Irregular Migration in the Mediterranean

By Sabine Klasen

Even though numerous European policies exist to deal with irregular migration, the overall situation seems to have worsened. A key source of concern is the Mediterranean: Here, the amount of irregular migrants crossing the sea has not decreased, while the rate of deaths has even grown[1]. This raises the question as to which of the already launched policies are really effective and which are not. One may assume that a change of course has become necessary in order to effectively reduce the phenomenon of irregular migration and its consequences in the Mediterranean. While (irregular) migration has been increasingly linked to security politics after 9/11, it is often only approached as a possible threat, while empirical data shows that only the smallest part of terrorists cross the border irregularly[2]. A distinction between security and migration politics seems to be necessary. On a discursive level, the anxiety/ security paradigm needs to be broken up in order to benefit and impact real politics.

Apart from the effects on the host countries, the EU and third countries, a humanitarian level has to be added to the issue while creating the need for special attention. With Frontex as the common border control instrument, all 28 member states still have different immigration systems, there are therefore many difficulties to overcome and unclear responsibilities to sort out. This can only be addressed by a collective EU strategy that is borne by all member states, as it concerns common European (Schengen) borders. Clear, common and fair regulations and responsibilities have to be set up and implemented. So far, the

policies have been deeply linked to the security paradigm focussing on fighting traffickers and protecting the borders of the sovereign EU member states. But Frontex activities including the externalisation of borders, satellite supervision, boat controls as well as military plans that discussed the sinking of trafficker boats bring up a complicated problem: on one hand, operations like Mare Nostrum are urgently necessary for maritime salvages and sea control to prevent death and suffering. On the other hand, it is believed that intensified border controls could make sea migration routes more dangerous, as traffickers might choose alternative routes to circumvent detection. Moreover, the prevention of people fleeing the Southern Mediterranean coasts would often mean risking violent and inhuman treatment, without being able to escape. Especially during periods of fluctuating numbers of migrants as seen in the last years the border control should be ready to take action while adjusting the focus on the humanitarian security. Respecting the Human Rights Conventions in the course of the asylum qualification procedures is crucial to ensure fair non-refoulement treatment, return policies and disembarkations on European soil, while a clear country responsibility would prevent aggravating delays and tensions at the expense of the suffering migrants. The discussed destruction of trafficker boats would deteriorate the situation and possibilities for migrants fleeing from actual brutality in countries such as Libya. Instead, safe escape routes and a common maritime salvage programme reaching to the Libyan coast and extended accommodation spaces for migrants within the EU are approaches

demanded from institutions such as Amnesty International[3]. Moreover, for citizens from crisis states such as Syria, the resettlement programmes should be expanded. The careful opening of legal ways to enter Europe could prevent the outlawed situation of irregular migrants on the sea but also within the Union.

The securitisation of migration especially by political elites seems to be rather counterproductive and damaging. As identities can never be seen as rigid and migration has always been an important and often enriching influence to European cultures, the overall perception vis-à-vis foreigners has to be rethought and the malicious association of security problems and migration decoupled. The Mediterranean area should be seen and used as a common cultural area, with a relationship focussing on commonalities instead of differences between partner countries and regions. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM)[4] are providing the framework for an enhanced comprehensive dialogue and cooperation which should be used for examining the root causes of irregular and forced migration in order to prevent future dramatic incidents and for securing migrants lives and their fundamental rights. Through a more holistic approach, the factors pushing irregular migrants could be cooperatively addressed and reduced while at the same time intra-EU rules setting up comprehensive, national long-term integration plans concerning labour markets and social and educational programmes as well as fair burden-sharing mechanisms would help to moderate and master the phenomenon. Even if in the end the deep root causes can only be directly addressed by the countries of origin themselves and the EU's perspective and influence is limited, it has to become active and use its diplomatic and economic power to effectively fight poverty, human rights violations and conflicts across the Mediterranean.

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