

The Next Future of Migration and European Policy

by Valentina Delli Gatti

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"This background document has been realized in the framework of the project, to spread data and information based on a scientific analysis. If you want to know more about this project and be part of its activities, please feel free to contact the leading partner Diaconia in Czech Republic (email: nozinova@diakoniespolu.cz), as well as Focsiv in Italy (email: f.novella@focsiv.it)."

¹ This background paper has been realised in the framework of the "Faces of Migration" project (Migrant and SDGs, contract number CSO-LA/2018/401-798), co-financed by the European Union. The paper has been elaborated by Valentina Delli Gatti with the coordination of Andrea Stocchiero (Focsiv). This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

THE NEXT FUTURE OF MIGRATION AND EUROPEAN POLICY¹

The year 2021 will be another challenging year for recovery and resilience with respect to sustainable development and, within this framework, for the European Union's migration policy. Below is a non-exhaustive list of the trends and developments that will be at the top of the agenda of governors dealing with this issue.

1. The evolution of the COVID-19 crisis: will restrictions on mobility continue?

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered the worst global crisis since the end of World War II, causing profound social, economic and political upheavals around the world. The crisis also had an impact on migrants. The pandemic disrupted mobility routes and pathways, stranded people in transit more than in previous years, literally

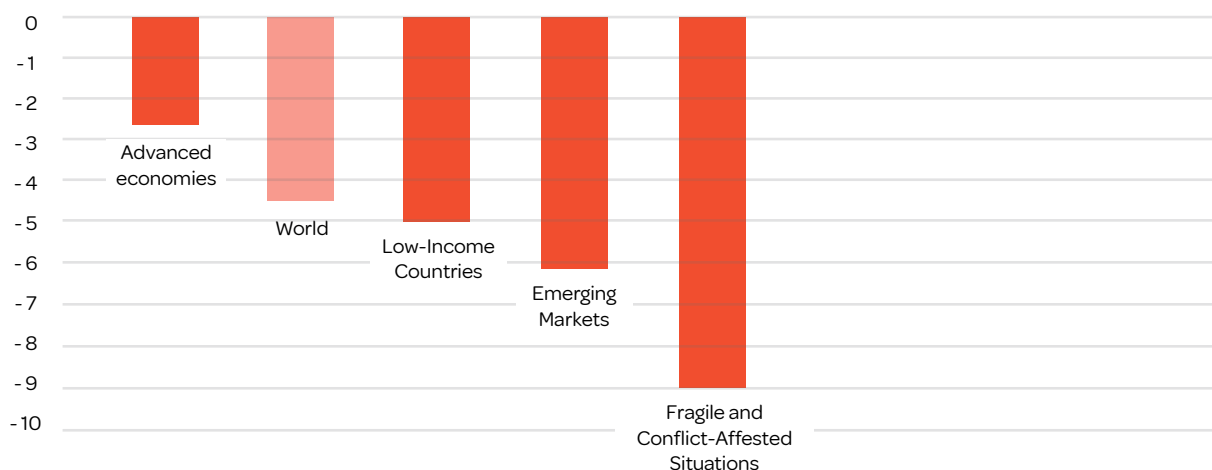
ripped away jobs and income from citizens, caused a major reduction in remittances², pushing millions of already vulnerable migrants and populations into poverty.

It has not stopped the phenomenon of migration, rather, as expected, it has entailed new irregular and dangerous ways of crossing borders and reaching European countries.

The evolution of the ongoing global pandemic will decide on the imposition or removal of restrictions on mobility, further triggering or preventing migratory movements.

This will largely influence the size and direction of formal and informal migration flows during 2021.

Graphic 1 - The gap in the estimate of the gross domestic product compared to the pre-pandemic forecast (in%)



Source: World Bank

¹This background document was produced by Valentina Delli Gatti with the contribution of Andrea Stocchiero, based on the document produced by ICMPD, Perspectives on migration 2021. Seven things to keep an eye on in 2021. Origins, key events and priorities for Europe : ICMPD_Migration_Outlook_2021.pdf

² The World Bank estimates a reduction of 14% by 2021: COVID-19: Remittance Flows to Shrink 14% by 2021 (worldbank.org)

2. Unequal access to vaccines and uneven economic recovery: a new pressure on migration?

The recent launch of coronavirus vaccination programmes raises hopes of a substantial economic recovery, which is expected starting from the second half of 2021.

Nevertheless, the inequality between nations' gross domestic product and household income among different regions of the world will be maintained, indeed increased.

This gap will be amplified by unequal access to vaccines: by early 2021, around 60% of all planned vaccine doses had already been purchased by high-income countries, leaving merely 40% to countries with low and middle income. It goes without saying that higher-income countries will recover faster, both economically and socially, and the resulting imbalances will increase short-term migratory pressures throughout 2021.

3. Which migration policy in the aftermath of the pandemic: creating jobs for all

Inequalities and the economic rebound triggered by COVID-19 could further push formal and informal migrations to EU countries, increasing the pull factors for migrants. This trend is not new, and is likely to be reinforced by the increased push for emigration in low- and middle-income countries, and by a greater need for immigration in high-income countries.

European policy should be able to manage the economic recovery by calling for the reduction of unemployment among resident population as well as the creation of new jobs for the migrant

population in the framework of the new Next Generation recovery and resilience plan, which should be well linked to the perspective of sustainable development.

4. More cooperation on migration with EU partners in a sustainable development framework

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically deteriorated the social, economic and political situation of many impoverished regions that are at the origin of migratory movements towards Europe. Faced with worsening crisis situations, these countries may find it more difficult to cooperate on migration control and return, while their need to agree on regular migration opportunities should increase. Consequently, the EU could put an emphasis on the further development of its migration partnerships, as well as lead the efforts of the international community and development cooperation in supporting low- and middle-income countries, especially those in the European neighbourhood, in their economic and social recovery, according to the objectives of sustainable development.

5. Migratory impacts of new emerging crises such as that in the Sahel: improving the asylum and reception systems

Over the past two years, the conflict in the Sahel has turned into one of the worst humanitarian and displacement crises in the world. It is estimated that in the two-year period between 2018 and 2020 alone, over 1,8 million people were internally displaced, while another 845,000 people were forced to flee across borders, including 650,000 people in the last year alone.

In addition, 13,4 million people are reported to be in need of humanitarian assistance, 5 millions of whom are children. The global coronavirus pandemic has only aggravated the situation, leading to an exasperated increase in the already extreme poverty and malnutrition of these populations. Contrary to popular opinion, asylum applications lodged by African citizens in the EU are significantly lower than those from Asia and the Middle East, Latin America and other European countries. However, an emerging and growing crisis, such as the one in the Sahel, affects several countries in the region and could lead to a significant increase in arrivals and asylum claims in the EU.

The increase in departures and arrivals along the Central Mediterranean route and in the Canary Islands in 2020 indicates that related migration projects could play an increasingly significant role in 2021 as well.

Europe should therefore prepare itself by improving the asylum and reception system.

6. Movements along the main migration routes to Europe

In 2020, irregular arrivals moved from the Eastern Mediterranean route to the Central Mediterranean and to the Western Balkan routes. Along the Eastern Mediterranean route, the number of detections decreased by 75%.

This downturn was mainly caused by the closure of borders and the suspension of the admission of asylum applications by Greece in the beginning of 2020.

In contrast, the Central Mediterranean route

saw an increase by 155%, and the route of the Western Balkans by 105% (although remaining in absolute numbers well below the 2015 and 2016 flows), while on the West African route (towards the Canary Islands) there was an almost 9-fold increase compared to 2019. During 2021 much will depend on the continued cooperation between the EU, Turkey and Libya.

However, emerging crises and changing conditions could lead to rapid route changes in 2021. The EU should prepare to respond just as quickly to such shifts along the main migration routes, without erecting walls at the borders.

7. Work in progress for the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

The year 2020 was the busiest, and most ambitious year in the attempt to put the common European system on migration and asylum on new foundations³. The extensive discussion process was accompanied by a myriad of new proposals and numerous criticisms. However, every effort has proved to be wholly inefficient in addressing and overcoming the pre-existing and emerging obstacles to an EU-wide reform agreement on solidarity and responsibility-sharing in migration governance. The work will continue during the Portuguese and Slovenian presidencies of the EU.

Essentially, in terms of 'high politics', the focus in 2021 will be on strengthening the external dimension of the Pact, i.e. further developing migration partnerships with the main countries of origin and transit of migration to Europe.

³ In this regard, see the background document [Governance_migrazioni_FOCSIV_1_2021.pdf](#) ([viedifuga.org](#))

In view of the global increase in migratory pressures caused by the pandemic, this would currently seem the most likely priority. After years of crisis and failed migration policies, in September 2020, the European Commission published the “New Pact on Migration and Asylum”. The last legislature, in fact, had ended without reaching any agreement on the reform of the legislation on immigration and asylum, which remained still to the significant changes of 2013⁴.

In the meantime, a lot has happened: from the beginning - and subsequent closure - of the “Mare Nostrum” operations⁵ in response to the shipwrecks in the Sicilian channel, to the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015-2016, followed by the EU - Turkey agreement⁶, and then from that with Libya, up to the current global pandemic from Covid-19.

Formally, the Pact consists of a non-binding “communication” whose approach is to systematically bring together immigration and asylum policies. However, although the Pact’s proposals have resulted in a series of recommendations aimed at strengthening cooperation among states, nothing has yet been translated into concrete policy contents.

Indeed, the Covenant aims to build a system in which the prevention of all forms of unauthorised movement and the increase in expulsions and returns continue to be the main policy features, reducing the protection of the migrant population and risking the trampling of human rights conventions, opportunities for movement, reception and much less inclusion.

As foreseen in the 2015 European Migration Agenda,⁷ it was foreseeable that in a situation of health-economic crisis, governments intended to make the proposals even more restrictive: without hiding it, much emphasis is placed on the logic of combating irregular migration and migrant smuggling, as well as further strengthening external borders by increasing returns and cooperation with third countries to prevent migrants from reaching Europe.

The Commission tries to soften this approach to some extent, yet, the essence of the Dublin system remains, as the criteria for determining the state responsible for examining the asylum application are retained in the new first port state regulation.

What changes is the introduction of pre-access control, which should allow far fewer people to remain in the territory of the landing or arrival state and actually apply for asylum.

Furthermore, for circumstances of force majeure such as restrictions on mobility due to the ongoing health crisis, the “legalization” of the actions of exception to the asylum directives is foreseen, whereby a state facing a large influx of arrivals would be able to suspend asylum application procedures for up to one month, as happened in Greece, Italy and Spain.

This would result in a significant reduction in applications, while increasing the risk of violating international law, human rights and the constitutional order of many nations that uphold the right to asylum.

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2013:0422:FIN:IT:PDF>

⁵ <https://www.marina.difesa.it/EN/operations/Pagine/MareNostrum.aspx>

⁶ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>

⁷ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52015DC0240&from=HU>

Several proposals of the Plan are potentially in conflict with international law: cooperation with third countries will continue, but it must be taken into account that many of them, such as Libya, cannot be considered safe and that, above all, they are dictatorial regimes where human rights are regularly violated. Despite its promises, the Pact seems to neglect once again the importance and need for regulations to protect people on the move.

8. The New data on movements and asylum

Besides a desirable “new beginning”, continuing the trends of previous years, the European debate on migration is dominated by issues concerning irregular migration and asylum. In 2020, the speech was strictly linked to the restrictions on mobility, linked to COVID-19, and to the announced economic decline that has effectively led to a change in the trend of the phenomenon, with a net reduction in asylum applications. According to the indicators published by Eurostat and Frontex, already at the beginning of the year there were significantly lower numbers of people crossing the external borders and applying for international protection and asylum in the European Union, compared to previous years, following the strict travel restrictions introduced by EU Member States in March 2020.

Although irregular arrivals have fallen dramatically, this does not make the phenomenon, which continues to occur through dangerous and informal channels, any less dramatic. Moreover, as soon as border restrictions were lifted or relaxed, the numbers rose again, moving

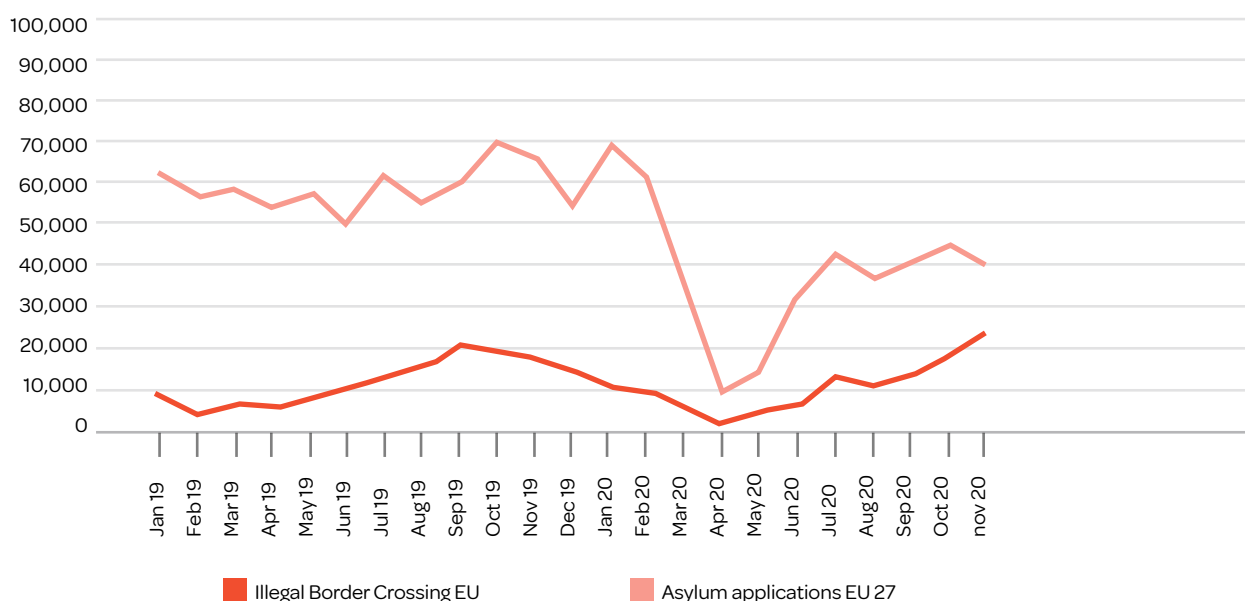
more from the Eastern Mediterranean route to the Central Mediterranean and along the Western Balkan routes.

This shift is mainly due to recent developments on the Greek-Turkish border in early 2020s, which saw a significant drop in arrivals to the Greek islands. Since the migration agreement between the EU and Turkey in 2016, significant refugee flows from Turkey had resumed moving towards Greece, with the latter responding by further radically closing its external borders and suspending the admission of asylum applications.

According to UNHCR data, the total number of arrivals decreased from 60,000 in 2019 to 9,300 in the first ten months of 2020. Nonetheless, enormous pressure persists on the Greek asylum and reception systems. UNHCR estimates that currently around 120,000 refugees and migrants are staying in Greece. The inevitably difficult conditions culminated in the disaster of the Moria fire in September 2020, a camp where over 16,000 refugees were housed, but they also contributed to shifts of secondary flows and movements to other migration routes: the Central Mediterranean route saw a 155% increase in detections, the Western Balkan route an increase by 105%. In this context, the most notable increases were observed along the West African route: in the first eleven months of 2020, a total of 19,600 migrants reached the Canary Islands through irregular channels, a number almost nine times higher than in 2019.

In particular, the trends illustrated in the surveys did not involve all nationalities in a similar way.

Graphic 2 - Asylum requests and illegal crossing of EU borders 2019/2020



Fonte: Eurostat, Frontex

Among the nationalities that have shown the highest number of arrivals and asylum requests in previous years, Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, the Syrian one has maintained the same importance; on the contrary, the number of Afghan citizens has decreased by 65% while that of Iraqi citizens by 71%. Moreover, while asylum claims from other nationalities decreased further in 2020, a significant relative increase in arrivals from southern Mediterranean countries of origin is observed: the Tunisian route increased three-fold in 2020, Algerians by 148% and Moroccans by 21%.⁸

Ultimately, data show that in the first eleven months of 2020, a total of 430,840 asylum applications were filed in the EU Member States: this represents a decrease of 25.6% compared to the previous year (the number at the end of November 2019 was 578,815 applications; and at the end of 2019 it was 699,095).

During the months when severe restrictions on mobility were imposed in the EU, applications dropped by 38.9% in March 2020 compared to March 2019; by 82.7% in April 2020; and by 75.6% in May 2020.

⁸ Source: Eurostat, Frontex

Similarly to the border surveys, the applications have begun to increase from June 2020 onwards, albeit at lower levels compared to 2019.

However, given the complexity of the phenomena, it is difficult to make a complete and objective analysis.

The true story of 2020 will only be known when definitive statistics on asylum applications in the EU are available throughout 2021, while it is urgent for the EU to elaborate a new policy and a new, more forward-looking asylum and migration system, based on human rights and a vision of sustainable development, with a stronger cooperation for the sustainable development of countries of origin and transit.



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