

Europe has reduced illegal immigration without goon tactics

Given its oft-proclaimed calling as a peace project, the European Union can sound oddly bellicose when it sets about crafting policy. There are trade and fiscal “bazookas” to blast away crises, “silver bullet” solutions for every problem, and “nuclear options” to be used as a last resort. Yet in the absence of an EU army or even a police force, the pen-wielding Eurocracy rarely gets its hands on anything that looks like an actual weapon. The only exception—tellingly—is the club’s border-patrol agency. For over a decade after it was founded in 2005, Frontex agents wielded little more than whistles and admonishments as they helped national authorities keep out migrants. These days they also carry Glock 9mm handguns, FBI-style. In a union built to make war unthinkable, the first supranational weapon was issued not for defence against armies, but for keeping unarmed people out.

Whether because of the Glocks or, more likely, because of a slew of new measures in recent years, irregular migration into the EU has markedly declined of late. Illegal crossings spotted by Frontex are down by more than half over the past couple of years. Demands for asylum in EU countries have also fallen sharply. Though migration can ebb and flow according to unpredictable rhythms—a million-strong influx of Syrians and Afghans arrived in Europe in 2015 and 2016, years after strife in their respective countries had broken out—there is an odd sense of calm about the EU’s external frontier these days. On June 12th a “migration package” of measures originally conceived in the depths of the crisis a decade ago will come into force, tightening border controls and sending irregular migration down further. Perhaps, maybe, conceivably, Europe has cracked the problem of new unwanted arrivals onto its shores. Alas, the politically toxic issue of migrants already in Europe, who are often poorly integrated, remains. Europe can be said to have half-solved one half of its migration problem.

Still, for the first time, a mood akin to optimism reigns among interior-ministry types. Illegal migration is the one issue that every EU leader knows can cost them their job if handled poorly. Officials in Brussels have thus worked up tangible ways to throttle unwanted arrivals. The most effective trick is to shower “transit” countries such as Tunisia and Egypt with cash if they prevent migrants from farther afield from travelling onwards to Europe. Such a deal with Turkey helped stem the crisis in 2016; it has since been expanded. The EU now works more closely with places from where migrants originate, even if that means talking to unsavoury regimes such as the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Things will get tougher yet for putative migrants. Beginning later this month, anyone who arrives irregularly in the EU with little chance of being granted refugee protection (because they come from countries deemed safe, such as Bangladesh) will be housed in detention camps at the border while their claim is assessed. Those who fail to qualify for asylum—currently a large majority of cases—would once have expected to spend years working in European countries’ shadow economies as they waited to be expelled. No longer. Under a deal reached on June 1st, anyone whose bid for asylum fails might instead end up in “return hubs” in far-flung countries such as Uganda or Uzbekistan while the EU makes arrangements to repatriate them. The hope is that potential migrants choose not to make the trip in the first place.

Europe deserves plaudits for stemming arrivals without resorting to the performatively cruel tactics used by immigration-enforcement goons in America. Though the tone around migration is harsher, and many NGOs are horrified by a strategy they say, plausibly, outsources Europe’s problems to unsavoury regimes, the measures are on the whole pretty sensible. Yet plenty of potential pitfalls remain. Schengen, the passport-free travel scheme, has been partially suspended by various countries, including France and Germany, because of fears illegal migrants will roam from one EU country to the next. Nobody knows how well the pact would work if migration were to surge again: return hubs in Africa or Asia, which have yet to be set up, will be able to house only limited numbers of people. Attempts to “externalise”

migrant processing, such as the centres Italy opened in Albania in 2024 to handle asylum claims offshore, have become mired in EU courts.

Not now, huddled masses

Migration continues to poison European politics. But these days it is not mostly because of new arrivals at the borders. Rather, hostility towards immigrants who arrived in the past, whether in 2015 or 1975, has propelled parties of the populist right to the top of the polls in Germany and France, and to power in Italy. Bashing people of foreign descent—most of whom settled in Europe legally or were born there, many of them citizens—has become routine across much of the political spectrum. On May 30th several hundred people attended a “remigration summit” in Portugal, including officials from the xenophobic Alternative for Germany. The idea that descendants of migrants should be encouraged to leave is plainly racist, yet no longer taboo. Jordan Bardella, who is leading the polls for the first round of next year’s French elections, blamed migrants “physically in France but whose souls and hearts lie elsewhere” for a night of rioting following a football match.

For such parties, the issue of migration is far too potent to leave behind, even if the number of new arrivals falls. The integration piece of the migration challenge cannot be resolved with guns or pacts. Perhaps, if irregular arrival rates stay low for many years, some of the toxicity might dissipate. It needs to. Europe will require migrants in coming decades to offset its demographic decline. That does not mean opening its borders to anyone who chooses to move there. But it will mean, one day, welcoming some migrants with open arms rather than Glocks.