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The fragmentation of the European migration system

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The current European refugee crisis highlights the disjunction between two sets of forces that could prompt the fragmentation of the European Union and confound the idea that crises represent moments of opportunity for the EU to move to a new, higher stage of integration.

On one side are the powerful set of forces that drive migration towards the EU and neighbouring regions. International Organization for Migration (IOM) reporting shows that more than 1 million people risked hazardous crossings of the Mediterranean to move to the EU, with around 845,000 of these going to Greece (IOM 2016). Tragically, more than 3700 men, women, and children were reported dead or missing. This migration is driven by two main factors: relative inequalities of income and wealth and the effects of conflict. Add to the mix the potential effects of other important factors, such as the relatively young population profile of many African countries and the limited economic opportunities for these young people, plus the effects – both actual and potential – of environmental and climate change, and there are good reasons to assume that European countries are likely to see persistent pressure on their borders for years to come. Equally important, states and regions that border the EU will also receive

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hundreds of thousands of migrants, with Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey already key destinations for Syrian migrants. UNHCR reports that more than 4.7 million people had been displaced from Syria by mid-February 2016, of whom 2.6 million were in Turkey, just over 1 million in Jordan, and over 600,000 in Lebanon. Between April 2011 and December 2015, more than 967,000 Syrians sought refuge in Europe.

While hundreds of thousands of people have moved to the EU seeking refuge, a countervailing set of dynamics underlies the growing risk of fragmentation in the EU. These can be understood as a set of factors that drive migration politics and help to explain the rise of Marine Le Pen's Front National in France, Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands, and Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the UK, to name but three. All focus on immigration and immigration-related diversity – particularly the presence and effects of Islam – to advance the classic populist claim that "the people" have been betrayed by an out-of-touch political elite. Research has shown a "cultural divide" in Europe that centres on declining trust and confidence in political institutions and political leaders that is strongly related to opposition to immigration (McLaren 2015). Those who feel most strongly about immigration trend to be older, male, white, and working class. They feel betrayed by traditional centre-left political parties and, as a study of UKIP put it, feel "left behind" by modern society (Ford and Goodwin 2014).

This disjunction between the economic inequalities and conflict that lead people to move and the drivers of domestic migration politics in many EU member states is a potential cause of EU fragmentation. In 2015 and 2016, border controls have reappeared within the supposedly border-free Schengen area, including at the borders of Hungary and at the border between Sweden and Denmark. In February 2016, Macedonia sought to prevent migrants from leaving Greece. The Greek immigration minister evocatively warned that the risk was that Greece could become Europe's Lebanon and a "warehouse of souls." Yet, at the same time, Greece – as well as the Dutch EU Presidency and the Commission – were excluded from a summit meeting of Balkan states convened by the Austrian government. In protest, at what it called "Austria's 19th century approach," Greece recalled its Ambassador from Vienna. The Commission warned of a potential humanitarian disaster in Greece, while the Dutch government warned of the breakup of the EU migration system (EU Observer 2016).

The bad news is that worse may still be yet to come. A make-or-break summit in March 2016 will see either the EU recommit to, or retreat from, the measures it agreed to in September 2015 to relocate asylum applicants from Greece, Hungary, and Italy across the EU. If the political will is lacking, then the alternative may well be an abandonment of the Schengen Area's passport-free travel for up to 2 years. A French government study estimated the longer-term effects on trade of reinstating border controls to affect an overall reduction in Schengen area GDP of 0.8% (France Stratégie 2016).

Those who see crises as moments in which EU integration might be reinvigorated may well be disappointed this time around. The EU is caught between two powerful and countervailing forces. The drivers of migration seem likely to generate persistent high levels of pressure on the EU's external borders for years to come, while the drivers of migration politics appear likely to stimulate a nationalist backlash against both immigration and the EU. The EU cannot lead Europe out of this crisis because it possesses neither the strength nor legitimacy to do so. At the national level, political leaders are more likely to look nervously over their shoulders at far right and populist anti-immigration parties than to address the plight of Syrian refugees. The most likely outcomes seem either a retreat from Schengen with re-imposed border controls or a much-reduced inner Schengen of a core group of founder members in Western Europe.

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