



The EU migration crisis

Getting the numbers right

by Roderick Parkes and Annelies Pauwels

The EU has a reputation for setting good standards. During the migration crisis, the humanitarian sector (non-governmental and international organisations) criticised the Union for letting its standards slip. Yet the problem all too often came down to numbers – and their reliability. A regulatory superpower like the EU is only as strong as its knowledge base, and the EU's statistical picture of the migration flows remains very partial – leaving it dependent on other actors, who may exploit this weakness to promote their own agenda.

The crisis in numbers

There is a widely accepted version of Europe's migration crisis: it begins in March 2015, when the number of migrant arrivals from Turkey to Greece more than doubles. The cause of this sudden surge seems pretty clear: food. Syrians are coming from Lebanon and Jordan where they have been sheltering since the beginning of the war – and where they would have remained had the UN's emergency programmes in the region been funded properly, *inter alia*, by the EU and its member states.

But the EU, as the now-familiar critique goes, has overlooked the warnings of the World Food

Programme in Jordan and Lebanon. Instead it focuses on stemming flows in far-away Libya, where member states claim to be waging a war against 'people smugglers and their business model'.

As 2015 rolls on, the number of arrivals remains high. This new route through Turkey and into Greece, unlike the route through Libya, is accessible all year round, not just when the waters are calm. By December, headline statistics galvanise the member states to start taking drastic action. Individual members are now reporting record-breaking numbers – 1 million new asylum applications in Germany alone, for instance. The figures shake national governments, many of which take unilateral action: some stop registering asylum-seekers, others build fences at the border. It is a period of radical policy experimentation as governments seek unusual new solutions, including in concert with transit countries.

March 2016 marks a turning point: the EU concludes its deal with Ankara. In return for €3 billion in financial assistance and a promise by the EU to reopen talks about lifting visas, Turkey will control its borders and take back migrants from Greece's Aegean islands. April



2016 duly brings a 90% month-on-month drop, and the deal's supporters hail it as a humanitarian triumph, saving migrants from taking dangerous routes to Europe and providing them with safety closer to home. But the success proves hollow. Syrians do not wait long before again exploiting their old entry-point into the EU. In the first half of May, Italy experiences a 54% increase in migrants arriving from North Africa. It seems that the EU has succeeded only in deflecting the flows.

As the volume of people increases across the central Mediterranean, so too do the numbers of dead-and-missing migrants at sea. This maritime route to Europe is deadly: in the first five months of 2016, more than 2,500 migrants drown in the Mediterranean – a 35% increase compared to the same period of the previous year. In response, the EU extends its naval activity in international waters in the central Mediterranean. Operation Sophia is still supposed to target migrant-smuggling networks but, in the face of growing public disquiet about the displacement effect of the EU-Turkey deal, is drawn into the task of rescuing migrants in distress at sea.

The real timeline

The lesson of this narrative seems clear: the EU's restrictive law enforcement policies amounted to little more than fire-fighting, and if the Union had instead adopted a broad-minded humanitarian response, it would have resolved the problems better. But does this argument actually stand up to scrutiny?

Starting again at the beginning, serious questions have emerged about whether that initial surge of Syrians through Turkey was really occasioned by shortfalls in refugee assistance in Jordan and Lebanon. True, the UN's Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, which gathers the humanitarian agencies active in the region, was badly underfunded (in August 2015 it had received merely 37% of its \$4.5 billion appeal), but this was probably not a decisive driver. When the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) finally surveyed Syrian asylum-seekers on the Greek islands, it turned out that the majority of respondents (at least 65%) had come straight from Syria – and only

a tiny proportion (2 out of 670) said they had made use of UN assistance on the way.

By contrast, people-smuggling gangs and their 'business models' almost certainly did have a hand in the surge. In the early days of the Syrian conflict, gangs operating out of Libya had dominated the market, offering high-grade smuggling services to middle-class refugees. But their model was gradually strangled by visa restrictions in Egypt and Morocco, and the central Mediterranean route fell to the African mass market, with its low-grade 'ghost ships'. At around the same time, 1,200 km away in Kosovo, criminals had been bussing local migrants to Germany and Sweden where they worked or made bogus asylum claims. The surge appears to have occurred when Turkish gangs took over this Balkan route, and marketed it to poorer Syrians displaced by fighting in the north of their country.

Statistical gaps inside the EU allowed alternative narratives to take root, as well as falsely magnifying the problems facing member states. It soon turned out, for instance, that Frontex had been 'double counting' irregular migrants as they moved through Europe (first at the Greek border and then again as they moved back into the Schengen zone from Serbia or Albania). But this was only the tip of the iceberg. A statistical recording of an asylum application in the EU can, depending on the member state, refer to initial or subsequent applications, to individuals or entire families, and may include repeat applications. It does not reflect withdrawals of applications or returns – and, in Sweden alone, in the first eight months of 2016, a record number of more than 4,500 asylum-seekers abandoned their applications and left.

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By the spring of 2016, the authorities were desperate to show that the tide had turned. On one memorable occasion, they interpreted a day-on-day dip in crossings at a key border point as heralding the end of the crisis. It later turned out there had simply been fewer border guards to register migrants as it was a local holiday.

This sounds like a minor blip, but similar errors were repeated on an EU-wide scale. European authorities let it be known that a plateau had been reached in the numbers of asylum claims



registered. The real indication of a turning point would have been a dip in the numbers who *intended* to register for asylum. The EU figures were merely a measure of administrative capacity, indicating that the authorities were at full stretch.

Such events undermined the EU's message when the shift finally did come. It is telling that the one thing for which the EU has watertight statistics directly contradicts the widely accepted narrative of events: the EU-Turkey deal did not 'deflect' Syrians back to Libya. True, migrant flows across the central Mediterranean did rise again after the March deal, but this was because Nigerians, Gambians and Eritreans were taking advantage of better sailing weather. Any Syrians who were intercepted turned out to be North Africans disguising their nationality. If there has been any diversionary effect, therefore, it is limited to Bangladeshis. They appear to be flying on from Turkey to Tripoli's newly-reopened airport. In other words, the EU's restrictive measures have served their purpose. But which ones precisely? And to what degree?

The risk of blackmail

Without accurate statistics, the EU cannot evaluate the border restriction measures it has implemented, nor can it identify its vulnerabilities. It is still not known, for instance, whether the EU-Turkey deal caused the dip in numbers crossing the Aegean or if, say, the closure of the Balkan route delivered the necessary deterrent effect. This matters because, if the Turkish government does now tear up the deal, the Union's main line of response would again be to close the Balkan route. Frontex would line the border between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia with officials, sending a message to migrants: there is no point in leaving Turkey, because you will not make it out of Greece. But this is a gamble, and could end up turning Greece into a giant refugee camp.

EU officials who are trying to trace the effects of measures such as the EU-Turkey deal struggle with statistical errors and day-to-day distortions. Europe's border authorities have been

dutifully sharing data on the migrants they intercept, broken down into 24-hour periods. But it turns out that these 24-hour periods do not actually coincide with the calendar day: rather than counting from midnight to midnight, national authorities begin at the start of the first shift – 04:00, say – and end with the last. They may also have wrongly recorded where they intercepted the migrants. Officials understood the terms 'onshore' and 'inland' to refer respectively to islands and mainland Greece – wrongly, as it turned out. The authorities now struggle to discern which migrants were intercepted en route from Turkey and which had been on the Greek mainland beforehand.

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A whole range of third countries have proven happy to step into this statistical vacuum, and confuse matters further. States situated on the transit route to Europe use statistics to magnify their problems

and demand concomitant sums from the EU. One government has reportedly calculated the contribution which the people-smuggling business makes to its GDP, and is demanding the equivalent sum from the EU to justify combating it. Another government regularly informs the EU about how many migrants it detects crossing its borders; but these numbers are far higher than the ones it circulates internally. So is this state incompetent, or purposefully inflating the numbers to take cash from the EU, or deflating the numbers for internal consumption – or a mix of the three?

Similar questions can be asked of international organisations – and not just the World Food Programme, with its understandable desire to make up funding shortfalls. A year ago, NATO officials were quite open in their assessment that their 'Aegean Initiative' (a naval mission in support of Frontex in Turkish waters) was of little practical value. They complained that they were being drawn away from core defence tasks, and hoped at best that their activities would kick-start the alliance's naval dimension. Today, and in the absence of statistical clarity, they take credit for the dip in flows to the Greek islands. And then there is the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), a body which indisputably holds a central place in managing the crisis. The IOM is



currently recalibrating its mission and its funding sources and, tellingly, has set up a data centre in Berlin.

Questions have recently been raised about the IOM's statistics – about its possible over-estimate of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean (where the EU operates) and its underestimate of the numbers of migrants crossing into Libya from Niger (where the IOM operates). The IOM last year joined the family of UN organisations. But it retained its old status as a membership body whose money is provided by its 166 sponsor states. This hybrid setup potentially gives it the best of both worlds. The IOM gains new operational autonomy by aligning with the UN's humanitarian mandate, but continues to draw on traditional membership funds. Indeed, it can squeeze its traditional funders in Europe with a new humanitarian narrative. The IOM's numbers cast the EU in a bad light, and itself in a good light.

Whatever the case, the responsibility for getting the numbers straight lies ultimately with the EU – and the EU is the one reinforcing the picture of a humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean by playing up the numbers of people which it rescues. Again, this possible distortion occurs because of the absence of clear statistical standards. If Frontex spots a migrant in distress at sea and the same person is afterwards rescued by Operation Sophia, this can result in the total of two saved lives. Meanwhile, the Italian military counts migrants once they set foot into their naval vessels, whereas Frontex relies upon numbers provided by the migrants themselves (for instance, over the phone) while still in their dinghies. These distortions risk drawing Operation Sophia away from its law enforcement mission and into a humanitarian one.

Charting the future

The EU-28 are today negotiating with governments in New York on a global migration regime. But the UN, which is driving the process, has brought Europe to the table using a rather partial statistical picture (see: *EUISS Security Monthly Stats*, April 2017).

Since at least 1994, the UN has been pushing for governments to create rules on legal migration, cheered on by countries of the 'global South'. These less-developed economies see a chance to open up migration opportunities to Europe or North America. But the EU-28 and other countries of the 'global North' have

historically been opposed to these multilateral rules – they prefer their migration deals to be bilateral and demand-driven, and want talks to focus on border control and migrant returns. Last year, the UN finally achieved its goal of getting northern states to the table, making the argument that they had allowed things to reach boiling point and that more people are on the move than ever before. Now, the numbers do not lie: the UN's massive figure of 244 million migrants is an all-time high. But it is the nuances which count.

Break down that monolithic figure of 244 million and an alternative picture becomes clear. If more people than ever before are today on the move, then it is because there *are* more people: the world population is rising at an unprecedented rate and it is also living longer. That means the stock of migrants is simply stacking up, as people who moved decades ago retain their classification as migrants.

In short, the UN figure of 244 million probably says more about a global demographic crisis than about migration. The most important migrant development is instead the one that is hidden: a growing proportion of today's migrants are moving within the global South itself, as countries like South Africa or the Philippines become richer and more attractive migrant destinations.

This is what really matters. North and South have much more in common than they did 20 years ago. Countries like Cote d'Ivoire or South Africa are increasingly 'northern' when it comes to managing immigration. Countries like Mexico, Turkey or Morocco are northern too when it comes to managing transit flows and border control.

The EU is being drawn into fighting yesterday's battle with the South rather than identifying new global allies and different ways of dealing with migration. South-South migration is a huge opportunity for the future, but also a source of instability. If the EU mastered the full statistical picture, it could better identify the South's new responsibilities – and its own.

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