



Tough Migration and Refugee Policies are a Blight on the EU's Geopolitical Ambitions

End of the Year Review 2021

CRITICAL INSIGHTS BY SHADA ISLAM

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END OF THE YEAR REVIEW – CRITICAL INSIGHTS

By Shada Islam – BIC Senior Commentator on Geopolitics

European Union leaders make no secret of their geopolitical ambitions. Yet their hostile refugee and migration policies are undermining EU influence and authority across the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

Discussions on “strategic autonomy” and plans for a new “strategic compass” highlight EU aspirations of contributing to international peace and security. As his country takes over the EU presidency in the first half of 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron has promised to create “a Europe that is powerful in the world, fully sovereign, free in its choices and master of its destiny.” Meanwhile in Berlin, after 16 years following a fairly stable foreign policy agenda under Chancellor Angela Merkel, the new German government is engaged in reassessing Berlin’s role in a rapidly changing world.

The EU rhetoric is impressive. Change is good and adapting to new external security challenges is urgently needed if Europe is to stay relevant in an increasingly complex world. A beefed-up security footprint and autonomous defense initiatives will undoubtedly help increase the EU’s geopolitical clout. But soldiers and guns – and more money and arms for Frontex border control forces – can only do so much.

The focus on building the EU’s military muscle might (one day) impress Russia and China. Increasingly aggressive pushbacks by Frontex may deter some desperate

people from seeking asylum in Europe. But neither a “Europe of Defence” nor Fortress Europe can help the EU in its search for a global leadership role on climate change, digital governance, global health, trade, and connectivity – as well as efforts to salvage a deeply fragilized multilateral system. Shaping responses to these and other challenges depends on Europe’s much-touted regulatory clout and powers of persuasion. These, in turn, are conditional on the EU’s respect for the principles and values which it claims to stand for and seeks to project and promote across the world.

The stakes are high: Unless the EU stops being tough with the weak and starts respecting its own standards as well as the international conventions it helped draft and implement, it can expect a dwindling of its global imprint. Given the nationalities of most of the refugees and migrant seeking EU entry, it can also expect Eurocentric mindsets embedded in EU migration policies as well as the increase in Islamophobic discourses across Europe to impact especially negatively on plans for enhanced interaction with Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Declaratory flourishes and well-crafted speeches which wax lyrical about the much-touted “European Way of Life” are meaningless if not backed up by more – much more - determined action to stop the EU-wide erosion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Without consistency between its external and internal policies and actions, a stronger stand-alone security profile will not succeed in transforming the EU into an effective global power.

BUILDING A UNION OF EQUALITY

EU policymakers must start connecting the dots between the internal and the external. This requires achieving real progress in creating a Union of Equality. It also means recognising that years of impressive hard work on building the EU’s normative power and establishing respected pro-democracy outreach initiatives are being squandered by hardline EU policies which justify the inhumane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, spark greater fears of migrants and quasi-codify racism and Islamophobia – and are also often in clear breach of international commitments.

Racism, discrimination, and the EU’s colonial history are significant obstacles to the EU’s efforts to open a new chapter in relations with Africa. EU appeals to Myanmar’s

military junta to allow in desperately needed humanitarian aid for displaced and discriminated groups like the Rohingya are easily disregarded when EU states themselves are in breach of international refugee conventions. The EU's criminalization of non-governmental organisations working with refugees and migrants means it is powerless to stop other countries from taking similar action.

KEYS TO FORTRESS EUROPE

Also, by underlining their panic over possible "uncontrolled large-scale illegal migration movements" and the emergence of "new security threats for EU citizens" following the Taliban take-over of Kabul in August, EU leaders once again handed the keys to Fortress Europe to an unscrupulous strongman.

Following the example set by Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, now a skilled manipulator of the EU's obsession with refugees, this time it was Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus who lost no time in using refugees as geopolitical pawns. Similarly, earlier in the year, Morocco "engineered" a surge of 8,000 migrants into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, apparently in retribution for Madrid's decision to allow a separatist leader in Western Sahara to come to Spain for medical treatment.

Europe's global reputation is not helped either by its inability to stop violations to the rule of law, attacks on the judiciary and erosion of media freedoms in Hungary and Poland or by the fact that racism, bias and discrimination are also being spread by many of the EU's liberal democratic leaders, not just by bigots, populists and far-right groups.

Policies which reinforce exclusion and prejudice are prevalent and remain largely unchecked in many Western EU states, adding to fears that even without chalking up any major electoral victories (so far), Europe's far-right parties have succeeded in mainstreaming their corrosive anti-migrant narratives across the EU's political landscape. And since the populists' message is largely Islamophobic, it has also clear repercussions on how Muslim-majority countries view Europe.

RISING ISLAMOPHOBIA

As France gears up for presidential elections in April 22, French politicians have embraced Islamophobia as an electoral strategy, thereby ensuring that Muslim-

bashing is no longer the preserve of the traditionally Islamophobic far-right candidate Marine Le Pen. Eric Zemmour has now joined the fray while president Emmanuel Macron's government is busy enforcing a spate of anti-Muslim policies, including an "anti-separatism bill" and the shutting down of the Collective Against Islamophobia (CCIF) which documents anti-Muslim hate crimes.

EU officials looked the other way as former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz stepped up his fight against an undefined "political Islam" including through the launch of a much-criticised Islam Map website which showed the locations of more than 600 mosques and Muslim associations across the country and led to incidents of violence against Muslims.

France, Austria and Denmark also recently launched the "Vienna Forum on Countering Segregation and Extremism in the Context of Integration", an annual conference which they hope will intensify cooperation in the fight against "political Islam", alleging that even Muslims who present themselves as democrats are in fact using the law to subvert European nation states.

THE INTERNAL IS EXTERNAL

The EU's focus on external challenges to democracy and human rights can no longer be separated from developments within Europe. By militarizing migration, implementing restrictive refugee regimes, and allowing Islamophobia to flourish, the EU has created a template for others to follow, encouraging a reverse or negative version of its much publicised "Brussels Effect".

The EU's migration-panic and anti-Muslim policies are allowing autocrats and authoritarian governments to exploit its weaknesses. Worse still, they are providing many governments with ammunition to shrug off EU human rights interventions as an example of hypocrisy and double standards. They are also eroding respect for the EU and decreasing its ability to tackle important global challenges.

Building a more powerful geopolitical Europe requires being able to deal with old and new security threats. But to walk tall on the world stage, the EU will have to practice at home what it preaches abroad.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"

Author

Shada Islam | BIC Senior Commentator on Geopolitics



@BICBrussels @bicrhr BIC

www.bic-rhr.com info@bic-rhr.com

Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium Tel:+32 027258466