The Year of Migrations in the Mediterranean

Gemma Aubarell
Programmes Director
European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), Barcelona

Immigration in the Mediterranean area is a constant which defies evaluation using time parameters. Mediterranean countries currently occupy a prime place in worldwide immigration and are at the confluence of two migratory systems of great significance: the highly fluid region that is Africa and one of the major reception zones - Europe. None of which negates the importance of other zones, such as the Gulf, that are ever more strongly tied into this dynamic of mobility.\(^1\)

European entropy figures prominently in this context as relates to Mediterranean flows: five of the 18 million immigrants in the EU originate from Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries. Added to this is the consolidation of Mediterranean Europe as one of the continent’s immigration magnets. Its reception capacity has increased substantially between 1995 and 2002, with Italy and Spain going from 1 to 3% of migrant population levels, reaching as high as 7% in the case of Greece, not allowing for the undetermined impact of unregulated migration.\(^2\)

Notwithstanding the complex criss-cross of flows, the South to North movement in the region is apparent, and bears witness to the clear imbalance between the Northern side’s development and the situation on the Southern side.\(^3\) MENA countries have a per capita GDP four times lower than those of the Mediterranean nations of the EU. Such a situation alerts us to the importance of acting upon the development of those societies, even though for now strategies such as the Euro-Mediterranean one have failed to have a significant effect.\(^4\)

In that regard, the countries of the Maghreb, which are the main senders of emigration, consider this to be an opportunity: it reduces pressure on the labour market, is a significant foreign currency generator and facilitates professional training. The continuing importance of immigrants’ remittances is undoubted: during the 1995-2000 period net transfers by Moroccan and Tunisian emigrant workers amounted to 60% of the balance of payments deficit\(^5\) and to 6.3% of GDP in Morocco’s case, 2.3% in Algeria’s and 4.2% in Tunisia’s. Despite these opportunities, the impact of these factors is diffused as in a large number of cases remittances are not an element in investment and consequently their productivity is only token.\(^6\)

Closely tied into this reality, a reading of the demographics ceases to be cause for alarm and becomes a window of opportunity, tempered by significant questions. Without doubt, the simultaneous drop in active populations in the North, which are subject to ever-increasing ageing, in tandem with the significance of the South’s active population, brings into focus the opportunity for complementary action between the two shores.\(^7\) Most recently, labour market demands affect skilled sectors; information technology, health and agribusiness. Of particular relevance is the case of the agricultural market, causing Southern European nations to develop measures allowing the employment of immigrant workers, to which end bilateral agreements have been signed with Morocco and Eastern countries.\(^8\) Nonetheless this demand for temporary labour has no effect on the continuing flow of immigration due to the reintegration of families, which persistently increases.

---

The idea of attributing to European migration policies an openness which facilitates temporary and regular movements, within a flexible and dynamic perspective, opens up a debate of broad-ranging interest. As evidence of this, following deliberations by the European Parliament9 on the need to establish a flexible visa system, the European Commission adopted in September 2003 the proposals governing the uniformity of entry visa formats, as well as that for work permits for third country citizens.

More recent trends point to a growing propensity for flows in a sphere which is touched by human tragedy. The situation, far from improving, has left a significantly dramatic balance in the last period. During the May 2002 – May 2003 period, the entry points to the EU – the Straits of Gibraltar, the Canary Islands (Fuerteventura and Lanzarote), and the island of Lampedusa (Sicily) – witnessed an increasing number of deaths. During 2003, arrests of immigrants trying to enter via the Straits of Gibraltar and the Canary Islands increased by 9% relative to 2002, reaching close to 90,000 detentions.

In this regard, a relevant factor in this latest period is the presence of immigrants in countries already known as «transitional». Such a case is the Maghreb, which has experienced a notable rise in its transit population destined for Europe. As a result of this situation, control requirements grow, as do consequently the demands for management within the transit country itself. Countries such as Morocco have recently developed legislation at the start of 200310 relating to foreign nationals to regulate the growing immigration arriving in that country. Simultaneously in this period, the concern for management of those flows has translated into joint initiatives between countries to the North and South of the Mediterranean basin. Thus a notable intergovernmental initiative was put in place, the First interministerial conference on migration in the Western Mediterranean, Tunis October 2002 (5+5 Dialogue)11 setting out a framework for dialogue and regional cooperation between the Mahgreb and Southern Europe. This initiative, a focal point for priorities of the Southern and Northern Mediterranean in relation to migration in the Western Mediterranean, with its continuity assured in 2003 in Rabat, highlights especially the security aspect. Also prominent in the Mediterranean environment is a multilateral initiative to establish the main points of agreement surrounding Mediterranean transitory migration that brought together 18 European and five MENA countries, as well as the European Commission, the Arab League and UNHCR,12 whose first meeting took place in June 2003.

Similarly, illegal immigration in the Mediterranean has been on the agenda of EU countries, as for instance in bilateral Franco-Spanish relations, where in October 2003 their Ministers of the Interior agreed to make common cause in the demands on the EU concerning the costs of border controls. But the definitive framework within which immigration policies are circumscribed is that of the European framework itself. During this period, the development of a multiplicity of initiatives can be seen which clearly highlight the aspects of control and security. The Seville Council of 2002 was central to short-term proposals relating above all to the fight against illegal immigration. Subsequently the Thessaloniki Council of Europe in 2003 will lead to a return towards the communitarian logic of Tampere, whilst largely incorporating the control proposals on migration to be developed at a common level this time.

Within the strictly Euro-Mediterranean dimension, the Crete mid-term conference of May 2003 which brought together the countries of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, fully recognised the Valencia Action Plan which has a prominently security-led focus.13 Subsequently, at the Naples Euro-Mediterranean Conference of December 2003 the requirement is maintained to approach migration and human flows from the perspective of balancing security measures with those designed to manage migratory movements.14

Also integrated within this framework is the return policy for illegal immigration, from which it is worth highlighting that at the Seville Council a proposal was brought forward to grant aid conditional on the readmission of immigrants and removed asylum seekers. This proposal will be halted in the case of the Euro-Mediterranean countries, since those readmission terms cannot be applied by virtue of the Partnership’s social and cultural package. In this latter case, it should be noted that the Valencia Plan also foresees promoting bilateral agreements for the admission of people among EU countries and Mediterranean partners, as well as between Partnership members and source (Sub-Saharan) countries in order to repatriate those whose status is irregular.

And while, by that token, the instruments governing relations between Europe and its Southern neighbours, largely through the Euro-Mediterranean project, are open to an interpretation that, as it has been noted, is eminently economic and security-related, scant consideration has been given to the human factor and mobility as a means

---


10 Loi n° 02-03 relative à l’entrée et au séjour des étrangers au Maroc, à l’émigration et à l’immigration irrégulière ».

11 Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Mauritania, Tunisia, Spain, Portugal, Italy, France and Malta. Aubarell, G. (2003), «Relanzamiento del Diálogo 5+5: por un plan de acción» in Afkar/Ideas, nº 1.

12 Meeting held in Alexandria in June 2003, under coordination of the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD).


of wealth generation, except in the context of remittances. It is possible to state that the greatest unresolved issue in this dossier is the integration of immigration policies into foreign relations. Proof of this is found in the action plans that, since 1999, integrate a global policy for cooperation between the EU and third countries, among which Morocco is, significantly, the only Mediterranean country. And one of the changes through which this much-needed turn of the screw to our Mediterranean migration relationships can be detected is the expectation for change in the migratory geography born from the forthcoming enlargement which will become effective in 2004. Studies carried out in recent months, far from pointing to a potential competition from new flows originating from Eastern Europe vis-à-vis those from the South attribute a significant value to the potential for these new EU members as future hosts for migrants, as occurred recently with Mediterranean Europe. This new situation ranks flows from Turkey in first place, followed by Eastern EU nations, the Balkans, and by Southern Mediterranean countries, with a foreseeable rise in irregular flows. The strategic paper on Wider Europe is highly indicative in this regard, since in this latter framework the debate is centred on how the European project should balance the long-term freedom of movement foreseen by Wider Europe with the current reality combining robust border controls with the need for workforce circulation. Within the Mediterranean context of this project, the President of the European Commission himself expounded the need to find new tools to manage the «immigration problem» and highlighted the need to link immigration with the relationship among cultures as a fundamental value of European citizenship. The European Parliament’s proposal at the end of 2003 expanded on how the proposal for freedom of movement by people put forward by Wider Europe must take into account the diversity and specificity of the countries involved and, in this sense, such a strategy towards neighbouring countries should give rise to particular policies aimed at facilitating the circulation of people.

Main Multilateral Meetings on Immigration Policies in the Mediterranean

Justice and Home Affairs Council, Seville, June 2002
At the Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting held in Seville during the Spanish presidency of the Council of the European Union, an action plan was reached on a package of measures geared to regulating immigration.
Council conclusions:

Interministerial Conference on Migration in the Western Mediterranean (5+5 Dialogue), Tunisia, October 2002
The first interministerial Conference on Migration in the Western Mediterranean (Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Mauritania, Tunisia, Spain, Portugal, Italy, France and Malta) proposed a framework for regional cooperation and dialogue between the Maghreb and Europe. The conference concluded in October 2003 in Rabat, where emphasis was placed on the aspect of security in dialogue on migration.
Tunisia conference:

Rabat conference:

Euro-Mediterranean Mid-Term Meeting of Foreign Ministers, Crete, May 2003
It was acknowledged that the València action plan established a framework for regional activity as regards justice, the fight against drug trafficking, crime and terrorism, and the social integration of immigrants, migration and the movement of people.
Valencia Action Plan:

European Council, Thessaloniki, June 2003
In the European Constitution project presented at the Thessaloniki summit, decisions on immigration became, for the first time, subject to the control of European institutions and to approval by qualified majority.
European Council, Thessaloniki, June 2003
It was acknowledged that the Valencia action plan established a framework for regional activity as regards justice, the fight against drug trafficking, crime and terrorism, and the social integration of immigrants, migration and the movement of people.

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and to the Council in view of the European Council of Thessaloniki:

Euro-Mediterranean Foreign Ministers, Naples, December 2003
The Euromediterranean conference in Naples confirmed the need to deal with migration and human movements on the basis of a balance between security measures and measures geared to managing migratory flows.

Euromed Civil Forum, Naples, December 2003
The ECF in Naples informed the governments of the countries of the Partnership of the need to cease viewing migration as a security problem and urged that it be considered as a resource and a cultural asset for the development of the region.
http://forumcivile.euromedi.org/FINALEN.htm

18 Held last 17th May 2003 in Bologna a conference «Building a Euro-Mediterranean area» as part of the 22nd «Giornate dell’osservanza».