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The Strategic Implications of the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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In the spring of 2015, a sudden change occurred in population flows between the southern and northern banks of the Mediterranean. Overall numbers of new asylum seekers climbed from fewer than 58,000 in April to close to 89,000 in June. The number of new applicants hailing from Syria nearly doubled, from slightly under 11,000 to close to 21,000.[1] This was just the beginning; the wave of refugees picked up during the summer, with the movement of some 190,000 Syrians during July, August and September 2015, three times the number that had arrived during the same period in 2014. This would represent a yearly rate of around 672,000. By late October, a cumulative total of 507,000 Syrians were seeking or had secured an abode within the European Union.[2]

In the recent past, population flows to Europe had mostly passed through the western half of the Mediterranean, notably towards the Italian island of Lampedusa, and hailed mainly from Africa. The bulk – 400,000, 75% of the total from January to September 2015 – were now entering Greece (and thus the EU) from Turkey, across the Aegean Sea. In September 2015, fully nine-tenths, amounting to 153,000 people, came via the narrow waters separating mainland Turkey from the Greek islands of Lesvos and Kos. By then, the share accounted for by Syrians had risen to some 70%; 18% were Afghans, with a small but growing contingent of Iraqis, at 4%.[3] The flow remained unabated in October, with some 48,000 entering in one five-day

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period during the middle of that month, and 12,558 on the single day of 20 October.[4] Prima facie, these are for the most part war refugees, who on the basis of both international law and past practice, can expect to be granted asylum if they get an opportunity to apply for it within recipient countries of the EU.[5] Germany is the destination of choice. From 1–29 September 2015, more than 169,000 additional refugees were registered in Bavaria alone.[6] Unsurprisingly, more than two-thirds of the current wave of asylum seekers are young adult men, blazing the trail for their kin as they brave the hardships of an uncertain journey.

This sudden and massive flow of population has already had a substantial impact on the domestic politics of most European countries. It has generated new tensions, and exacerbated pre-existing ones, between the member states of the EU, and promises to be critically important for the Union as a whole. The crisis also bears on Europe's security choices vis-à-vis the conflicts in the Middle East. This impact will be magnified as a function of the duration and the scale of the refugee crisis.

Strictly speaking, the current flow of refugees is not unprecedented in numerical terms, nor from the standpoint of its consequences – human, strategic or otherwise. Events such as the *Vertreibung* (eviction) of the German-speaking population of Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War, the partition of India in 1947, the Palestinian *Nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948 and the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan displaced people on a scale and at a tempo at least comparable to, and sometimes greater than, the ongoing exodus.[7]

From a European standpoint, the wars of Yugoslav succession of 1992–2001 offer some elements of comparison: close to 1.5 million war refugees from Bosnia in 1994, and 900,000 Kosovars uprooted in 1998–99.[8] The flow of Bosnian refugees towards the EU was gradual, however, and therefore relatively manageable. The surge of Kosovar refugees was quite sudden, but it was comparatively modest and handled on the assumption that their stay would end after a brief and successful war.

There is no precedent for such a large and abrupt flow of war refugees from the Middle East to Europe. The exodus is poised to continue, moreover, at a sharp tempo and on a massive scale, with only occasional respites

as high winds and choppy seas deter passage. There are in excess of 4m Syrian refugees registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the Middle East, primarily in Turkey (2m-plus), Lebanon (close to 1.1m) and Jordan (some 630,000).[9] The ongoing war in Syria provides no prospect for their early return home. The shortfall in the funding required by the UNHCR to ensure the survival of the refugees in 2015 – currently assessed by the organisation at more than $2.5 billion – hardly makes it possible to sustain, let alone increase the numbers of displaced people living in these countries, even if the $1.1bn promised by the EU in September were to be released quickly.[10] Furthermore, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates at 6.5m the number of internally displaced people in Syria.[11] Any number of these people may feel obliged to leave the country as the war continues, or even intensifies, with the military intervention of Russia in support of Bashar al-Assad's government and the ramping-up of the Western air campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

In other words, the theoretical potential for further Syrian refugee flows is some ten times greater than the number that have already sought, or are currently seeking, a safe haven in Europe. Post-NATO Afghanistan and conflict-ridden Iraq have to be added to the equation. As for the longer run, Europe must assume that as the century-old territorial dispensation in the Middle East is further challenged in a twenty-first-century version of the Thirty Years War, additional refugee flows will be set in motion.[12]

Europe's triple crisis

The refugee flow picked up at a time when the EU was already facing a set of massive challenges, with the high drama of the Greek crisis set against the backdrop of persistent low economic growth, the rise of right- and left-wing populism within numerous EU member states, and the growing uncertainties concerning the United Kingdom's place in the Union, along with separatist movements in several countries, continuing tension with Russia and the pervasive threat from ISIS.

At the domestic level, hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers have predictably provided ready fuel to those political movements that have

made xenophobia, in its various guises, their stock-in-trade. But while the ongoing exodus to Europe is a spectacular development, it does not in itself transform the human fabric of the EU, a grouping of some 508m residents, of whom 33.5m were born outside its limits.[13] At least as important as xenophobia per se may be the broader sense of loss of control experienced by countries and societies as the EU is seen to be demonstrating yet again that it is unable to cope. As the EU ceases to be identified with prosperity and security, euroscepticism – if not outright euro-phobia – rises. This, in turn, ties into the fears of the social and societal transformations brought upon by the forces of globalisation. What the French call *souverainisme* – the return to the old religion of tightly controlled borders and the unfettered sovereignty of nation-states – is an ideologically and politically much broader church. Rather than the anti-Islamic demonstrators of Pegida in Germany or the neo-Nazis of Golden Dawn in Greece,[14] the political beneficiaries of the refugee crisis may well be a broader-based French National Front or the multihued forces of euroscepticism in the UK. The unequivocal electoral victories of Switzerland's People's Party and of Poland's Law and Justice Party in October 2015 point strongly to such a *souverainiste* backlash. The regional elections in France in December could confirm a wider *souverainiste* shift of the political centre of gravity in Europe. The systematic practice of *souverainisme* by each member state is not conducive to the emergence of the EU as a single strategic actor.

The crisis revealed new fault lines

The refugee crisis has revealed new EU fault lines cutting across those already laid by the economic crisis. Within weeks of the surge of asylum seekers crossing into Greece and from there to the Balkans and into the EU's continental heartland, the post-communist members of the union made it crystal clear that they were not ready to accept sizeable numbers of refugees on their territory. The problem here was not mainly Hungarian President Viktor Orbán's overt xenophobia: if he appeared indifferent to the refugees' plight, he was nevertheless acting in line with existing EU policies, and notably the Dublin Regulation which mandates that asylum requests be processed in the country of first entry – in this case, Greece.[15] By building

a physical barrier to entry, he was acting no differently than other countries that had built razor-wire barriers, with EU acquiescence, such as Spain (along its border with Morocco) or indeed Greece itself, which had sealed its land border with Turkey some years earlier.[16]

The bigger development was the extreme reluctance from the Baltic states, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia to accept any EU burden-sharing scheme, variously invoking their relative poverty, the intrinsic difficulties of accepting deeply alien outsiders or even the refusal of hosting non-Christians. 'In Slovakia, we don't have mosques, we only want to choose the Christians', said one official; Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the leader of Poland's Law and Justice Party, stated during the recent electoral campaign that the migrants carry 'various types of parasites', which 'could be dangerous here'.[17] Such hostility took many outside observers aback,[18] given the acceptance in the West of large numbers of refugees from the Baltic states after the Second World War (200,000-plus), Hungary after the crushing of the 1956 revolt (around 200,000) and Czechoslovakia after the 1968 Soviet invasion.[19] Besides providing convenient cover for some of the hardly-less-stingy countries of Western Europe, this unexpected refusal will eventually rebound to the detriment of the EU's more recent members in their eventual hour of need. Conversely, some not-too-well-off non-EU countries, notably Serbia, a major transit country, acted with more humanity both officially and at ground level than many EU members.[20]

No less spectacularly, the arrival of the refugees reinforced the split between the more prosperous, reputedly well-managed countries of Protestant tradition, most notably Germany and Scandinavia, and others. Since the end of the Cold War, Germany has hosted a disproportionate share of refugees from the wars of Yugoslav succession,[21] while Sweden in recent years has already been a haven for more than 80,300 refugees from Syria.[22] Sweden's population is six times smaller than that of France or the UK, which together have given asylum to less than one-fifth as many Syrian refugees.[23] There was therefore reason to expect Germany and like-minded northern partners to manifest similar solidarity in the face of the current new crisis. The manner in which this was done by Germany, however, came as a complete surprise. On 12 August, Germany's Minister of the Interior

stated that up to 800,000 people would be seeking refuge in Germany by the end of 2015; by 24 August, Germany had dropped Dublin rules by opening its doors to all Syrian refugees, who represented by then about half of the refugee flow coming from Greece and the Balkans.[24] This humane policy was put forward by Chancellor Angela Merkel to widespread popular support at home, and has earned Germany well-deserved plaudits from the broader public in Europe and beyond. Germany's compassion was all the more necessary in practical terms as refugee flows reached up to 12,000 a day at Munich's main railway station in the closing days of summer, overwhelming local administrations. Furthermore, Merkel has pursued this course in the face of compassion fatigue, slumping opinion-poll ratings, rising budget costs (with €4bn extra spending in 2015 and €10bn more planned for 2016) and attacks from her right-wing coalition partners in the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU).[25]

German power, EU division

Foreign capitals were less than thrilled, however, by Berlin's activism. Germany acted without consultation or coordination, with its unilateral open-door policy potentially attracting even more refugees into Europe. Berlin was seen as taking no account of EU rules, reinforcing the suspicion that the German mantra on the sanctity of a rules-based European order, so often invoked during the euro crisis, was aimed at others; Berlin could choose to shrug it off. Germany had deliberately breached the EU's fiscal pact in 2002,[26] and now was doing the same with the Dublin Regulation. The exposure, at around the same time, of Volkswagen's flouting of US and EU environmental rules did not help calm such feelings. This perceived pattern of behaviour could add venom to the next euro crisis, should one break out, when Greece finds it impossible to stick to the terms of its latest bailout.

By taking the moral high ground, Germany made such feelings difficult to express in public. Germany is serious about giving refuge to a disproportionate number of asylum seekers. Furthermore, on 22 September Germany and France together secured an initial EU agreement, including members lying outside the Schengen area such as the UK, to host 120,000 refugees over a two-year period with burden-sharing ensured by a quota system, in

the face of bitter opposition by several Central European states. Although the initial numbers are limited, and the decision faces legal challenges,[27] a double precedent was set: the quota system is mandatory, and the agreement was secured by qualified majority voting, which may be permissible under existing treaties but was unexpected on an issue of principle and great political sensitivity. Berlin got its way, and may expect to do so again in the future.

This remarkable development, along with the outcome of the latest euro crisis, has led to a discussion on the emergence of a 'German horizontal of power' (in contrast to the Kremlin's 'vertical of power') in a gradually integrating EU.[28] In this view, the EU gains greater cohesiveness with a soft-power Germany acting as the pacesetter at its core, successfully countering the forces of extremism and defying many outside observers' low expectations as to the survivability of the EU and its works, not least the euro.

Some EU integration is occurring in order to reinforce the prospects of the euro's survival, and this process is heavily influenced by Germany's policy choices. This, however, is a largely technocratic process: integration by stealth. As a deliberate and political process, federalism, in the sense in which that concept is used in countries such as the US, Brazil or Switzerland, has ceased to be on electoral offer in the EU, as is demonstrated by its absence in the 2015 elections for the European Parliament. This process predates the refugee crisis. Jürgen Habermas's constitutional patriotism – the idea of identifying with a constitution and its values, rather than with a nation and a territory – had already been dealt a body-blow in 2005 with the failure to ratify the European constitutional treaty.[29] Then came the divisive and apolitical manner in which the EU's members, notably an increasingly influential Germany, and the 'Institutions' chose to respond to the successive economic crises that began with the recession of 2008.[30] On a hot-button issue such as population movement, integration by stealth of the sort practised in the economic and financial arena will be even less likely to prove politically sustainable. Norms are not a substitute for policy, nor can they be counted on to provide a shared sense of purpose in the face of crisis.

The resort to qualified majority voting is not so much a sign of the emergence of a European *demos* as it is a sign of overstretch. Germany has indeed

proven to be at the centre of Europe's response to the refugee crisis (such as it is), but with little power, horizontal or otherwise. The forces of *souverainisme* will continue to develop to varying degrees in most EU member states. For its part, the UK will find it more difficult to resist the temptation of exit from an EU in which population issues are dealt with by qualified majority voting.

In short, the refugee crisis is aggravating and accelerating the economic, social and political consequences of Europe's inability to deal jointly and severally, in an effective and legitimate manner, with the challenges of our age. The EU may survive more or less completely, with all or some of its current powers. But its constitutional and strategic ambitions of barely more than ten years ago are already receding in the mist of the pre-crisis age.[31] Just standing still is made more difficult by the refugee crisis.

Dancing with wolves

The refugee exodus, and the subsequent beginning of Russian military operations in Syria, has already changed European priorities in the Middle East. In early 2015, the main regional concerns in Paris, London and Berlin could have been summarised as defusing Iran's nuclear programme, eliminating ISIS and supporting the removal of President Assad from power. Today, a to-do list would look like this: avoiding new large-scale refugee flows; eliminating ISIS; and providing the non-jihadi component of the Syrian rebellion with the ability to resist Russian and Iranian operations in support of Assad, while seeking his removal by political means. The situation has not only become more intrinsically dangerous with the direct involvement of Russia and the ramping up of Iran's presence. Europe's new list of priorities is also markedly more problematic. The intensification of military operations in Syria will increase the refugee flow, not least as a result of the bombing and shelling of the major cities on the north–south axis: from Aleppo, Idlib, Hama and Homs, down to the Damascus conurbation and Deraa. In terms of population movement, this effect will be relatively scenario-independent: whether initial Russian strikes are followed by stalemate or whether the battle will spread into other areas, east (to Palmyra and Raqqa) or west (to the coastal mountains), there is little cause to expect Moscow's ongoing involvement to lead to a lessening of

refugee flows. Dialogue with Russia will no doubt be seen as necessary for a variety of reasons, ranging from the need to deconflict air operations to trying to seal Bashar's fate politically, but reducing emigration will not be a low-hanging fruit.

From the European and especially German vantage point, Turkey's strategic importance is rising, at the expense of EU reservations on issues of democratic and human rights under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Turkey is the only convenient springboard for massive emigration from the Middle East to Europe. It has the ability to prompt further emigration towards the EU and to facilitate the transit of the 7m-plus internally displaced persons from Syria to Europe. Turkey and the EU each have in hand assets that lend themselves to a broad range of trade-offs, from the resolution of the Cypriot question or support for Turkey's attempt to create a 'safe zone' in northern Syria, to the re-launching of the stalled negotiations for Turkey's entry into the EU.[32] Some of these items are immediately germane to migration and refugee issues, such as visa regimes and asylum policies. Turkey is a key strategic and political player in the handling of the situation in Syria generally: the refugee crisis will increase the attention paid to it in the EU overall, and notably in Germany, with its massive Turkish community. With a GDP close to half of Russia's, Turkey is the EU's sixth-largest trading partner, ahead of Japan, India and Brazil.[33] In turn, the EU is by far Turkey's largest partner, with more than 40% of its trade.[34] If its political scene allows it, Turkey is set for a step change in European, and specifically in German, geostrategic and geo-economic policymaking. The refugee crisis may accelerate that process – provided Turkey does not fall prey to political instability.

What is to be done?

The EU has every incentive, but only limited means, to reduce the effects of the refugee crisis. The institutions and the member states can, first of all, attempt to reduce the future flow of refugees towards Europe. Ideally, this would be best done through a political settlement of the wars in Syria and Iraq: a worthy goal to pursue, but probably not one that will be reached soon. In practice, two sets of policies are available in the shorter run. The

quickest and least difficult to implement is a massive increase of financial support to the UNHCR in the region, now that the costs of stinginess have become apparent to all. The EU should be ready to pay a multiple of the UNHCR's $2.7bn funding shortfall in order to cope with both present and current refugee flows from Syria. Systematic support of NGOs and humanitarian organisations (notably the International Committee of the Red Cross) that attempt to help some of Syria's internally displaced people is no less necessary, preferably handled by a dedicated full-spectrum EU 'aid tsar', possibly under the auspices of the European Commission's humanitarian organisation (ECHO). In parallel, the negotiation of a modus vivendi between the EU and Turkey is essential. First steps towards an agreement were taken in October, with talk of some €3bn in funding to support refugee relief in Turkey and the loosening of the Union's strict visa regime in Turkey's favour, along with new steps in the accession negotiation. Such an agreement should be supplemented by a deal on the opening of EU asylum-processing facilities in Turkey itself, along with an EU commitment to take a given number of asylum seekers into the EU: this would help eliminate the hazardous and disruptive sea and land voyage from Turkey to Europe.[35] It is as yet unclear whether a deal will first occur as a result of a German bilateral initiative or in the framework of EU–Turkish discussions.

At the other end of the line, the EU must comprehensively review its current rules and organisation vis-à-vis asylum seekers: the Dublin rules are simply not working. In the short term, asylum regimes will become more restrictive, notably for claimants from so-called 'safe countries' in the Western Balkans,[36] and less generous in terms of benefits. New legislation is being enacted to that end in Germany. At the time of writing, the EU was also considering the provision of shelter for some 100,000 refugees in Greece and the Western Balkans in 2015–16. However, it is unlikely that the Europeans can cope without creating an integrated EU asylum organisation, charged with running the processing and temporary relief centres, adjudicating the requests in liaison with national authorities and allocating slots in the EU's quota system.

Even such a utilitarian federalism-lite, however, is not politically acceptable in many of the member states. Indeed, by responding to the refugee

crisis independently, Germany has shown the way to purely national responses by others. This can turn into a downward spiral: an integrated EU response is made more difficult as a result of go-it-alone policies; and the resulting absence of a convincing EU response will lead Germany and others to further act on their own initiative, thus fuelling *souverainiste* forces overall. The bottom line may be more of the chaos of the sort already encountered today from Calais to Budapest, and the rebuilding of borders within an ever looser EU. In combination with the other crises roiling Europe, the balkanisation of the EU has become a real risk. America could lose the unique alliance system built up over the decades, while Europe's individual member states would be at pains to cope with a revisionist Russia, a war-torn Middle East and a rising Chinese superpower cherry-picking the remains of what is still today the world's largest marketplace.

These fears may be misplaced. The EU has managed to muddle through an uninterrupted string of crises during the last ten years, and this one may be no different. However, muddling through is no panacea: like every policy course, it has its own limits, and these are being tested as never before.

Notes

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12 During Europe's Thirty Years War (1618–48), religious war and territorial conflict combined much as they are combining in the Middle East today. A third of Germany's population may have perished at the time.

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com/2015/10/07/opinion/the-case-for-euro-optimism.html.

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