct dangers.

⁴ Eurostat, *Citizenship of first-time applicants: largest shares from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq*, 12 March 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics#Citizenship_of_first-time_applicants:_largest_shares_from_Syria.2C_Afghanistan_and_Iraq (accessed 28 March 2019).

⁵ *EU Member States granted protection to more than 300 000 asylum seekers in 2018*, "Eurostat News Release", no. 71/2019, 25 April 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/9747530/3-25042019-BP-EN.pdf/22635b8a-4b9c-4ba9-a5c8-934ca02de496> (accessed 30 April 2019); *EU Member States granted protection to more than half a million asylum seekers in 2017*, "Eurostat News Release", no. 67/2018, 19 April 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/8817675/3-19042018-AP-EN.pdf/748e8fae-2cfb-4e75-a388-f06f6ce8ff58> (accessed 30 April 2019).

The continuing securitization of immigration

The humanitarian aspect of inflows of third-country nationals to the EU went along with the growing awareness of the negative repercussions for social stability, internal order and political balance. Some inclusionary measures adopted in 2015 (such as a resettlement scheme, refugee relocation system and solidarity mechanism) fell short of their main objectives and were often boycotted by some member states. Meanwhile, security issues were put high on the migration agenda in many member states, including by their governments and leading political parties. Statements depicting migrants as a threat to national security and identity were voiced by parties which succeeded in the parliamentary elections in 2018 in Sweden and Italy. In many others anti-immigrant discourse, including hate speech, intensified and was increasingly used as a tool for raising political capital⁶.

Against that backdrop, EU institutions stressed not only the humanitarian and moral dimensions of the migration issues, but also negative outcomes posing risks to internal security and public order, especially due to the permanent illicit activities of smugglers and traffickers on the main routes heading to Europe. The European Council at its meeting on the 28th of June 2018 reconfirmed its determination to prevent a return to uncontrolled migratory flows and to effectively tackle illegal migration. Pointing to smugglers operating on the main migratory routes, the heads of states and governments declared their determination to definitively break the business model of the smugglers as well as increase search-and-rescue capabilities with the possible use of regional disembarkation platforms⁷. This position was confirmed by the European Council in October 2018 by underlining the point that the fight against people-smuggling networks needs to be stepped up in several ways. These include an intensified cooperation with third countries on investigating, apprehending and prosecuting smugglers, the setting up of a joint task force at the European Migrant Smuggling Centre (housed by Europol) and improved monitoring and disruption of malicious online communications⁸.

A discussion on a new multiannual financial framework was started in 2018, giving the first projections of the next EU budget for the years 2021-27. Migration and borders acquired particular attention as matters of growing relevance for the stability and security of the Union and its member states, having learned lessons from the recent crisis and its prolonged repercussions. In May 2018 the Commission proposed a long-term budget for the 2021-2027 period in which funding for migration and border management was planned to triple, amounting to €34.9 billion. This radical increase in the funds for the management of migration and asylum (doubling the current financial perspective) was overshadowed by the skyrocketing spending on the management of external borders, quadrupling the current budget by establishing

⁶ See: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Beyond the Peak: Challenges Remain, But Migration Numbers Drop*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2019, pp. 5-9, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2019-beyond-the-peak-migration-annual-review-2018_en.pdf (accessed 28 April 2019).

⁷ European Council, *European Council meeting (28 June 2018) – Conclusions*, EUCO 9/18, Brussels, 28 June 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35936/28-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf> (accessed 30 June 2018).

⁸ European Council, *European Council meeting (18 October 2018) – Conclusions*, EUCO 13/18, Brussels, 18 October 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/36775/18-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf> (accessed 30 October 2018).

an Integrated Border Management Fund and allocating more than €12 billion for the decentralised agencies in charge of border management⁹. The latter aspect heralded the determination of the Commission to reinforce the relevant EU agencies and increase their impact on migration, asylum and border management. On the 12th of September 2018 the Commission brought forward a proposal for a new regulation on the European Border and Coast Guard, transforming it by 2020 into a standing corps of 10,000 operational staff with executive powers to effectively support member states on the ground. Similarly to that, the Commission advocated for the creation of an EU Asylum Agency in order to speed up return procedures and increase effective returns¹⁰.

Anti-immigration drivers and forces

The political and organizational actions undertaken in 2018 at the EU level coincided with several important developments which determined, to various extents, the state of migration, asylum, border control and accompanying security-related issues. Firstly, the EU-Turkey deal on irregular migration based on the 2015 EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan and 2016 statement was in general implemented as far as the main conditions, i.e. halting the massive flow of refugees and asylum seekers towards Europe in exchange for substantial financial assistance, were fulfilled. The number of refugees who came to Greece via Turkey fell in 2017 by 97% compared to the period before the agreement¹¹. The Turkish authorities complained about the financial, organisational and administrative hardships caused by hosting more than 3 million refugees, mainly Syrian victims of the civil war. They also insisted that the EU transfer the money under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey scheme without delays and difficulties. On the 28th of June 2018, EU Member States agreed at the European Council meeting that the second instalment of €3 billion of the Facility (€2 billion financed from the EU budget and €1 billion by member states' contributions) would be transferred before the initial allocation of the first tranche of €3 billion has been entirely spent. By the end of 2018, the EU committed over €1 billion out of the next €3 billion instalment to humanitarian and development assistance under the Facility for Refugees mechanism.

Secondly, demographic and migratory trends were carefully monitored and analysed with a view of acquiring a full situational assessment of risks and tensions outside the EU, both at its external borders and in pre-border areas, as well as within member states' territories and at their internal borders, due to secondary migratory movements and the management of immigrants and refugees residing in the EU. As to the latter, the gradual restrictions on the movement of international migrants imposed by some countries in the Western Balkans in late 2015 / early

⁹ European Commission, *EU budget: Commission proposes a modern budget for a Union that protects, empowers and defends*, "Press Release", 2 May 2018, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-3570_en.htm (accessed 13 March 2019).

¹⁰ European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Border and Coast Guard and repealing Council Joint Action n°98/700/JHA, Regulation (EU) n° 1052/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Regulation (EU) n° 2016/1624 of the European Parliament and of the Council*, COM(2018) 631 final, Brussels, 12.09.2018, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-border-coast-guard-regulation-631_en.pdf (accessed 14 September 2018).

¹¹ Deutsche Welle, *EU asylum applications drop off drastically in 2017*, 30 December 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-asylum-applications-drop-off-drastically-in-2017/a-41976192> (accessed 12 April 2018).

2016, up to the closing of the borders to migrants and asylum seekers of certain nationalities, decided on by Macedonia and Slovenia, significantly diminished the number of migrants entering the EU from the Balkans. However, long-term effects, entailing the processing of asylum application, temporary protection mechanisms, integration of immigrants, and administrative bottlenecks, exposed the main host countries in the EU to multiple problems, challenges and risks. As far as the external dimension is concerned, the EU put a proper emphasis on global demographic and migration trends, seeking viable responses to potential risks and future challenges. For instance, it extended cooperation and dialogue with African countries from the northern part of the continent to western and sub-Saharan Africa. The reason for this was the development and diversification of migratory routes from sub-Saharan Africa in response to the growing demographic pressures and worsening socio-economic conditions, as well as political tensions and conflicts taking place there, particularly in western Africa, the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa.

Thirdly, the EU, partially under pressure from anti-immigrant factions in such states as Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, Malta, the Visegrad Four and the Scandinavian countries, promoted an exclusionary approach which consisted in preventing migrants from reaching the territories of the EU and keeping those rescued in controlled hotspots established by member states on a voluntary basis¹². The objective of keeping migrants and refugees out of Europe by placing them in so-called regional disembarkation platforms resembles an idea of buffer zones protecting the EU from an unpleasant and politically incommensurable problem¹³. The securitization of internal and external migratory movements aims unambiguously at the lowering of a positive perception of immigrants by EU citizens and legal residents and portraying them as a serious problem of security and domestic order which should be deterred as early as possible and prevented from penetrating the territories of EU member states.

In spite of the declining migratory pressure on the EU's external borders and the appeasing statements of EU institutions, the long-term consequences of the migratory crisis were clearly visible during 2018. Secondary migration movements continued to cause severe strains on the immigration services in the member states. The number of asylum applications pending examination - despite a considerable reduction - still amounted to roughly 450,000 cases by the end of the year¹⁴. The risk of organised criminal activities at the external borders, the threat of terrorism-related movements across the borders and the growing anti-immigrant sentiments in the EU completed the grim security picture.

¹² See Francesco Maiani, „Regional Disembarkation Platforms” and „Controlled Centres”: Lifting the Drawbridge, Reaching Out Across the Mediterranean, or Going Nowhere?, “EU Immigration and Asylum Law and Policy Blog”, 18 September 2018, <https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/regional-disembarkation-platforms-and-controlled-centres-lifting-the-drawbridge-reaching-out-across-the-mediterranean-or-going-nowhere/> (accessed 20 February 2019).

¹³ See Jon Henley, *EU migration deal: what was agreed and will it work?*, “The Guardian”, 29 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/29/eu-summit-migration-deal-key-points> (accessed 30 June 2018).

¹⁴ EASO, *Latest asylum trends - 2018 overview*, <https://www.easo.europa.eu/asylum-trends-overview-2018> (accessed 29 March 2019).

Conclusions

The European Union has managed to take the migration issue under control due to the strengthening of control and protection instruments and mechanisms at its external borders. The deal with Turkey enabled to curtail the main migrant streams from the Middle East and South Asia. The cooperation with Libyan authorities, irrespective of internal struggle between the rival factions, contributed to the substantial reduction of human smuggling and dangerous expediting of migrants into international waters. However, the risks and threats affecting migrants did not diminish. The Mediterranean Sea continued to be the main passage to Europe. For several thousands of migrants, it turned to be their grave. The practice of outsourcing refugee deterrence to authoritarian regimes, such as Turkey under Erdogan, or failed states, such as Libya, brought about a plenty of human rights violations. In Libya, overcrowded refugee camps and detention centres were the everyday scene of abuse, maltreatment and violence against migrants.

2018 was the year of the growing tension between European values and pragmatic interests. Ultimately, it was migrants who bore the adverse consequences of the EU's increasingly restrictive policy.