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MIGRATION POLICY-MAKING IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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In the past years, the terms migration and crisis have been closely linked to one another in public discourse, especially since the so-called European migration and asylum crisis of 2015/16, when Europe witnessed a significant increase of inflows of people fleeing, inter alia, war and instability in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. In this situation the EU and its Member States faced a wide range of challenges, including an overburdening of institutional capacities, the unpredictability of the migration routes and scope of inflows, as well as political disagreements on the distribution of applicants for international protection. Such crisis situations can severely impact public perception of migration and policy-making, but also provide an important learning opportunity that allows us to draw lessons on the migration and asylum systems currently in place and what is needed in terms of crisis preparedness and contingency planning.

Crisis communication and a constructive 'framing' of the crisis

The framing of a situation as a crisis influences how it is perceived and addressed, and is often contested. In this context, it is important to ask 'who' frames a situation as a crisis, what are the intentions behind this framing, and how it is communicated to the wider public.

Some media – especially tabloid newspapers – are likely to take a sensationalist approach to their reporting on controversial issues such as migration. The 2015/16 crisis, for example, was often portrayed as a situation over which the authorities had lost control, creating fears and feelings of uncertainty among the population and leading to or accentuating existing anti-immigration sentiments. Also populist parties tend to use a strong 'crisis' framing in their own communication to capitalise on such sentiments ahead of elections. Civil society organisations, in contrast, often play a role in countering such anti-immigrant sentiments and in framing a situation of increased inflows under the perspective of solidarity and in creating a 'welcome culture' through active engagement and volunteering.

In migration crisis situations it is important to build trust in the institutional capacities to handle the situation by providing the population with up-to-date information on how the situation is developing and how it is managed. In this context, the relevant authorities have an important role in reaching out to the public and keeping them informed – for example

through press releases or dedicated websites. Furthermore, beyond the immediate crisis communication, a balanced narrative on migration and the provision of objective information on migration to a broader public may help to mitigate unfounded fears of the population and anti-immigrant sentiments. Such balanced narrative should involve reporting both on the opportunities and on the challenges of migratory movements, taking into account both the perspectives of the hosting society and the migrants, and at a broader level, those of countries of origin, transit and destination alike.

The impact of migration crises on policymaking

Besides their impact on the public perception of migration, migration crisis situations also affect policy-making processes in the field of migration. The policy-making process is often described as a 'policy cycle' comprised of different stages, including agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. In an ideal scenario, these stages are guided by an inclusive and evidence-informed approach in which the policy-making process builds upon the consultation of relevant stakeholders and findings from research and policy analysis.

However, due to the high time pressure under which policies are developed in times of crisis and the polarisation of public and political discourse, it becomes ever more difficult to follow the stages of the policy cycle in an evidence-informed and inclusive manner. There is a higher risk of results of research and analysis being contested and of expert advice being used to legitimise policy choices ex post rather than to build a basis for policy design. At the same time, crises may also trigger an increased academic interest and research on relevant topics. As crises require quick reactions and do not usually leave time for long-term planning, policy-making is often more reactive rather than forward-looking. Also the roles of relevant actors in the policy cycle may be strengthened or weakened in the course of crisis situations. The role of cities and municipalities, for example, turned out to be particularly prominent in managing the reception of new arrivals during the so-called 2015/16 migration and asylum crisis and in providing integration support to refugees.

Crises can disrupt the policy cycle, and prevent the passing of policy projects that have already been underway and are blocked by the changed situation. However, crises can also have the opposite effect and open policy windows, as specific policy areas become a priority, and policy proposals are passed that would otherwise not have been politically feasible. Yet, even if a crisis situation does not directly lead to the passing of new policies, it may trigger important policy debates. At the EU level for example, increasing numbers of arrivals in the years 2015/16 showed a clear need for a reform of the Common European Asylum System, including

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a fair responsibility-sharing mechanism. The circumstances triggered intense political debate on these issues, although no political agreement could be found due to the diverging positions among EU Member States.

Learning from the crisis

The last stage of the policy cycle – evaluation – can be considered specifically important in the context of crisis, as each crisis can be seen as an opportunity for learning and improvement. Migration and asylum systems and their functioning should be thoroughly monitored and evaluated – especially in times of crisis – to identify gaps and compile lessons learnt for the future. The same applies to immediate crisis response measures.

Lessons learnt from the 2015/16 crisis, for example, have shown that challenges in managing the situation resulted not so much from the sheer numbers but rather from the unpredictability of inflows and the institutional unpreparedness, a lack of coordination among the actors who played a role in addressing the situation, as well as a lack of flexibility in adapting institutional capacities to the needs on the ground.

This unpredictability of inflows and institutional unpreparedness resulted from a lack of timely and accurate information on the migration routes and expected numbers of arrivals, which could have helped the authorities to prepare for increased numbers of inflows. Ongoing analysis and the production of forecasts on expected migration movements, as well as enhanced information exchange with relevant actors in countries of origin and transit could help providing such information in the future.

Furthermore, mechanisms such as contingency plans, institutional focal points for crisis situations, as well as dedicated training programmes on crisis management for relevant staff can help to ensure better institutional preparedness in the future. Inter-institutional coordination mechanisms should be made fit for the increased coordination needs in crises. An innovative example is the establishment of 'arrival centres' in Germany, where the relevant authorities who play a role in reception and accommodation of the new arrivals – from security services to welfare offices – have been placed under one roof to facilitate cooperation. Furthermore, in countries with a strong 'welcome culture', dedicated volunteer coordinators can help to ensure that the contributions of volunteers are used as efficiently as possible.

Relevant authorities also need to have the possibility to increase staffing if a crisis situation requires enhanced institutional capacities. The streamlining of workflows, for example by

introducing fast track procedures for applicants with a high prospect of being granted international protection, or new technologies, such as virtual interpretation services, may render the asylum system more effective.

Outlook

Migration crises, and especially how they are framed, have a significant impact on migration policy-making and on the public and political discourse on migration. As the migration topic is likely to remain contested and lend itself to short-term political gains, it is ever more important to provide balanced and objective information on migration now and in the future.

In order to mitigate the negative effects a crisis situation may have on the policy cycle and on an inclusive and evidence-informed approach to policy making, it is also critical to ensure that institutional structures are in place that facilitate the coordination and cooperation with relevant stakeholders, as well as the quick access to objective, independent evidence.

Migration crisis situations, however, also provide opportunities and can serve as a reality check for the migration and asylum systems in place. The 2015/16 European migration and asylum crisis, for example, marked a turning point for European migration and asylum policies as it triggered a political debate on a reform of the Common European Asylum System and a fair responsibility-sharing mechanism. Although politically controversial, such policy changes – along with enhanced crisis preparedness mechanisms – should contribute to avoiding similar crises in the future – or at least to reducing their scale and impact.

This article is based on the report The Migration Policy Cycle and Migration Crisis Response. A Comparative Report Covering Germany, Italy, Russia, Sweden and the United Kingdom (EN, TR) that has been produced in the context of the 'Supporting Migration Policy Development in Turkey (MIND)' project, co-financed by the European Union and the Republic of Turkey.

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