

Dossier: An Unexpected Party Crasher: Rethinking Euro-Mediterranean Relations in Corona Times, 25 Years after the Barcelona Process

A Renewed Migration Contract Post-Covid: What Next for Migration Governance in the Mediterranean?

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2020 has seen not only a fundamental disruption to mobility and migration due to Covid-19, but also the acceleration of ongoing processes and pushing forward with policy pathways that existed before the pandemic in the Euromed region.

The Broader Migration and Policy Context: Between Vision and Reality

The 1995 Barcelona Process set out to establish a regional zone of prosperity in which peace, stability and economic development are advanced through close cooperation as part of a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. When the global COVID-19 pandemic rapidly spread in early 2020, the Euromed region was far from the image originally envisaged of an environment of shared prosperity, characterized by the free flow of goods, services and ideas and legal mobility. Instead, relations and governance have been driven by prevailing “*narratives of control, security, negative and conflict-based views of migration*” (Zapata-Barrero, 2020). This context, together with the policy responses during the COVID-19 crisis, have influenced the impact on migrants in the Euromed space and provide a background to understand lessons learned for governing migration and mobility.

The idea of comprehensive cooperation on migration has only been gradually introduced into the Euromed partnership. The 1995 Barcelona Declaration acknowledged the role that migration plays in the relations of Euromed countries, but focused on limiting

migration pressures and reducing irregular migration while protecting migrants' rights. Following the EU Member States' security concerns over migratory developments, the 10th anniversary of the Barcelona Process Summit added a fourth chapter on “Migration, Social Integration, Justice and Security” with the aim to deepen cooperation on these issues in 2005. Only in 2007 was the agenda expanded during the first Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Meeting on Migration under the 2007 Portuguese EU Presidency, which agreed to work towards promoting *people-to-people exchanges and legal migration opportunities within the Euro-Mediterranean region*. Ambitions on legal mobility were confirmed by the Heads of State and Government, who in their Joint Declaration of the 2008 Paris Summit underlined a commitment to facilitate the legal movement of individuals alongside reducing irregular movement as part of a more comprehensive, balanced and integrated approach.

In practice however, migration control gained the upper hand and emerged as a central feature of EU foreign policy towards its southern neighbours. Reducing irregular migration flows and ensuring the speedy return of those without the right to stay has been a central theme for EU policy-making and its strategic outlook in the region for decades. The 09/11 terrorist attacks, the Arab Spring of 2010/11 and the so-termed “Migration Crisis” of 2015/2016 consolidated these objectives largely reinstating prior positions and interests framing migration within the realm of security. The EU response has always taken a similar line of offering neighbouring countries bilateral deals with financial incentives to control migration or to take back migrants. Humanitarian cooperation in supporting countries to host migrants has also at times been framed as a way to reduce onward migration.

While the EU has, during the past decade, reiterated commitments to facilitate regional legal mobility, e.g. as part of its approach to the Arab Spring offering money, markets and mobility (3Ms), or the strategies outlined in the Communications “A dialogue for migration, mobility and security with the southern Mediterranean countries (2011)” and “Supporting closer cooperation and regional integration in the Maghreb: Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia (2012),” little success can be noted beyond bilateral relations of EU Member States with North African countries. Regular flows of migrants from North Africa in fact declined between 2008 and 2016. Natale et al. (2018) point out: “Over this period, the already small number of residence permits issued to Libyans dropped by 72%, while those issued to Moroccans and Egyptians dropped by 52% and 15% respectively.” EU funding for migration governance in the Mediterranean has in the past also not put a strong focus on programmes explicitly fostering legal mobility beyond student mobility.

Rather than building a region of joint mobility management, cooperation since the launch of the Euromed partnership culminated in various agreements between the EU or its Member States and Mediterranean countries

From the perspective of southern and eastern Mediterranean countries, migration in general has received less political salience, with interests being geared towards providing mobility options to its populations, while managing increasing immigration and transit. North African countries have, in general, been wary about the EU’s approach to externalize migration governance, and cooperation efforts have thus not always been smooth. Yet, an interest in cooperation on security questions, as well as the fact that cooperation on migration could serve a variety of other interests, led to a certain openness to cooperate with the EU and its Member States on migration management. Among countries of the Mediter-

anean outside the EU, there has been less of a spirit of a regional partnership given the diverse migration realities, geopolitical tensions as well as existing instabilities.

As a result, rather than building a region of joint mobility management, cooperation since the launch of the Euromed partnership culminated in various agreements between the EU or its Member States and Mediterranean countries. In essence, the aim of these is to put in place containment measures in exchange for various incentives. Examples include the EU-Turkey deal, deals between Italy, Malta and Libya, cooperation between Morocco and Spain, an EU-Tunisia Mobility Partnership as well as EU Migration Compact agreements with Jordan and Lebanon to name but a few. These agreements, as well as coordination efforts as part of regional fora ranging from the Euromed Migration Partnership, 5+5 Dialogue for the Western Mediterranean, to the Rabat Process have fostered exchange and had some success in efforts to counter migrant smuggling. The EU has often measured the functioning of such cooperation by whether they keep irregular migrants at bay. Although developments have fluctuated and vary on different routes, irregular migration to the EU has decreased significantly since 2015. Increases in 2019 on the eastern Mediterranean route has been ascribed to Turkey’s increasingly lax stance in the context of a failing EU-Turkey deal. As a consequence, the Mediterranean has become more deadly and the smuggling business has become professionalized over time, with the United Nations pointing to the Mediterranean as one of the deadliest crossings in the world today.

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mobility and Migrants in the Mediterranean

Against this background, the border closures implemented as part of the COVID-19 response had a clear and immediate effect on migration and mobility in the Euromed region. Not only have many migrant workers lost jobs or found themselves stranded, but also irregular crossings on the Mediterranean routes have come to a temporary halt. However, rather than disrupting and changing policy approaches to migration governance, the pandemic has accelerated existing trends of migration securitization and pro-

vided an even stronger impetus for the EU to seek solutions in externalizing irregular migration governance with neighbouring countries. The pandemic has, however, also revealed openings for a more rights-based agenda for migrants and a possible new impetus for renewed partnerships in the Euromed in the future.

The effects of lockdown measures hit **migrant workers** in the Mediterranean particularly hard. In Tunisia, according to the IOM, the lockdown led to a majority of migrants losing their jobs and having to rely on assistance. More than half of migrant respondents surveyed by the Mixed Migration Secretariat in Libya and Tunisia noted that they had lost income because of COVID-19 restrictions (approx. 51% and 60% respectively). Egyptian migrant workers in Jordan, could not reach their places of work, earn money or send remittances due to the strict lockdown, neither were they able to return to Egypt. Many Syrian informal migrant workers in Jordan slid into even more precarious situations. A similar picture emerged in Morocco as well as Turkey, where the situation of migrant minorities worsened significantly due to COVID-19 measures. Other migrants were stuck at European destinations due to sudden border closures: About 7,000 Moroccans in Spain, who had arrived early in the year for the strawberry picking season, had to wait for weeks without pay before they were able to return to their homeland.

Mobility also stopped along the Euromed's deadly irregular migration routes. Although this did not last long, thereby demonstrating the resolve of migrants to reach envisaged destinations. Shortly before the border restrictions started to take effect in mid-March 2020, the number of sea crossings had already started to decrease from previous months, other than a spike on the central Mediterranean route in January 2020 and the high numbers on the eastern route due to Turkey opening its borders in February. Yet, compared to the previous year, especially through the central Mediterranean route, they stood at a high: Frontex noted an increase of total detected illegal border crossings on Europe's main migratory routes in the first quarter by 26% compared to the same period in 2019. In January 2020, irregular migrants crossing the central Mediterranean had more than doubled as compared with December 2019, and recorded a six-fold rise

compared to January 2019 (Frontex, 2020a). While there are always monthly variations, detected irregular crossings reduced significantly on all three routes from February to March 2020, and especially from mid-March onward, showing the effect of border closures and lockdowns: a drop of 38% along the eastern Mediterranean route due to Turkey's travel restrictions between its own provinces, 88% on the central Mediterranean route and 66% on the western Mediterranean route. In April, the numbers further fell by 85% to become the lowest total since the Frontex data collection had started in 2009 (Frontex, 2020b). However, this low, initially brought about by the pandemic, did not have a lasting effect. With the easing of some COVID-19 measures and restrictions, irregular migration slowly picked up again in May. During July, the numbers of irregular migrants arriving in Italy increased, putting more strain on reception centres. Irregular journeys picked up, despite some continuing restrictions and the presence of fewer search and rescue vessels.

The pandemic has accelerated existing trends of migration securitization and provided an even stronger impetus for the EU to seek solutions in externalizing irregular migration governance with neighbouring countries

The policy responses during the pandemic may well have increased the risks for migrants taking the journey. Search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean have further reduced due to COVID-19 – a trend that had already started in 2017 with restrictions and political condemnations against private and NGO rescue ships. The new EU naval mission IRINI is not actively engaging in search activities, yet has a mandate to train Libyan coastguards. Italy, Malta and Libya closed their ports to disembarkation noting that they can no longer be considered “safe” during the pandemic. As a consequence, ships with rescued migrants were not able to land and have repeatedly been left stranded for days and weeks,

while distress calls experienced delayed responses. This demonstrates that the EU is still far from reaching an agreement on the envisaged swift and predictable disembarkation mechanisms backed up by fair responsibility sharing as put forward in the 2019 Malta Declaration. Sea crossings, therefore, seem to have become more dangerous, while the ability to detect migrants in distress has diminished, as has the knowledge about “hidden shipwrecks” and the possibility of collecting data that could adequately portray the situation (IOM, 2020).

Smuggling networks, while disrupted in the short term, have quickly adapted and have started to profit from the situation. The risk of contagion on route or at destination has not discouraged migrants from trying to reach their envisaged destination. The installed border measures have enabled smugglers to demand higher prices and premiums to overcome heightened risks during the pandemic, as pointed out by Interpol. However, there are also indications that the fear of the pandemic spreading has led communities usually profiting from human smuggling activities, to call for greater efforts to combat such activities, as has been reported in Libya. In Algeria, smugglers themselves have reduced operations so as not to further fuel contagion of the virus in Algeria (Bird, 2020: p.8).

Fears of witnessing renewed smuggling activity and future increases in irregular migration and the resulting need to counter such developments have been one of the dominant features of the EU narrative since the pandemic

In the longer term, the impacts of COVID-19 are projected to further worsen socioeconomic conditions in African and Middle Eastern Mediterranean countries. This will also likely increase reasons and determinations to migrate in the Euromed space. Smugglers will therefore continue to find opportunities to capitalize on organizing irregular migration, which some fear will increase once the restrictions are further lifted.

The pandemic has led to a stronger resolve in pursuing existing approaches that link security and migration in the Euromed. Fears of witnessing renewed smuggling activity and future increases in irregular migration and the resulting need to counter such developments have been one of the dominant features of the EU narrative since the pandemic. EU Commissioner Johansson has repeatedly noted the need to cooperate more strongly to combat the increase in smuggling activities with partner countries. It is not surprising that a swift meeting between the EU, some of its Member States and North African countries (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia), took place in July 2020, during which interior ministers reiterated commitments to jointly intensify efforts against people smuggling as part of agreements that are to be further specified bilaterally between the EU and each of the countries.

What Lessons Have Been Learnt from the Pandemic for a Renewed Partnership

While the pandemic has also revealed further cleavages in an already polarized discussion and has exacerbated some of the risk factors that are driving the Union further away from strong regional cooperation, some of the lessons provide opportunities to push forward positive policy developments and migration narratives that can help the establishment of a renewed mobility contract in the Euromed.

One of the key lessons learned during the pandemic is that many economies of the Euromed region rely on migrant workers. They perform work in key occupations and support the economy whether in formal or informal jobs. In the EU, the crisis has revealed what migration researchers had been pointing out for some time: that certain segments of the labour market need a predictable supply of workers urgently, including in the care, health and agricultural sectors. Governments, therefore, have had to balance health measures with economic interests, opening legal pathways for migration. A number of countries aimed to ensure that key workers are either able to overcome travel barriers, e.g. through quarantining (e.g. Germany), can continue working legally in key sectors (e.g. regularizations in Italy, extensions of permits in Spain and Portugal), or at the least do not have to pay fines for violating visa and work permit

regulations (e.g. Jordan). Moreover, several countries have pushed for expedited recognition of foreign qualifications, which provides opportunities to improve such processes more permanently in the future. This acknowledgement of the important role of migration shows that in the future more workable systems of labour migration will need to be found, which are not only prepared for dealing with possible crisis situations, but which also facilitate safe and orderly migration and working conditions during regular times too. In the future there will likely be a renewed interest among countries in the Euromed to find partners with whom they can strengthen bilateral ties on labour migration.

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A related lesson concerns the need for improving the conditions under which migrants live and work. While this should be a goal in itself, during the pandemic conditions have come under the spotlight as they exacerbate risks of further contagion of the virus. In some cases there has thus been a sudden self-interest to improve migrant protection and extend integration measures and services in the context of containing the pandemic. NGOs in some North African countries have pointed out that they are finding unlikely allies in supporting migrants' access to services and improved conditions. For refugees and asylum seekers in refugee camps and detention centres, situations are still desperate – especially since the Greek government has further extended lockdowns in its camps so as to limit the spread of the virus in overcrowded areas. Even before the pandemic, there had been many calls to improve living conditions and reduce overcrowding. A re-think of how migrant reception is organized has become even more pressing.

These more positive developments, which show an openness to improve the situation of migrants, are countered by an all too familiar lesson – that health and economic crises often result in the need to find scapegoats for deteriorating situations – and the blame often falls on migrants. There has been an increase in xenophobia and discrimination, with some politicians exploiting existing fears to mobilize against migration. It may well be that stigma around human mobility will increase. Recent cases of migrants crossing the Mediterranean being tested positive or leaving their quarantine stations in Italy too early is fuel to the fire. Such migrants, however, do not pose an increased health risk if migration is properly managed and if health precautions are in place.

A lesson for the EU has been that, in a context of disruption and volatility as well as insecurity, which is present in its neighbourhood and is likely to be exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic, it is essential to develop functioning systems for managing mixed migration and refugee inflows. This is a lesson that should have been learned already during the 2015 “migration crisis.” Yet, in the absence of an internal agreement on responsibility sharing in the Common European Asylum System and on how to organize reception, the EU is again turning outward first. Its internal mechanisms still lag behind and have also become a problem for migration management in the Euromed. It is not yet clear whether the upcoming EU Migration Pact can overcome existing deadlocks, especially as the COVID-19 context has hardened positions. If not, the EU will not only remain in an ad-hoc crisis mode, but will also find it more difficult to engage in a constructive discussion with Mediterranean partners on comprehensive migration governance, given that predictability and trust are cornerstones of a good partnership.

Following the COVID-19 Crisis: What Is the Way forward for Migration Governance in the Euromed?

The socioeconomic and migration situation in what has been framed as the Euro-Mediterranean region has been complex. The past has shown that across the states that form part of the Union for the Mediterranean, migration contexts differ and views have

become polarized, while perceptions about migration vary. Joint objectives on migration or a true regional partnership have been absent and Euro-Mediterranean relations have been strained and characterized by high levels of fatigue concerning geopolitical developments.

In this context can the Euro-Mediterranean partnership devise a new contract for mobility and migration that can revitalize the vision for the region formulated in Barcelona 25 years ago? A future contract will have to deal with the challenging aspects of Euromed migration, but at the same time overcome the prevailing negative image, which defines migration as a problem, and open a more positive and proactive narrative of Mediterranean migration; one that actually puts flows and exchanges of people as a central part of achieving the vision of peace and prosperity. The discussions around “essential workers” could provide an impetus for such a development.

A key question is also what unifies the diverse regions in terms of migration opportunities and challenges, as well as how a renewed cooperation agenda complements and relates to other processes, such as the Europe-Africa Partnership, the discussions between the EU and the Arab League or the many bilateral and sub-regional constellations that have formed.

While the agenda will need to tackle migration in a comprehensive way, responding to all the above highlighted aspects both on paper and in practice, the following four elements could give a necessary push to revitalize a new mobility contract in the Mediterranean.

First, while COVID-19 has accelerated existing approaches of securing borders and reducing irregular migration – a feature that will likely continue – better governance of labour mobility across the region will need to be repeatedly highlighted. The pandemic may be able to give a push to more effectively manage restrictions on mobility and devise mechanisms to govern labour mobility in a predictable way, connecting labour markets and educational opportunities, while integrating the need for health standards (including screenings) across the region. This will include more in-depth discussions on conditions, modalities of work and protection, as well as other provisions in times of crisis or travel restrictions. The result could be a set of standardized regional arrange-

ments and standards, as well as deeper bilateral or sub-regional cooperation.

Second, conceptualizing partnerships must ensure coherence and involve a “wider Mediterranean.” Migration routes are connected to countries and communities beyond those of the Euromed space, given the transitory routes that pass through it. This means that connecting stability and migration governance in a wider region, e.g. by bridging to Sub-Saharan African nations, should form part of the picture. Governments of North African states, including Egypt and Morocco, have formed their political approach to migration also in response to relationship building with other African countries. The partnership will thus need to seek coherence with such existing relations.

Migration dynamics are also tied to wider geopolitical ambitions and tensions. It will thus require creativity, leadership, courage and a bold vision to devise a new mobility contract across the region

Third, the decentralized levels should be better integrated and existing city-to-city cooperation in the Euromed space further built upon. Much of the effort to govern migration is local, yet due to the placing of migration governance under the security agenda, discussions between the EU and Mediterranean partners operate predominantly at state level. More support and acknowledgement of the city-level as part of a new contract can help to overcome a more negative migration, framing Mediterranean cities as key actors in building up a regional spirit that connects people. Initiatives such as the MC2MC (City-to-City Migration) Project or the Mayoral Forum on Human Mobility, Migration and Development can provide lessons to learn from and good practices. Fourth, many efforts will still need to be made in the areas of integration, protection and reception of migrants in a context of post-Covid economic recovery. This will require adhering to an inclusive spirit of treating migrants and host communities jointly if possible. Given that both migrants and host com-

munities are currently negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and are vulnerable as communities, favouring a particular group can easily lead to greater backlash. The EU and its Member States have agreed to provide additional financial support to migrant hosting countries as part of its Team Europe response. Yet, given Northern African countries' sensitivities and perceptions regarding the EU's outsourcing of its migration responsibilities, support in the area of protection and integration will need to be designed in a particularly sensitive and careful manner.

So far, 2020 has been a disruptive year. The wider socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, as well as the effects it has had on migration dynamics, are still being discovered. Moving forward, migration governance in the Euromed space will need to learn quickly from these developments and be adaptive. To be fit for a long-term future partnership that stays true to its original values, it will need to go beyond the all-too-familiar securitized migration approaches. Migration dynamics are, however, also tied to wider geopolitical ambitions and tensions. It will thus require creativity, leadership, courage and a bold vision to devise a new mobility contract across the region that improves on the current situation. In this regard, the opportunity provided by the COVID-19 crisis should not be wasted.

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