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EU MIGRATION: AN OPTIMISTIC VISION OF THE FUTURE

by Hugo Brady

It is February 2024. Ahead of elections to the European Parliament, several commentators are pointing to the unlikely success of the EU's migration policy. How did it happen?

When the current EU leadership took office, only the brave would have predicted that the Union was about to take a major leap forward on migration. If anything, the initial signs were not encouraging. In November 2020, the Mediterranean countries rejected key elements of the new European Commission's plans for a 'pact' on border control and processing irregular arrivals. Meanwhile, six states in the Schengen passport-free zone showed no signs of lifting the border checks they instituted during Europe's 2015 migration crisis. And when governments realised that EU irregular arrivals for 2020 were [down only slightly](#) on the year before — a global mobility shutdown notwithstanding — many looked fearfully to a new crisis once normality returned.

That crisis was certainly in the post but never arrived. Because the EU used a relative lull in early 2021 to mainstream migration priorities into its foreign and aid policies — for the first time from the beginning of its seven-year funding cycle. The shift began in 2021 when Spain called for help after the arrival of over 20,000 migrants to the Canaries, most embarking from a new smuggler base in Laayoune, Western Sahara. The Spanish government asked the EU to re-energise its model of friendly partnership with West African countries, Morocco and Algeria, with a 'Team Europe' approach.

Team Europe gets to work

This meant finally operationalising a long-growing consensus, which would see the EU's trade, aid and visa policies more precisely aligned to national priorities on border control, the return of irregular economic migrants and eventually to specific labour market needs. (Spain had already pioneered a version of this during the 2007 Cayucos crisis.) This reorganisation had its critics, including the decision to restrict visa access from countries refusing to take back their own nationals. But the EU also offered a concrete alternative: special partnerships with beefed up, long-term, predictable funding lines — incorporating 10 per cent of the Union's €85 billion external budget — and ever-growing access to European recruitment schemes, including skills-

matching and even extra-territorial job permits, an idea prompted by the work-at-home policies of the pandemic. In addition, every individual deal contained a counter-smuggling ‘op plan’, supported by special stand-alone funds, recognising that irregular boat arrivals to the EU had exceeded 100,000 people a year for over five years, and created the deadliest sea on earth.

Each country accord was unique to itself, targeting carefully the partner state’s needs. Tunisia wanted help to re-start its tourism sector and spur trade with Libya; Algeria urgently needed budget support to compensate for low oil-prices and high youth unemployment; Morocco pointed to its own concerns on its southern border, and so on. As it became clear that the pandemic’s true impact on Africa was [more serious and longer lasting](#) than first assumed, the Union offered generous funds for post-COVID reconstruction, and in late 2021 re-directed excess stocks from its own successful vaccination drive for free [to its neighbourhood](#). Step-by-step, the partners constructed a spine of intra-regional co-operation stretching from Senegal to Turkey that began to toughen and cohere. The latter, a critical player, concluded its own enhanced migration accord with the EU in November 2021.

France used its [2022 EU presidency](#) to complete and formalise the governing structures of this new collaborative model, under the mantra: ‘Une coopération plus humaine, plus rapide et plus intelligente’. The upshot was that, for the first time since 2005 when annual irregular arrivals were less than 10,000, the Mediterranean boat crisis was ended. In a further strong signal to smugglers, Slovenia had also negotiated special arrangements under which spikes in irregular movements through the Western Balkans would be pre-emptively met by a coordinated border closure and the speedy deployment of EU experts and money. (A new [‘Joint Cooperation Platform’](#) on Irregular Migration would monitor and trigger the plan’s different phases, based on specific thresholds of irregulars.) Internally, the Team Europe approach also meant [returning home](#) those entrants with no asylum claim, quickly and wherever possible, voluntarily. Here, streamlined readmission procedures negotiated in late 2020 with African countries, as part of the ‘Post-Cotonou’ development agreement, were key. As the effective return rate climbed towards 60 per cent, Member State authorities began to relax.

Getting to ‘Yes’

By the end of its EU presidency, France was able to announce that Schengen would relaunch with full internal circulation at the end of 2023. In the interim, EU interior ministers re-designed the area’s rulebook to apply lessons learned from a pandemic now rapidly fading from memory, and created clear accountability mechanisms tied to real-time operational

criteria. In addition, a new ‘Comande Schengen’ would be established to respond to mass arrival or security emergencies, where services other than regular border and immigration personnel might be needed.

Like the big boss at the end of a computer game, the question of how to handle asylum claims lodged at the EU’s borders, still remained, however. Since 2021, national experts had worked quietly on, in hope rather than expectation, modifying the Commission’s technical proposals with insights from the EU’s ongoing experimentation in migration management. Now, by demonstrating a European way to control irregular maritime migration and increase returns, the Union had greatly lowered the stakes in the asylum negotiations, including for the front-line states legally obliged to conduct sea rescues. During its EU presidency in early 2023, Sweden skilfully exploited the new detente to make the final breakthrough.

The Swedes proposed a package consisting of relocation guarantees for island states Malta and Cyprus; a refugee swap scheme with the Biden administration to counter smugglers either side of the Atlantic; and the agreement of central and eastern European countries to act as temporary evacuation havens for UN resettlement. In addition, the eastern Member States agreed to keep the Union’s newly effective migration diplomacy fuelled with work permits (‘blue cards’) for third countries: labour, which – in any case – they were already trying to secure for their fast-growing economies. Mario Draghi’s Italy, always the country most pivotal to any resolution, grumbled, but finally said ‘Si’.

Flanking measures

Since young men had made up 90 per cent of boat arrivals in the past, EU countries initiated a ‘Women and Children First’ scheme, based on Skype interviews, effectively doubling the Union’s resettlement quota from conflict regions. Refugee camps in Greece and the Balkans were cleared and closed in a few months via ‘metro relocation’, in which European cities, rather than countries, were invited to take part. These humanitarian flanking measures helped speed a new-look EU asylum system through the European Parliament, fittingly at the end of [Spain’s presidency](#) in December 2023.

All’s well that ends well? Perhaps not. At the beginning of 2024, a new ‘Entry-Exit System’ (EES) allowed European officials for the first time to tally border crossings with visa records across the whole Schengen area, a long-planned upgrade to the EU’s external border system. The EES revealed huge numbers of migrants were over-staying Schengen tourist visas or abusing the EU’s visa-free arrangements. Indeed, many times more than the boat

phenomenon had brought to Europe's shores. Now, with the elections imminent, some observers expect a fresh outcry over illegal immigration across the continent...

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