12 2015

“Refugee crisis” or crisis of European migration policies?

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“The refugee crisis in Europe is fabricated,” Prem Kumar Rajaram writes in the opening post of this series. It is certainly true that the framing of current events in terms of crisis and emergence contributes to a dramatization of the situation and opens up the space for “certain forms of intervention and the production of specific types of subjects.” This frame reproduces a division of labor, according to which migrants and refugees play a passive role while states, governments, and European institutions are the active agents, called upon to intervene and solve the “crisis.” This is part and parcel of a process through which the “crisis” becomes a governmental category and device.

The origin of the crisis

But how did the “crisis” begin? Which was the moment when it really became politicized? Once again, we must go back to the choppy waters of the Mediterranean, to the images of shipwrecks, drowning, and military-humanitarian intervention that multiplied in the summer of 2015. These were certainly not new. At least since the early 1990s, the illegalization of migration has transformed the Mediterranean into one of the most dangerous and lethal border zones of the planet. Over the past decades there

have been several moments in which the intensification of the movement of people across the Mediterranean and the reorganization, tightening, and even militarization of the European maritime border regime have reached a threshold that has been deemed as "emergency." One thinks, for instance, of migration from Albania in 1991 or from Tunisia after the "Jasmine Revolution" in 2011. Thousands and thousands of men, women, and children have lost their lives attempting to cross the Mediterranean. The summer of 2015 could have been just another "episode" within this history, but the pace and scale of migration escalated parallel to the intensification of wars from Libya to Syria and the "Greater Middle East."

The border regime in the Mediterranean, with its unbearable "necropolitical" implications, has been a crucial and constitutive component of a more general assemblage of policies aimed at governing mobility into and across the European Union. While the tensions and conflicts that crisscross this border regime have always extended far beyond the literal "external borders" of the EU, what Nicholas De Genova has termed the "spectacle of the border" has been deployed in the Mediterranean, with the Italian island of Lampedusa becoming a kind of iconic and symbolic name for border crises.

The geography of the current crisis is significantly different. A new quality was reached, and the real "crisis" was inaugurated, at the beginning of September, through the combined effect of (and the resonance between) two events. Significantly, these were also two images. The first happened indeed along the Mediterranean shores, on a beach near Bodrum in Turkey, where a Turkish journalist shot a photo of a Syrian Kurdish child's corpse on September 3. It is impossible to underestimate the effect of the circulation of that photo. The second event was the march of thousands of migrants

and refugees from Budapest to Vienna, which began the next day, on September 4. We are convinced that this march was the moment when the real "crisis"—in the governmental sense—began. It implied, even at the level of the "spectacle," a dramatic displacement of the geographical coordinates of the drama. And it foregrounded a subjective composition of the movements of migrants and refugees characterized by agency and obstinacy, by an ability to articulate their demands in an explicitly political way. The snapshot of the march that circulated most showed a man at its fore bearing a flag of the European Union. The march also made visible and helped multiply a huge network of solidarity with migrants and refugees, even in places like Hungary that are usually depicted as black holes of democracy.

A disrupted geography

It was this moment of "debordering" that pushed the "crisis" onto a completely new level. What became clear at this moment was that there was indeed a crisis. But this was the crisis of European migration policies. On August 25, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees acknowledged this, announcing that it would not follow the so-called Dublin procedures in the case of refugees from Syria. The border regime and the government of mobility writ large have historically played a crucial role in the European integration process, and it is clear the future of this process is precisely what is at stake in the current crisis. The multiple frictions and tensions that emerged around specific internal borders—for instance, at the French–Italian, the German–Austrian, and even more spectacularly the Slovenian–Austrian borders—can be taken as symptoms of this more general crisis that challenged one of the symbolic as well as practical achievements of the integration process: freedom of movement within the Schengen space. At the same time, the heterogeneous geography

and variable geometry of the EU, which have emerged through the "enlargement" process, appear disrupted in the light of the current "refugee crisis." Walls and fences arise along borders between Hungary and Serbia and Croatia and Slovenia, while the ongoing dramatic developments in Calais politicize in a relatively new way the historically peculiar position of the United Kingdom in the European Union. At the same time, clashes over "refugee quotas" make visible a new fault line between East and West in Europe, which overlaps with the divide between South and North that has become so violently apparent in the wake of the economic crisis.

Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel has grasped the European dimension of the "crisis" quite effectively. Her open acknowledgment that the Dublin system could not provide realistic answers to the movement and claims of migrants and refugees was a key moment in this regard. This created the conditions for a massive arrival of refugees into Germany and inaugurated a shift in the perspective of the German government. The initial moment of "opening" was immediately followed by multiple "closures," including border controls and a tightening of asylum law. An increasing social and political polarization is emerging in the country. Old and new forces of the right are gaining momentum. Racist attacks on buildings where refugees are or should be hosted occur on a daily basis, but we see also the consolidation of solidarity networks active in facilitating border crossing and providing multifarious resources to migrants and refugees. In confronting this situation, Merkel has consciously played the European card. She continues to insist on the need to reorganize the European government of mobility in a historical moment that is characterized by the renationalization of politics in Europe.

The crisis of European migration policies that plays itself out as "refugee crisis" demonstrates that the binary opposition between

the “sealing off” of borders and their “opening” is not particularly helpful when it comes to making sense of the challenges currently confronting us. Migrants will continue to come to Europe, and what is at stake today is the way this migration will be governed and managed. The notion of “differential inclusion” opens a critical angle on the panoply of tendencies and trends emerging out of the current “crisis.” There are good reasons to believe that the selective, hierarchical, and spatially and temporally heterogeneous nature of migration management characterized by differential inclusion will become increasingly manifest. But there are many ways the regime of differential inclusion can be organized against the backdrop of the multiple conflicts, tensions, and contradictions that characterize the present conjuncture.

However, reorganizing the whole government of mobility in Europe according to this tendency requires a further step in Europeanization. And this would not be, paradoxically, a response to the challenge posited by the movement of refugees and migrants, which has been and continues to be a movement toward and across Europe. It is this movement that most effectively challenges the renationalization of politics and the fragmentation of European space. Whether an attempt to meet this challenge from the point of view of a new “governmental reason” at the level of the EU will be successful is difficult to say at this point. It is important to note that what is at stake here is not only the balance of forces within the space of the EU but also the articulation of this space with its multiple outsides, which also means with areas torn by war and crisis. The Balkan route, across territories that have historically been and continue to be liminal to Europe, has become over the last months once again a strategic juncture in this regard.

Europe against Europe

The “Balkan route” has its own history. While the “Western

Balkans" have experienced a sequence of uprisings and ongoing turmoil over recent years, the opening of the Balkan route for transit migration in the current "crisis" traces back to the beaten track of mass escape from Kosovo in the fall of 2014. It was this movement that paved the way and established the logistics for migrants and refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq in the following months. The role played by migrants from Kosovo points back to the legacy of a different age, the wars that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and to movements of mass escape of refugees from the region. That was a crucial moment in European history. Soon after the constitution of the European Union with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the Balkans became the stage on which the spectacle of the EU's political infamy was played out. The disagreements and clashes between its most powerful member states acted as multipliers of the tensions in Yugoslavia, nurturing the catastrophe of the wars.

We cannot forget that at the very origin of the EU we were confronted with this decisive moment in which Europe acted against Europe. And, while a quite different situation, that moment was also marked by what was presented as a "refugee crisis." The management of this "crisis," as hundreds of thousands of people fled the wars in the Balkans, was also crucial to the invention of new legal, military, and governmental tools that would become part and parcel of the European border and migration regime. The notion of "safe third country," for instance, was forged against this backdrop, parallel to the process of "reform" of the German constitution's section regarding asylum, which drastically cut rights to asylum in Germany. Furthermore, recall that in the early 1990s, the "refugee crisis" associated with the wars in Yugoslavia immediately followed another "crisis," which signified

the movements of migration and escape from Iraq at the end of the First Gulf War.

More than twenty years later, people continue to move not only from Iraq but also from the Balkans, embodying the ongoing instability in those regions. It is even more striking that today, particularly in Germany, Syrians, Iraqis, and people from the Balkans are treated in very different ways. One can see here a "difference machine" at work, which discriminates between "first-class" refugees of brutal war (the Syrians) and potential seekers of political asylum (the Iraqis) while branding people from the Balkans as "economic migrants."

Looking to Europe from the Balkans today, one gets a different sense of the historicity of the current "crisis." It tells us something important about the long-term nature of this "crisis" and about the crucial, indeed "existential," questions that are at stake for Europe. Once again, migration has contributed not only to the Europeanization of the continent but also to posing the question of the borders of Europe. The disrupted geography we described above appears even more messy and complicated once the Balkans are included in the picture. The position of Turkey, another important question, has dramatically changed with regard to the EU over the past few months. Connected to Europe through the Balkan route, Turkey has once again become a crucial site in the constellation of the European "refugee crisis." This has opened up new spaces of action for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, as Erdoğan's party attempts to position itself as an ambivalent "gate keeper" at the borders of Europe. The Turkish involvement in the Syrian war, as well as the violent attacks on Kurds and dissidents of all kinds at home, has thus become internal European matters. These are uncanny implications of the peculiar kind of "enlargement" of Europe, which, as Étienne

Balibar contends, is produced by the movements of migrants and refugees.

This text, first published on 12 November 2015, is part of a series of texts on migration and refugee crisis on focaal blog.