Marek Okólski *Committee on Human Migration Research, Polish Academy of Sciences*

Europe: A Weary Promised Land

While the migration problem that became one of the main topics of public debate in Europe this summer (often referred to as the "refugee crisis") does involve a certain migration component, this does not in fact constitute the essence of the problem. The essence lies elsewhere, in a profound political crisis within the European Union whose manifestations include the institution's inability to formulate a coherent and effective asylum policy.

My task is to focus on one selected aspect of this problem, namely the aforementioned "migration component."

Migrations are as old as history. Now is not the time to explore why this is the case, but it does seem important that human migrations have always exhibited a certain dual nature. One type of migration is systematic, regular, and dependent on personal preferences or the situation of individual human beings, the other provoked by sudden and irregular occurrences. The latter type of migration is sparked off by catastrophic events, shared by entire communities affected by such disasters. In the long run, however, the nature of these two types of migration movements have changed over time, as have their quantitative significance. In the relatively distant past, most migrations were caused by various sorts of cataclysms, and migrations of this type occurred relatively frequently. In the modern-day world, however, migrations are usually motivated by individual choices, whereas those stimulated by sudden events occur much less frequently and pertain to relatively fewer people.

I will now restrict myself to the phenomena that have occurred since the end of World War II.

When population resettlement precipitated by the events of World War II came to an end, the countries of Western

BE&W

Europe supported the mass influx of foreign workers for two and half decades, largely in the false or illusory belief that the immigrants would return to their countries of origin after their contracts expired or, generally speaking, once demand for their labor declined. When that demand indeed fell drastically in the mid-1970s, it transpired that most immigrants would not leave the countries to which they had been recruited and would instead settle permanently in their societies. Post-war employment of foreigners in Western Europe served as a curtain-raiser and stimulus for mass and permanent immigration on a continent that had in previous decades mainly experienced mass population emigration. Once that heightened wave of migration related to unsatisfied demand for labor slowed down, the following decade, or the period until the mid-1980s, witnessed a massive influx of foreigners who wanted to join their families. As the phenomenon seemed to continue endlessly, the destination countries drastically reduced the possibility of more family members being brought in from abroad.

Back then, in the late 1980s, those same countries witnessed a heightened and more systematic influx of individuals posing as refugees, a phenomenon undeniably linked to the elimination of other legally sanctioned forms of migration to European countries attractive to immigrants. This was undoubtedly facilitated by geopolitical circumstances, conducive to the broader invocation of the concept of "refugee" and "refugee status."[1] One of the arguments that can be cited to justify the suspicion that migrants are misusing this concept is the fact that Germany is undeniably far in the lead among countries reporting the highest number of foreigners applying for refugee status. Germany does not share borders with any of their countries of origin or represent any exception in terms of the level of security it offers to refugees, but it is perceived as a wealthy country offering plenty of employment opportunities.

Refugee status within the meaning of the 1951 Convention signed in Geneva was first granted on a larger scale to fugitives from Hungary in 1956 and 1967. Aside from that incident, however, Europe made use of that status only sporadically until the mid-1980s, when the number of individuals applying for refugee status started to grow dramatically. However, the surge in the number of applicants was disproportionate to the number of individuals who were granted refugee status. Indeed, these two trends proved quite divergent. In the years 1985-1990, for example, the number of applicants who were denied refugee status in Germany rose nearly sevenfold from 17,000 to 116,300 while the number of individuals who were granted this status dropped from 11,200 to 6,500. Since the aforementioned Convention (and the complementary New York Protocol from 1967) came into force, the share of asylum seekers that met the requirements stipulated in the Convention has fallen systematically. In Germany, for example, it dropped from over 50% in the early 1950s to slightly under 15% in the late 1970s and to 5% in the early 1990s. It recently rose slightly (to 13.5% in 2013),[2] but an overwhelming majority of applicants are still rejected.

From the outset, European countries, or more precisely the most affluent members of the European Union, have been top destinations for migration,[3] motivated or sometimes directly precipitated by cataclysms. Those fleeing disaster-stricken areas are usually joined by masses of people from various regions of the world that see such movements as a chance to enter countries that would not allow them in under different circumstances, under a different pretext. Such movement usually takes the form of illegal migrations, supported by organized criminal groups engaged in human trafficking. A large share of such migrants, including almost all those in-

1 Migrations were more intensive during political crises in the satellite states of the USSR, for example in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland in 1981.

2 In that year, 127,000 applications were submitted in Germany, compared to 81,000 decisions, including 10,900 applicants who were granted refugee status.

3 In the years 1987-2006, for example, nearly 90% of all the world's applications for refugee status were submitted to just 12 countries; 10 of these were European states.

tercepted by the border control authorities of the destination states, apply for refugee status. Refugee procedures are strict, absorbing both time and resources. Given the relatively long application processing times, often coupled with insufficient resources allocated to this, and the low degree of effectiveness with which applicants who are turned down are actually forced to leave the country, migrants frequently melt into the "gray area" of social life and job markets in affluent EU countries. Such a situation is a source of social tensions and poses a great political challenge in those countries.

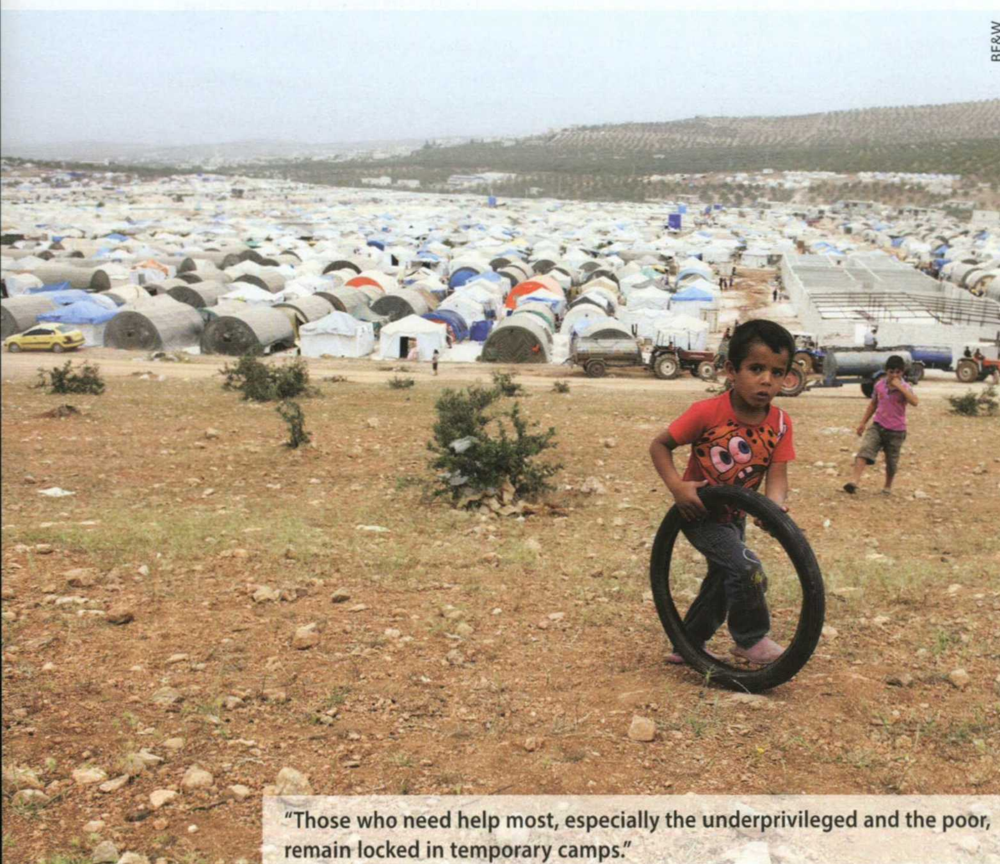
Unlike for asylum seekers, Europe is not such a clear leader as a destination for the other type of immigration mentioned earlier, namely systematic immigration motivated by the personal preferences of the migrants. Every year, the United States alone takes in 1-2 million new inhabitants or foreign workers. Other top destinations for international migration are the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, some countries in Southeast Asia as well as Canada, Australia, and to some extent Russia. Unlike the European Union, however, none of those countries or regions periodically face an influx of tens or hundreds of thousands of refugee claimants.

The ongoing crisis within the EU, related to the influx of hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers colloquially referred to as "Syrian refugees," on the one hand reflects the phenomena described earlier and has similar causes. On the other hand, this situation is special in that the present influx has taken on unprecedented dimensions and there are reasons to believe that it might even grow in scale.

Until the mid-1980s, the number of asylum seekers, or applicants for refugee status, did not exceeded 100,000 per year on the scale of the globe. At that time, however, the figure started to grow rapidly and reached 850,000 in 1992. After that, it dropped visibly and again peaked at around 600,000 in 2001. It later fell substantially. Since the end of the previous decade, however, it has been growing systematically and the year 2014 witnessed a new record – 866,000 registered applicants. It is worth stressing that in the same year 184,000 individuals were granted refugee status or other forms of protection, which was yet another record number.

In 2014, as many as 82% of applications for refugee status were filed in European countries, with the largest share being reported in Germany (20%).[4] If we adopt the time frame of the 12 months ending in June 2015, the European Union alone received applications from 750,000 individuals, most of whom applied for refugee status in Germany (260,000), followed by Hungary (100,000), Sweden and Italy (70,000 each), France (60,000), Austria (45,000), the United Kingdom (30,000), and the Netherlands (20,000).

The present problem essentially boils down to the fact that since the Arab Spring, temporary refugee camps, located mainly in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, have taken in many millions of individuals waiting to be relocated to safe places in stable countries or to return to their former place of residence. The protracted nature of the situation these people are facing, characterized by difficult and temporary living conditions, naturally prompts them to despair and protest. Some of them attempt to reach Europe, taking advantage of favorable circumstances. These are usually more affluent people, who can afford the costs of illegal trafficking. Those who need help most, especially the underprivileged and the poor, remain locked in temporary camps. Even so, those millions of people attract a lot less attention in European debate than the "lucky ones" who could afford to be "escorted" by professional smugglers en route to one of the EU countries, usually Greece.



BE&W

"Those who need help most, especially the underprivileged and the poor, remain locked in temporary camps."

It needs to be pointed out that the vast majority of migrants who have recently applied for refugee status in the EU countries are not nationals of Syria. In fact, Syrians accounted for slightly over 20% of the aforementioned 750,000 applicants. Over 35% of applications for refugee status were filed by individuals from the next six countries: Kosovo, Afghanistan, Eritrea,

4 Another important country was the United States (15% of the global number of applicants).

JAKUB OSTAŁOWSKI

Professor Marek Okólski
is a demographer and economist. A professor at the Warsaw University of Social Sciences and Humanities, head of the Center of Migration Research at Warsaw University, and chairman of the PAS Committee on Human Migration Research.

Albania, Iraq, and Pakistan. Other countries made up around 43% of applications.

All these reflections prompt the conclusion that the notion of a "migration crisis" in the EU caused by a massive influx of Syrian refugees should be treated with caution and skepticism. The problem is a lot more complex, it concerns refugees not only from Syria, and above all it pertains not only to refugees but to a much larger group, namely the constant influx of illegal migrants. As I suggested in my introduction, the problem is a more general one, strictly political in nature.

The discourse on migration, especially the way it gets reflected in the public media, may give the impression that Europe is a fortress, an area difficult to access for non-Europeans. Nothing could be further from the truth. Every year, the EU countries see the absolutely legal arrival of 1-2 million immigrants from non-EU countries (1.4 million in 2014).[5] In addition, over a million new immigrants a year come from other EU countries. What is more, as I have demonstrated, Europe accepts by far the highest number of applications for refugee status and offers shelter to the highest number of refugees.

Can Europe withstand an even greater burden related to migration pressure? That burden will be growing, because those living in the world's poorest region, Sub-Saharan Africa, have recently started making mass-scale attempts to migrate to Europe. In addition, the population of that region of the world (and the related demographic pressure) will continue to rise at a staggering pace.

Finally, I would like to attempt to describe Poland's place in the problem I have sketched out. First of all, Poland has been open to immigration for some time and it is starting to be a significant immigration country in the EU (see footnote 5). There are no scientific grounds to claim that Polish society is xenophobic (or more xenophobic than other societies in the EU) or that it poses obstacles to the integration of immigrants. Secondly, the principles governing the provision of humanitarian aid to individuals from areas affected by cataclysms or civil war adopted in Poland correspond to the highest international standards and are implemented in practice. Poland is one of the European countries that take in thousands of asylum seekers every year, including ones from other cultures and non-Christian religions. Thirdly, however, a vast majority of refugee procedures based on applications filed in Poland end up being discontinued, because many asylum seekers (spontaneously and illegally) move on to Germany and other countries that are more affluent than Poland. Moreover, there are grounds to believe that most of the people who were granted refugee status in Poland left our country after a short stay and moved further west. The conclusion is that a vast majority of refugees and illegal immigrants that reach Poland treat it not as their desired destination, but as a transit country. Fourthly, in the light of the ongoing civil war in Ukraine, Poland is a natural area where those fleeing Ukraine may and should receive support and humanitarian assistance. Poland's administration and Polish society appear well-prepared for that.

Regulations in effect in the EU (the Dublin Convention from 1990 and the complementary Dublin regulations from 2003 and 2013) provide for extraordinary situations, such as the ongoing situation, when the burden of processing refugee applications (and providing assistance to applicants) as well as offering protection to refugee applicants falls disproportionately on one or several member states. In such a situation, it is possible to for those people to be relocated to other member states on condition that the specific asylum seekers or refugees agree to that. However, Poland's experience to date shows that we should not expect a significant influx of asylum seekers (rather unfortunately, as I have already attempted to explain, referred to as "Syrian refugees"), nor should we expect many of them to settle in Poland, even if the EU institutions force Poland to accept certain quotas. ◂

5 According to Eurostat, the eight most important destination countries are: Germany (252,000), the United Kingdom (248,000), Italy (201,000), Spain (158,000), France (127,000), Sweden (64,000), Poland (59,000), and the Netherlands (41,000).

Sources:

- BBC News, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34252673; accessed 15 September 2015
- *Demography Report 2010: Older, more numerous and diverse Europeans*, 2011. Commission Staff Working Document, European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Luxembourg.
- Frey M., Mammey U. (1996). *Impact of Migration in the Receiving Countries*. Germany, CICRED-IOM, Geneva.
- Hatton T.J. (2011). Seeking Asylum. *Trends and Policies in the OECD*, Centre for Economic Policy Research, London.
- Okólski M. (1999). Migration Pressures on Europe. In: van de Kaa D., Leridon H., Gesano G., Okólski M. (eds.) *European Populations: Unity in Diversity*, Kluwer, Dordrecht--Boston-London, 141–194.
- UNHCR's current statistics
- Eurostat's current statistics