

From “bogus” asylum seekers to “genuine” refugees; shifting discourses and attitudes towards Afghan migrants

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Once again, the European Union is facing what is perceived as a ‘migration crisis’ at its (Eastern) borders after some thousand asylum-seekers, reported to be mostly Afghans, are stuck in the border between Belarus and Poland. Increasingly in the last few days, media and politicians are making explicit parallels between the events at the Eastern border and the so-called 2015 European ‘refugee crisis’.

These recent events take place after some relevant changes in the public and political discourse on Afghan migration in Europe after the fall of Kabul in August 2021.

During the last decade, in many EU countries the dominant public and political narrative had been that Afghans were not genuine refugees but economic migrants, or “bogus” asylum seekers. Consistent with these dynamics, EU countries repatriated thousands of Afghan failed asylum seekers.

Then it all changed. The Guardian reported in September 2021 that sign-ups for a befriending scheme between locals and refugees saw a ‘meteoric rise’ amid the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan and the fall of Kabul.

This acknowledgment of the plight of Afghan refugees was also mirrored at the highest political level.

After the British government had been blocking the provision for sanctuary for Afghans working for the UK armed forces for years, Prime Minister Johnson announced this autumn generous refugee resettlement schemes for these individuals, promising to provide them with “the certainty and stability to rebuild their lives with unrestricted right to work and the option to apply for British citizenship in the future.” The UK Home Secretary also called upon other countries in the EU to take Afghan refugees.

Germany struck an equally welcoming tone. Even a leading politician of the radical right AfD underlined that Germany has a moral duty to take in Afghans who worked for German forces. Several countries, including Germany, have also suspended returns of rejected asylum seekers to Afghanistan over safety concerns. Previously the German government had categorized Afghan asylum seekers under a non-priority category that implied less access to integration facilities and longer asylum procedures. The country had also launched campaigns in Afghanistan to discourage people from leaving. The official rationale was that German soldiers and police were contributing to Afghanistan’s security, and the country was supported through development aid. “So one can expect that the Afghans stay in their country”, Germany’s Interior Minister argued.

Italy had been somewhat of an exception concerning the attitude towards Afghan asylum seekers – 90 percent of whom

were granted some form of international or humanitarian protection – but it had received very few Afghan asylum seekers compared to other EU countries. However, here we also find astonishing developments in the aftermaths of the fall of Kabul. In total Italy evacuated some thousands of Afghans via planes to Italy, the highest number in the EU. Whilst the dispersal and the reception of asylum seekers was highly contested in the past decade, political elites are now stressing the need to welcome asylum seekers. Even some far right mayors, including from the populist anti-migrant Lega party, who before had vehemently opposed the reception of asylum seekers now personally welcomed Afghan families within their municipalities. The reception that usually resulted in local protests, now has not provoke any significant hostility by the local population.

However, in other EU member states we have not seen such an about turn. In Austria, the ruling anti-immigration People's Party vowed not to take in any Afghans, and insisted on continued deportations to Afghanistan. Other EU countries that remained hard-line included Denmark and CEE countries, such as Hungary and the Czech Republic.

We suggest that four key factors might explain these puzzling dynamics within the EU members' responses. We argue that these same factors are also likely to influence the political and public discourse on migration in Europe following the new 'crisis' at the Polish border.

Public attitudes & framing matters; *the dutiful, loyal migrant*

First, countries where we saw a U-turn (at least on a rhetorical level) towards Afghan asylum seekers are those that played a crucial role in the military occupation in Afghanistan. Support for armed forces is a component that touches upon questions of national identity, security and stability. These are conservative values that usually influence the attitudes of those individuals (and elites) that are more sceptical towards immigration. In other words, welcoming attitudes by Western European politicians seem to be linked to how Afghan asylum seekers and refugees are portrayed and how their role in supporting EU armies is framed in media. Research has in fact shown that it is not necessarily hard facts that drive the depoliticization or politicization of migration, but also perceptions, and which frames are available and accessible to decision-makers and public opinion more broadly. In a nutshell, the Afghan crisis tells us once again that we need to pay more attention to how asylum and migration are communicated, since framing has a real impact on politics and policies, or as one leading EU policy makers put it speaking to us:

The problem is the public perception of the problem, not the problem itself. Where is the problem with migration? That's always something I try to say, migration is not a problem and it does not have a solution. It's as simple as that, it's a phenomenon. You decide how you perceive that issue and

what makes it a problem. Not understanding this basic element means not understanding how policy making works (EU leading official, October 2017, interview by the author LHA in the framework of the ERC project MIGPROSP 340430).

The media & the role of focusing events; *the 'deserving' asylum seeker*

Second, these positive frames suddenly became highly salient in recent public debates.

The takeover of the Taliban did not happen overnight. Only recently, however, the Afghan conflict was powerfully mediatised, and, especially after the fall of Kabul, European media emphasised the brutality of the Taliban regime. In addition to the way asylum debates are framed this dynamic also points to the role of focusing events and cues picked up from the media in influencing how policymakers – and we as individuals – make sense of events.

Orderly migration vs migration portrayed as chaotic

Third, research has shown that the sudden, chaotic, unordered nature of the arrival of thousands of Syrians in 2015 generated negative effects on attitudes to immigration in receiving countries. While the fall of Kabul was highly mediatised, the arrival of asylum seekers via planes seems to have been perceived as much less visible to locals and was not portrayed by media as disruptive or challenging for the

receiving countries and their reception systems. This is not a new dynamic of course. In the last decade, the European political debate around migration largely revolved around irregular arrivals by boat, particularly by Sub-Saharan Africans to Europe's shores, notwithstanding the fact that most irregular migrants in Europe become irregular because of the overstaying of visas. The fact that it has been Ukrainian migrants that are one of the largest irregular groups present in the EU, had also never been a topic of discussion.

Declining public concern about migration

A fourth factor that might explain the welcoming attitudes towards Afghans of European elites has to do with the decreasing salience of migration in many Western European countries. Available data suggest that, in the aftermaths of the covid-19 pandemic, migration is not any more considered a top priority by the European electorate, which might have decreased incentives for parties to politicise the arrival of the Afghan refugees. At the same time, it is important to notice that, at least in some EU countries, right-wing parties tried to keep the attention high on other migration flows while displaying welcoming attitudes towards the Afghans. In Italy, for instance, the political debate on migration seems to remain largely focused on the Central Mediterranean route and migrant arrivals in the island of Lampedusa. While thousands of Afghans were being evacuated to Rome, the Lega leader Salvini vehemently attacked the Interior Minister Lamorgese for failing to deter the arrival of migrant boats in Sicily. Similarly, in the UK, in early September the government

authorised Border Force officials to turn back migrant boats in the English Channel, generating vibrant protests from the EU and pro-migrant NGOs. This dynamic very much points to a well-known argument in the migration literature, according to which governments and political parties can seek to send 'control signals' targeted at 'unwanted' forms of immigration to create space for more expansive policies for more 'accepted' forms of immigration and that sending such signals can offer a successful way out of the 'immigration control dilemma'.

What Next ?

Instead of a united approach by the EU on questions of asylum, we see more and more small coalitions of 'like-minded states'. The EU has grappled for years now to settle internal disagreements over asylum and migration related disputes. Different responses to a rise in migration remind us that different visions are also related to the geopolitical role EU countries have in the world and to ideational factors how migration debates are framed and made salient in public debate.

The recent events at the Polish border have the potential to significantly influence once again dominant discourses, frames and narratives. Dominant reports of these events depict migrant flows at the Polish borders as 'massive' and 'chaotic'. These framings can trigger fears by people who value security and order, and can consequently drive negative perceptions. Media accounts describe these migrants as 'political weapons' used by the Belarusian government to

put pressure on the EU. The political discourse seems to have shifted back to border control and the opportunity to build new walls at the EU's external borders.

These events remind us once again how perceptions and discourses are volatile and can shift very quickly when new 'signals and cues' become available and are linked to changes in how media frame political issues.

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