

Europe's Anti-Migrant Bias is a Blight on its Global Standing and Economic Future.

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN THE SOUTH SERIES

Commentary

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Whether it be the conflict between Israel and Palestine, efforts to upgrade relations with Africa, or hopes of stronger trade and security ties with Asia's economic giants, the European Union's complex network of relations with countries in the Global South is dominated by one key concern: migration deterrence.

The restrictive approach, marred by controversies and serious human rights shortcomings, is a blight on the EU's global reputation. It makes a mockery of the EU's lyrical references to European values and, given the contrast between the bloc's warm welcome of Ukrainian refugees compared to the rough treatment meted out to those from the Global South, it also reeks of double standards.

The EU's migration panic is not only a violation of its international commitments, but also counterproductive, inefficient and ineffective – and a threat to Europe's economic prosperity and future.

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS: RETHINKING EU MIGRATION POLICIES AND NARRATIVES

Several inconvenient truths about the current EU approach to migration must be voiced and discussed openly – not dismissed and pushed away by EU and national European policymakers:

First, today's haphazard approach is not working. For all the focus on keeping out unwanted "illegal" refugees, the number of people fleeing wars, humanitarian disasters, climate change and poverty to seek shelter in the EU is actually on the rise. Irregular arrivals of migrants in Italy via the Mediterranean from North Africa amounted to almost 114,300 between January and August 2023 – almost double the number in the same period of 2022, according to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex).

Second, at a time when Western governments like to make a distinction between "good" democracies and "bad" autocracies, EU agreements which outsource the more unseemly aspects of migration restrictions to countries in Africa and the Middle East – including the recent deal with Tunisia, which was recently accused of dumping refugees and migrants in the desert – have put the bloc in bed with some of the world's most ruthless and manipulative "strongmen" and autocrats.

To the dismay of many and in an indication of how the migration debate has moved from the far-right fringes to the mainstream European discourse, the deal with Tunisia was signed by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, flanked by Italian prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, and the Dutch caretaker prime minister, Mark Rutte.

Fortunately, questions about how the agreement will align with respect to human rights are being asked, among others by the European Ombudsman and EU Foreign Affairs chief Josep Borrell, who has warned that such "rushed" unilateral action [Europe's Anti-Migrant Bias is a Blight on its Global Standing and Economic Future | Shada Islam](#)
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cannot be “considered a valid template for future agreements”. Von der Leyen, however, is not backing down, and insists the Tunisian blueprint will be followed by similar deals with Egypt and other states.

Third, EU policy – and the EU narrative about migration from the Global South - is based on fiction rather than facts. Contrary to the prevailing conventional wisdom, not everyone wants to move to Europe. Most refugees, devastated by wars – often those in which the EU is directly or indirectly involved – find shelter in neighbouring states.

For all the song and dance about migration, the EU received 3 million migrant workers via legal pathways in 2022, compared to 300,000 who arrived through irregular means. In “How Migration Really Works”, migration expert Hein de Haas says that far from being at an all-time high, migration remains remarkably stable. The vast majority of people who migrate do so legally; illegal migrants represent only about 3 to 3.5 per cent of non-EU migrants into the European Union.

Fourth, while tighter border control is the go-to solution for many politicians, such policies often serve to increase migration. De Haas argues that border restrictions function not to keep people out, but to keep people in, since they “typically prompt migrants to cancel return plans, as more migrants decide to stay on the safe side of the border”. Also, strict enforcement doesn’t reduce numbers; it pushes down in one part of the system and causes other routes to develop.

Fifth, despite the prevailing narrative of scroungers looking for easy handouts, most migrants are not the “tired, huddled masses”, but rational actors with the ability to choose a better life. Migration is a powerful form of global development, and the remittances migrants send back home are an effective form of bottom-up aid. Those who embark on the treacherous journey to EU shores are often qualified

professionals who are unable to find legal pathways to enter the EU. Even though in Europe “illegally”, they should therefore be able to find jobs in Europe.

Sixth, faced with a significant population decline by the end of the century – Eurostat signals the EU could see its population shrink by 6 per cent, or 27.3 million people, by 2100 – the EU needs foreign workers, both skilled and unskilled, to fill labour market gaps. According to a recent EU report, this means that the bloc must ensure “managed legal migration” to fill the surging number of job vacancies, maintain the EU’s competitiveness, and finance public budgets.

In 2022, around three-in-10 firms reported labour shortages, and 74 per cent of SMEs experienced a shortage of skilled workers, despite high unemployment rates in the EU. Subsequently, the Commission has suggested the establishment of an EU Talent Pool, which would match European employers with third-country jobseekers to fill existing gaps in the most pressing sectors.

These and other rational schemes, such as the so-called EU Blue Card – a permit issued to highly qualified individuals – are likely to run up against one major obstacle, however: an EU-wide anti-migrant narrative, embraced by almost all politicians, which feeds racism, xenophobia and discrimination across the bloc.

Changing public opinion in favour of legal migration and towards a more pragmatic, compassionate approach towards migrants will therefore be a difficult, uphill task. It will require that EU policymakers and politicians be more honest with voters about Europe’s need for foreign workers and start preparing their citizens for a more open migration policy.

It will also require EU governments to respect international law and human rights, and above all, that they stop demonising and dehumanising migrants and migration.

The competition to attract workers from the Global South is getting fiercer. EU politicians have a choice between seriously countering anti-migrant racism, or endangering Europe's future by losing the global race for foreign talent.

About the BIC

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