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A reset of the European Union's approach to migration?

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In this blog post Leila Hadj Abdou & Andrew Geddes argue that a reset of the European Union's migration policy is unlikely to occur under the new Commission. Instead, as migration politics is now driven by politicisation of migration as a European concern, it is probable that we will see more horizontal 'Europeanisation' of like-minded governments, and a continued and intensified quest for external arrangements with countries and regions outside of Europe to find policy solutions to immigration.

Changes in leadership tend to raise expectations about policy change. So, unsurprisingly, the new European Commission under President-elect Ursula von der Leyen has been confronted with expectations for a reset of the European Union's approach to migration, too. Despite such expectations, substantial and radical change is unlikely to occur.

A stable policy core

The policy core in the field of migration, by which we mean the underlying priorities and who defines them, have remained relatively stable for decades now. Policy changes in the field of migration and asylum, the most developed areas of EU migration policies, have been consistent so far with the 'policy core' established in the 1990s and 2000s, rather than being disruptive of its rationale. Policy priorities identified in those decades were informed by the idea that there are large scale and potentially uncontrollable migration flows, and that the EU needs to secure its borders. Whether accurate or not, this understanding has had—and will continue to have—powerful effects. EU actions on asylum and irregular migration have been focused to a great extent on stemming such flows. Moreover, the underlying dynamic that has shaped contemporary migration politics and policy-making, namely the politicisation of migration, is unlikely to dissipate.

...and the core dynamic of politicization

Until the 1990s, European integration developed in a context where public opinion was quiescent. It was a period of 'permissive consensus ^[1]', with policy deals cut by insulated elites. Important work ^[2] on the origins of European cooperation on immigration matters shows how it was precisely this insulation that appealed to the executive branches of national governments as they began to intensify their cooperation on immigration and asylum at the EU level. However, by the 1990s, public opinion on European integration and immigration had become an important factor which affected national voting and was related to the underlying dimensions of political contestation in Europe.

Attitudes to European integration and immigration now form part of an important dividing line. This political cleavage has been variously labelled as pro- or anti- globalisation, or as cosmopolitan versus communitarian. As a result, opposition to European integration and immigration has motivated political behaviour and new forms of political mobilisation [3]. Brexit [4], and the Leave campaigners' strong focus on immigration [5], is a paradigmatic example of these developments.

Attitudes to migration

This is not to say that there has been a growth in anti-immigration sentiment in Europe. In fact, attitudes to migration are relatively stable. Following the 2015 immigration crisis, attitudes toward both migration from within and outside the EU actually became *more* favourable. However, the importance that people attribute to the immigration issue—its salience—increased dramatically after 2015 in many European countries. This triggered latent anti-immigration dispositions among sections of the European electorate and fuelled a growth in support for anti-immigrant political parties [6]. The increasing salience of the issue has also played a role in the adoption of radical anti-migrant positions by mainstream parties [7].

Irregular migration

The 'fight against irregular migration' has ranked highly among the priorities of the EU agenda, especially in the wake of the 2015 migration crisis. Irregular migration is also a particularly salient type of migration in public debate. Although regular migrants actually vastly outnumber irregular ones, a Eurobarometer [8] survey published in 2018 found that 47 per cent of respondents thought that there are at least as many irregular migrants in the EU as there were regular ones.

The EU plays a significant role in the area of irregular migration through regulations, funding and technical cooperation. The key element of the EU policy agenda addressing irregular migration has been border control and the external dimension of migration policy. This is often labelled as 'externalisation' of migration control, through which the EU seeks to co-opt non-EU countries into its migration framework. Externalisation [9] aims to prevent non-EU nationals from leaving their countries of origin, but also strives to ensure that if they manage to do so, they remain as close to their country of origin as possible, or in any case, outside EU territory. This approach is anything but new; it reaffirms existing policy approaches [10] and fosters ideas that have been floating around for decades. The 2015 crisis in many ways served as an opportunity to strengthen this path due to heightened political attention to the issue.

The external approach yielded some success for the EU and its member states. These arrangements, however, have been accompanied by considerable human rights concerns and constraints. Most notably, there are often differing interests in place, such as the different levels of interest in curbing or facilitating migration of destination, origin and transit countries. The negotiation leverage of the EU is also severely limited, largely as a result of the Commission's lack of legal powers in relation to admissions policy. Consequently, bilateral agreements between EU member states and third countries have remained highly relevant despite a growing EU role in the

external agenda. The Commission, moreover, has opted to follow a strategy of integrating other policy sectors such as development aid, trade, mobility, and energy in its negotiations, in order to broaden its bargaining leverage.

Asylum

With regards to asylum, two competing approaches have characterized this EU policy domain since its establishment: a commitment to the protection of vulnerable persons and a defence against, and prevention of, 'unwanted' immigration. The co-existence of these competing approaches can be seen as an expression of the different institutional interests at stake in EU asylum policy. Specifically, the tension demonstrates the shifting political agendas of national governments and the priorities of non-state actors, such as international organisations and NGOs. Consequently, we can often observe what appears to be a pendulum movement between bold, expansive pledges to develop common approaches to asylum, followed by disappointingly slow progress in actual policy making. This can create the impression that EU asylum policy is inconsistent.

However, rather than viewing this inconsistency as policy failure, it is more accurate to view it as a strategy to deal with conflicting and at times contradictory demands. An effect of the migration crisis after 2015, however, was to put severe pressure on this 'strategy'. Asylum became a highly politicised issue with expectations raised about what the EU could or should do— expectations that, as it has turned out, cannot be met exactly because of the conflicting demands that are present. This has plunged the EU's credibility into a severe crisis ^[11]. As the issue has become more politicised, and deep fault lines that account for the weakness of the common European asylum system continue to exist, the aspiration to outsource protection and even to question the fundamentals of the protection system ^[12] itself have become more prevalent.

More horizontal 'Europeanisation' of likeminded states & more externalization efforts

While there is little evidence of change in the underlying policy priorities established since the 1990s, there are other important changes. As we have emphasized, there have been important shifts in the social foundations of politics, with the emergence of a new dividing line in European politics that pits the 'winners' of globalisation against its 'losers'. Attitudes to immigration and to European integration are central to this new dividing line. Moreover, EU expansion has also brought new member states, some of which have been strongly opposed to common measures on migration and asylum.

Although the 2015 crisis also did not change the policy core, it did further increase politicisation of migration. Importantly, this politicisation was of migration as a European concern (i.e. not a series of national debates). This politicisation exposed the limits of top-down European integration, as the effective breakdown of the Common European Asylum System in the wake of the migration crisis has highlighted.

Instead of top-down Europeanisation in the domain of migration, forms of 'horizontal integration' between groups of 'likeminded' states within the EU have therefore become more likely. These are

not stable coalitions and are unlikely to develop fundamentally new policy directions. However, they can provide a basis for practice-based learning among states with similar views about the management and implementation of policy.

Given that that the EU leadership is no longer insulated from public opinion in the way it used to be in the 1990s – and Brussels is now deeply politicised – it is also likely that the quest for 'external' arrangements to find policy solutions outside of the European Union will further intensify.

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[1] permissive consensus: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/postfunctionalist-theory-of-european-integration-from-permissive-consensus-to-constraining-dissensus/60EA0C58491C06327A235761B08878D6>

[2] Important work: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-5965.00219>

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<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/european-party-politics-in-times-of-crisis/466446CE959EB782BC30047F8FB9275D>

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[14] **Andrew Geddes:** <http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/team/andrew-geddes/>

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