



Italian Migration Conundrum

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Famous Germany military strategist Carl von Clausewitz once noted that a country can change everything except its geography. Even today in a world where technical advancements defy all traditional paradigms, this remains true. The proximity of the Italian coast to Africa, in particular Libya, makes it the preferred destination for migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea on their way to Europe. Since the beginning of this year only, close to 80,000 migrants reached the Italian shores in rickety boats, an increase of 20% compared to the previous year. Following the EU-Turkey agreement and the closure of the Balkan route Italy finds itself again on the migration front lines.

Whereas in the past migrant flows used to slow down considerably during the winter, climate change has played into the hands of smugglers, enabling almost unabated crossings all year round. Still the summer season which this year has started as early as May continues to witness the biggest increase in daily arrivals with sometimes more than 10,000 people coming in the space of a few days.

Now the country seems to be reaching a breaking point. With its financial sector riddled with accumulated problems which may still culminate in a full blown crisis, Italy is becoming the new weakest link in the chain, just after the EU breathed a sigh of relief in the wake of the French election. In the absence of quick solutions migration pressure is likely to further destabilise the already shaky governmental structure.

It certainly doesn't help that many EU countries are either reluctant or openly hostile to sharing the migration burden, despite quotas for migrant relocation adopted by means of qualified majority voting in 2015. Solidarity, the principle enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty has been seriously tested in the field of migration. Many east European countries have bluntly refused to bear their quota shares stating their indisposed constituencies and the fact that migrants themselves prefer more affluent EU countries in the west. After repeated warnings, the EU launched infringement procedure against these countries which despite promises haven't complied with the legally binding Council Decision on relocation. But even if it worked, relocation is unlikely to lift migratory pressure in the short run. According to the Commission's statement of 13 June 2017 total relocation from Italy stands at 6,896 persons this year – a number, albeit bigger than in the same period in 2016, still below the daily arrival figure on some days. Furthermore, infringement procedures often take months to complete. More recently Commission President Juncker urged the rebel states to reconsider their course if they don't want to see their cohesion funds cut – a threat which carries more political than legal weight and risks deepening the east west divide. All this, when the EU needs to show unity in the face of the Brexit negotiation.

Over the last few years Italy has tried to draw the attention of its EU partners to the fact that as first point of entry, it carries a disproportional burden of receiving and accommodating migrants and refugees. The humanitarian response of non-governmental organisations and its people has been remarkable indeed, given the country's economic difficulties and unstable political situation. The EU did try to tackle the problem at its source, signing partnership framework agreements on migration with the countries of origin of migrants and trying to equip, train and engage the Libyan coastal guards and tribes to help prevent the departure of smuggler boats. But the delivery results have unfortunately never matched the ambitions. As a result, Italian authorities increasingly feel they are being left alone which further fuels anti-European sentiment and plays into the hands of the xenophobic Northern League whose force may significantly influence the outcome of the upcoming elections in 2018. It is all the more worrying given the size and economic importance of Italy, let alone the fact that its citizens were once the most fervent supporters of European integration and the euro.

Fearing that the situation will soon become unsustainable, the Italian representative to the EU has threatened to close their ports to vessels carrying migrants as a measure of last resort. This would be unprecedented, in view of international obligations binding Italy and the whole EU to provide rescue to



boats in distress. The EU is taking the message seriously and will most likely boost its emergency funding envelope, including the assistance to African countries known for generating large migration flows.

The problem is that even if the EU considerably reinforces efforts to stabilise Libya and increase funding for countries from which migrants come, the fruit of these efforts may take decades to materialise. Not only poverty, but corruption, repressive regimes and the lack of adequate economic prospects for the fast swelling African population represent colossal challenges which no emergency measures can solve. As if that were not bad enough, there is — as the IOM has recently pointed out — an increasing risk that African migrants while waiting to board a vessel to Europe fall into the hands of smugglers who profit from the lawless state of Libya to trade them on the 'slave markets', where they face labour and sexual exploitation.

The impasse of how to resolve migration crisis seems to have breathed new life into the old idea of processing applications for asylum outside Europe with the aim to stop the flow of the so called economic migrants. This may however become a new issue of contention as there is no common EU policy on migration. As long as national governments keep control over asylum procedures the idea stands no chance of succeeding.