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Migration¹ is not the real problem

The media, and in its wake, public opinion considers the influx of migrants into the European Union as a huge problem, potentially challenging the well-being of the Europeans as a whole, putting into question the way of life we are used to in the European welfare states. Historical comparisons with the migration period, or “Barbarian Invasions” in the late Roman Empire, are frequent; “the boat is full” is a widespread standard phrase for the refusal of more refugees, a (usually unconscious) quotation from a member of the Swiss government, who coined this phrase when opposing more Jews crossing the border from Nazi Germany², the “limits of our absorption capacity”³ have been reached, most of the tabloid press tells us. But what is the real size of the problem in 2015?

The real size of the problem



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immigrant

Most often, absolute figures, varying from single to double, are advanced: one or two million immigrants in the EU, 800.000 or one million in Germany alone, the country which takes in by far the majority of them – in terms of absolute figures. In fact, in proportion to its population, Sweden takes in more immigrants. On face it, figures can seem impressive – but figures

are useless and don't tell us anything about the real size of the problem (as already illustrated by the short reference to Germany and Sweden). Figures gain their meaning only in comparison – to other figures about migration, to other figures about demography, population, employment, GDP etc.

On a global scale, there are about 60 million people are refugees currently on the move, according to the UNHCR, at the end of 2014. Close to 40 million of them did not cross the borders of their home country.

This is to say that most of the refugees worldwide are living in developing countries and are unable or unwilling to leave their home country.

That is even the case for Syria, where approximately half of the populations, i.e. more than 10 million people, were forced out of their homes; about 40% of these 10 million left Syria, half of them stayed in Turkey, another quarter in Lebanon, many others in Jordan. 95% of the 2.6 million Afghans who left their country live in Pakistan. Second lesson: Most of those who finally do leave their country end up in the immediate neighbourhood.⁴

Starting from the perspective of the global “refugee crisis”, the first conclusion is that 5% of the refugees come to Europe. To put it another way: There might be a huge refugee crisis – but Europe is at the margins of this crisis, and encounters only a very small share of the whole problem.

But we can also look at the numbers of migrants as well from the European side, and start to assess the size of the problem with comparisons between those 5% of global refugees reaching Europe and other European figures, with reference to demography etc.. How big is a figure of one or two million refugees compared to the European population, to national populations? The European Union has approximately 500 million citizens – 2 million (to calculate with the higher estimates of the figures put forward) join them. This is one refugee for every 250 Europeans. In order to make the figures more vivid, we could imagine a beer garden, where 250 people are sitting under the trees, chatting, drinking, eating – one additional guest arrives, looking for a chair and a place at one of the tables. This is the real size of the “problem”.

As we know, one of the crucial questions is how to distribute the refugees over the European Union; many member states are reluctant to take any refugees at all. That is why the Council of the European Union voted with a QMV (qualified majority) a distribution plan for 120.000 refugees, on the 22 September, against the opposition of four East Central European countries (Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania)⁵.

We should not lose sight of the comparative magnitude: 120.000 refugees for every 500 million Europeans mean approximately one refugee for every 4000 European citizens.

Sweden and Germany are the countries which receive most of the refugees, Sweden proportionally, Germany in absolute figures: Some 190.000 refugees may arrive in Sweden this year, i.e. approximately 2 for every 100 Swedish citizens – twice the rate of Germany, which is expecting between 800.000 and 1 million, i.e. roughly one refugee per 100 citizens. Other countries which do take refugees – like the Netherlands and France – are far below these rates.

So again – this is the realistic picture, the real size of the “problem”.

Media driven perception

The media tells us another story, as if it was relating a totally different reality. To start with, the Swedish case, as reflected by the German foreign broadcast network “Deutsche Welle”, looks like this: “Sweden has reached the breaking point. [...] Sweden has now reached the limit. [...] An extraordinary 190,000 refugees are now expected to arrive in Sweden this year - double what the agency expected at the start of the year, and more people than live in Uppsala, the country's fourth largest city. If the predictions are correct, Sweden will take 20,000 asylum applications per million people in 2015, double the rate even of Germany. [...] Deutsche Welle quotes Anna Kinberg Batra, the leader of Sweden's center-right Moderate Party:] “If we do not act now, we will have a collapse in the system”.⁶

The British “Express” and the Bavarian “Bayern Express” have already been quoted. An interesting investigation has been conducted on behalf of Migazin, a network of researchers on “Migration in Germany”, addressing the use of metaphor in media reports on migration.⁷ One of the central findings is that very link to the above quoted phrase “the boat is full”: Many journalists take refuge in metaphors like “waves”, “flooding”, “streams” of migrants⁸: “Migrants stream into Croatia in a bid to bypass Hungary”, „Europe is Facing a ‚Great Wave’ of Immigration“, „Staggering interactive map shows waves of migrants flocking to Europe each day. The flow of more than a million migrants into Europe has been shown in these amazing interactive maps“, and many more examples are easily available.

All of these metaphors suggest that migrants are a kind of a natural catastrophe which nobody can control and which will inevitably do much damage to those who are exposed to the risk. Moreover, this qualification (categorisation) of immigration allows us to escape from a proper assessment of the problem – it is presented as a simply overwhelming phenomenon, out of reach and unmanageable by the people, by the Europeans.

It is obvious that the real size of the problem – 250 Europeans receiving one refugee – is totally different from the media driven perception of public opinion: “Europe is facing a Great Wave of Immigration”. The gap between reality and perception is simply staggering.

Politicians’ reactions

Politicians in many European countries are visibly tempted to follow the media driven hysteria, instead of reacting according to the real size of the problem. Even the Swedish moderate Anna Kinberg Batra could not withstand this temptation, as quoted above. David Cameron declared: „Britain would be 'overwhelmed' if it opened its doors to every refugee”⁹; Viktor Orban, Hungarian Prime Minister, who erected an armed border wall against migrants, goes one step further and taps into the arsenal of war metaphors: “Refugees 'look like an army', says Hungarian PM Viktor Orban”¹⁰. It comes as no surprise that Marine le Pen, leader of the French “Front National” takes of this opportunity to affirm her stance: “France is about to be ‘submerged’ in a ‘terrifying’ wave of migrants who represent only a ‘burden.’”¹¹ The German leader of the so-called Christian Social Union, the Bavarian branch of the Christian Democratic Party, Horst Seehofer, calls the policy of the Chancellor a “predictable disaster”¹², as various German media recall.

Angela Merkel seems to stand alone with her “welcome policy” (except for representatives of the European Union). When she declared on the 5th of September that the German borders would be open to any refugee, she triggered enthusiasm in a large part of the German public, but, after a short moment of wonder, disenchantment among most of her colleagues all over Europe.

The real big problem, revealed by immigration, is ... us

What the comparison between the real size of immigration on the one hand and media driven, politically endorsed perception on the other reveal is that the real problem does not lie with immigration, but with the European Union, its member states, its political class, its media and its societies.

Jean-Claude Juncker is right when he says in his “State of the Union address” before the European Parliament: „It is time to speak frankly about the big issues facing the European Union. Because our European Union is not in a good state. There is not enough Europe in this Union. And there is not enough Union in this Union. We have to change this. And we have to change this now.”¹³

Look at the problem under a different, opposite hypothetical premise: If the EU were to be a community of self-confident states and societies, if they would live up to their ambition to act in a united way, pursuing the declared values of the Union – like human dignity, freedom, respect for human rights – showing solidarity ... then the one refugee joining 250 Europeans would not be considered as a problem. In other words, immigration, as it stands, is not the big problem itself, it *reveals* a big problem within the European Union and its members – they do not have a problem, they *are the problem*.

Recommendations

A logical consequence of the above is, in the first instance, to turn our perception around and look at Europe and its member states; the big problem lies at their level. Of course, this is not a plea to leave the immigrants without a solution for their lives – there must be an integrated approach to deal with immigration. But it is not very difficult to sketch out such an approach: Their immediate needs (accommodation ...) have to be satisfied, they need education (professional and cultural!), they need jobs ... and this is the best way to integrate them into our societies in a way which would be beneficial for both sides. Even the implementation of this strategy is not just about solving a problem, but about investing in a better performing society.

The really big problems, however, lie with the Europeans themselves, and the main plea of this analysis is to allocate attention to this side of the affair.

There is no doubt that the media has to be free in European countries, but there is undeniably a problem with the perceptions of contemporary problems they create. We have to address the problem of media driven false perceptions, which are misleading the behaviour of our societies and their political representatives. One of the problems which contribute to the hysterical overestimation of some problems is the outrageous competition on the market for information. Responsible information should not only be submitted to the rules which apply to any other merchandise. The media should commit itself to rules which curb the run for ever more dramatic, exaggerated and in the end false assessments of real problems.

Secondly, political leadership is required in order to overcome the dramatic shift of large parts of the electorates in many European countries to populist (and worse) parties. It does not come as a surprise that those parties benefit from fear and the perception of threat. They are therefore interested in fostering these attitudes, be it at the price of wrong information, exaggeration and lies. “Listening to the people” has all too often degenerated into an excuse for a lack of leadership and accommodating populist parties, an electoral strategy which is not only immoral, but rarely successful. The original is always more attractive than the copy, and the ones to benefit from this strategy will always be the populists themselves.

Thirdly, and closely linked with the previous recommendation, there is no other way toward a sustainable societal and political future of Europe than to take the commitment to values, which all member states convened upon, seriously. Article 2 (Title 1, Common Provisions) of the Treaty on European Union is as binding as all other articles of a duly ratified and implemented treaty:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Governments and European institutions have to act in accordance with this (and similar) provisions – the current attitude vis-à-vis the so-called immigration crisis is far from corresponding to this requirement.

Open borders are among the most appreciated achievements of European integration. Freedom of movement is one of the highest values for Europeans, it must go hand in hand with value-based

solidarity at the common borders and cannot be sacrificed for the sake of a misguided perception of immigration, for the sake of populist electoral considerations.

Finally, the immigration problem reveals that Europeans, to a large extent, close their eyes to the real world outside the European borders. This has to change, too – globalisation is an irreducible fact, and Europe greatly benefits from it. But there is no way to deny the consequences: Europe has to act united beyond its borders, in order to prevent the societal and political failure of a whole neighbouring region (the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and beyond). There is no way Europe can retrench behind new iron curtains, and there is no reason to do so: Europe is strong enough to turn globalisation to its advantage, if it is willing to do so.

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References

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- 4) UNHCR: World at War. Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2014; <http://unhcr.org/556725e69.html>; UNHCR: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, as of 23 June 06 2015; more recent UNHCR data, especially for the Mediterranean: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>
- 5) The Financial Times called the vote, which conforms with the procedures agreed upon and implemented with the European Treaties “EU Ministers force through refugee quota plan”; ft.com/cms/s/0/76c2dd9e-6111-11e5-9846-de406ccb37f2.html; for the Council decision see the Commission's press release: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATE-MENT-15-5697_de.htm
- 6) Deutsche Welle: Sweden hits refugee crisis zero hour; 20 November 2015; <http://www.dw.com/en/sweden-hits-refugee-crisis-zero-hour/a-18863702>
- 7) <http://www.migazin.de/2015/11/18/metaphern-fluechtlinge-wir-wellen-flut/>
- 8) Express again is at the forefront of this type of journalism: „Staggering interactive map shows wave of migrants flocking to Europe each day. The flow of more than a million migrants into Europe has been shown in these amazing interactive maps“; Express 30 October 2015; <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/615542/Staggering-interactive-map-shows-wave-of-migrants-flocking-to-Europe-each-day>; France24 is another example: <http://www.france24.com/en/20150926-migrants-stream-croatia-serbia-hungary-refugees>, and there are many more. An American one is Nicholas M. Gallagher: The European Immigration Crisis: Europe is Facing a “Great Wave” of Immigration; The American Interest, 28 August 2015; <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/08/28/europe-is-facing-a-great-wave-of-immigration/>
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- 12) Horst Seehofer: Kollaps mit Ansage, 3 October 2015, quoted by Focus, Spiegel online, N24 and others.
- 13) Jean-Claude Juncker: State of the Union 2015, 9 September 2015; http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/soteu/docs/state_of_the_union_2015_en.pdf