

## **The geopolitics of migration control in the Mediterranean: how our gatekeepers are keeping us in check**

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A boundary line always defines two realities: the inside and the outside. This idea also reflects the twofold nature of migration policies. On the one hand, domestic policies aim to manage aliens already - lawfully or unlawfully - on national soil. On the other hand, the global nature of migratory phenomenon pushed EU States to combine internal measures with a transnational approach involving the cooperation of the countries of origin and transit of migration in order to stop migrants before they reach national borders. The external dimension is now a fundamental element of migration policies and provisions concerning migration and border control became a core issue, increasingly conditioning the domain of international relations. A new dynamic thus raised in the field of international relations, aimed to involve neighboring countries in the 'remote control' of European borders; an approach sometimes referred as externalized migration management.

From the geopolitical perspective, this externalization approach had an interesting effect in the international balances in the Mediterranean area. The dialogue among Europe and the Southern partners has often been addressed as a 'relation among unequals'. The underlining assumption of this perspective is that that migrant-sending countries are the weaker counterparts and that, by contrast, migrant-receiving States, better positioned on a political and economic level, can exercise their power in order to force third countries to apply more advantageous border policies, such as increased border controls and readmission agreements. In such negotiations, while the interest of Europe may seem clear, the benefit of counterparts may be less obvious. Not only the revenues of migrants are often an important income for the economy of the country of origin, but the migrants stopped or returned by the means of such readmission agreements and push backs eventually result as the third country's economic and political responsibility.

The perspective of enhanced economic and political relations with the EU undoubtedly represents an effective attraction in these negotiations. But beside economic benefits, such as trade partnership, development aid and visa facilitation, States might be motivated by the will to be seen as credible players in the international arena and to gain legitimacy. In this light, cooperation in the field of migration represents the occasion for regimes to exercise the control of migratory flows as a bargaining tool towards Europe, taking advantage of their role as key partners in the control of EU borders.

The pressure Europe is subjected when it comes to migration is not only the 'physical' action exercised by migrants at the Schengen borders, but also a political perception conditioning the behavior of Member States and creating new patterns of relations between the North and the South. This European 'anxiety' provided some countries with an increasing bargaining power that in certain occasions they have been able to capitalize in order to exercise a leverage on the EU, not only in terms of financial aid and development, but also to gain a better position in the field of international relations.

In this light, the cases of two countries are particularly interesting: Libya and Turkey. Due to their strategic positions and political ambitions, the two countries were able to use the 'invasion analogy' as a strategic tool to affirm their interests and succeeded in shaping the rules of the game.

At the time of Gaddafi's regime, the necessity of a bilateral understanding on the issue of migration flows was compelling for Italy in the light of the first massive trends of arrivals. For

the Libyan leader, on the other hand, the need of a rehabilitation inside the international community pushed him to offer cooperation in the control of migratory flows as a bargaining chip for an Italian action of 'advocacy pro Libya' within the EU. Indeed, the bilateral agreements between Libya and Italy seem to go hand in hand with an inclusion within the European dialogues, a process which Gaddafi conducted with increasingly uncompromising and provocative positions. Suffice to say that he once declared that the EU should have committed to pay 5 billion a year to ensure Libya's cooperation in the field of migration control, under the threat of opening the migratory faucets and 'turning Europe black'. For the EU, the cooperation with Libya represented an exception of the classic 'stick and carrot' strategy applied in the dialogues with Southern partners. Indeed, in the framework of negotiations with Libya, the perspective of an economic partnership and entry quota only had a limited weight with respect to a country with a relatively stable economy and with an emigration rate to Europe close to zero.

The power to control the migratory flows directed to Europe was profitably used by Libya to negotiate with the EU outside the Neighborhood Policy scheme and obtaining both political legitimacy and allocation of funds decoupled without any kind of commitments areas such as human rights and democracy. Migrants indeed proved themselves very useful to Gaddafi's regime and extremely effective in manipulating pre-existing Italian and European fears of migration to maximum advantage.

The collapse of Gaddafi's regime in 2011 marked a grinding halt in the cooperation and gave rise to a political instability and a power vacuum which resulted in a new peak of arrivals in Italy, nullifying the economic and political efforts made until then. The event following the fall of the regime created one of the largest migration crises in Europe with significant implications for the neighboring region and beyond. As well known, the chaotic situation in the country enriched migrant smugglers and traffickers who set their headquarters in the Northern and Southern borders of Libya, establishing their lucrative business of human and oil trafficking. Nevertheless, Italy and EU didn't stop allocating funds and means and launching renovated and expensive partnership attempts to a country where the condition of migrants sometimes recalls the situation of slaves in America in the 17th century.

The transformations that characterized the geography of migrations in recent years are now clearly designing Turkey as the key actor in the Mediterranean arena, which emerged as the new gatekeeper of European borders. The increasing European concern for migrants crossing the eastern borders offered Turkey an unprecedented contractual power towards the EU and important issues were put on the negotiating table such as the Mobility Agreements. But the usual migration-related anxiety that characterized the EU's approach persuaded Turkey to raise the stakes, calling the EU to re-launch the negotiations on accession to the Union. The dialogues were in fact in a stalemate situation since 2005 due to, among other factors, the low expectations of progresses with regards to the parameters set for particularly delicate issues (or "chapters") of the *acquis*, such as justice and fundamental rights. The dialogue among Turkey and the EU reached its momentum on March 2016, with the conclusion of the EU-Turkey Statement. Through the deal, Turkey agreed to take back migrants illegally attempting to reach Greek islands. In return, besides accepting to resettle Syrian refugees from Turkey in its own territory, the EU committed to provide the country with financial aid amounting to 6 billion euros, implement a visa liberalization policy and advance on accession talks, this time turning a blind eye on the increasing authoritarian tendencies of the President Erdogan. The evidence pointing against the compatibility of the Turkish system with the European *acquis* were also strongly reiterated by the European Parliament, which called for a halt to the negotiations in front of the 'disproportionate repressive measures' put in place by Erdogan after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. Erdogan's reaction to the European Parliament's position was intransigent and, in a way, recalling Gaddafi's threat to 'turn Europe black', as the Turkish leader admonished the EU that, if its promises will be betrayed, he will open the migratory floodgates throughout the Aegean. Accession talks seem nonetheless to proceed

slowly and one could say that the EU is trying to buy as much time as possible without reaching a breaking point with Turkey. However, until the situation of the Syrian crisis will keep pushing people to flee their country and try to reach Europe, Turkey will play a predominant position towards EU, which will have its hand tied with regards to a formal cessation of the negotiations.

With Turkey, EU replicated the pattern adopted with Libya, entrusting the control of the migratory flows to a partner who is fully aware of its power to blackmail Europe with migrants. But Turkey's enhanced awareness of its geopolitical importance also risks to persuade the country to reconsider the importance of becoming a Member State as the escalation in the Middle East region seem to push Erdogan's ambitious foreign policy away from Europe and to direct his efforts in the Middle East. If this happens, the EU will lose its main negotiating argument with Turkey.

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The recent events in the Turkish - Syrian border clearly revealed the breach of the plan. The clashes in the Idlib area pushed around 900 thousand refugees to flee in Turkey, which decided to open the gates and let them cross the Greek border, exacerbating the local anti-migrant feeling which rapidly escalated in an unprecedented and stunning violence against the refugees.

As expected, Turkey used the most effective weapon - migrants - against EU, asking more money (complaining the promised 6 billion euros never arrived) and legitimacy for its action in Syria. EU's reaction - also expected - was panic and internal division: some Member States such Austria immediately announced that their doors are shut to Syrian refugees in Greece and no solution has so far arrived by the Commission. The time bought - at great expense - by the EU in 2016 is now over and Europe is still unprepared to face the phenomenon of migration. And it probably won't have any other option than buying more, at the expenses of refugees' lives and dignity.

It is now clear that the increasing European dependence from the cooperation of transit countries in the control of migratory flows has projected the issue of migration on the higher ground of the overall geopolitical equilibrium of Mediterranean. The urgency of entrusting someone else the control of our own borders has pushed Europe to start cooperation and partnership to any interlocutor available, no matter its actual reliability and the political situation of the State, providing any neighbor with the powerful weapon of controlling migration flows. However, beside relying on a cynic and risky strategy, Libya's experience showed that another risk is around the corner: authoritarian regimes are enduring until they are not. Erdogan's power now appears stable and able to pursue ambitious goals in terms of foreign policy, but starting from 2019 Turkish economy has slowed significantly and the popular support for its party seems to shiver. If Erdogan's regime collapses, who guarantees that the next leader will be eager to take care of 'our' migrants?

The alternative of such an expensive strategy is a deep reframing of European approach towards migration, building enduring policies in order to release the EU from the dependence on migrant sending countries, relaunching its leadership in the Mediterranean area and its dignity among Member States. Is there any hope?