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# Migrants and Refugees in the Mediterranean in Times of Pandemic: Socially Distant?

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2020 has been a peculiar year for European Union (EU) migration policies. The closure of EU external borders and the suspension of asylum applications throughout Europe has turned Fortress Europe into a reality. The various states of emergency adopted in the EU have constrained the freedom of movement inside the EU. Social distancing has halted search and rescue operations and accelerated the retreat of civil society and public bodies from the Mediterranean. But the pandemic has not stopped sea border crossings and has increased the vulnerability of migrants and asylum-seekers both in Europe and in the southern Mediterranean. The temporary suspension of the processing of asylum applications, resettlement and relocation is an additional challenge in times of increased vulnerability of migrants in the region.

## **Social Distancing Accelerates the Retreat of Civil Society and Public Bodies**

Existing restrictive trends vis-à-vis freedom of movement and migrants have been reinforced in Europe, with an initial uncoordinated succession of lockdowns and immediate consequences for migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean. First, freedom of movement has been halted in the EU for its citizens but also for refugees and migrants waiting in the southern EU ports of Malta, Greece and Italy. Then, social distancing measures have nega-

tively impacted search and rescue operations as well as disembarkation. After years of disputes amongst EU Member States over who should be responsible for disembarking migrants and processing asylum-applications, Covid-19 has brought a simple solution: the halt to search and rescue operations, at least temporarily. Already deserted by civil society, only a few boats have dared to go and rescue migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. The *Alan Kurdi*, was the only NGO boat run by Sea-Eye and operating close to the Libyan coast in April 2020. Besides the challenge of organizing medical equipment on board, the crew was unable to find a safe place to disembark migrants, leading to a diplomatic row between the German and Italian authorities. The latter had blocked the ship in the port of Palermo arguing that the boat presented “serious safety deficiencies.”

Social distancing has halted sea rescue operations in the Mediterranean and accelerated the retreat of civil society and public bodies. Instead, resources of NGOs working in the Mediterranean, such as *Médecin Sans Frontières* have been transferred to support southern European hospitals. Similarly, public bodies working in the Mediterranean region such as UNHCR have also reduced their staff presence due to the difficult working conditions. This UN agency has suspended some of its activities in Libya, where the civil conflict has undergone another tipping point, and announced in April 2020 that “it would suspend some activities in Libya and stop making visits to detention centers until staff are given personal protective equipment. Phone counselling and outreach to refugee community leaders will increase” (Tondo, 2020). Similarly, in Morocco UNHCR conducts its work of protection interviews, counselling and psychological support remotely (UNHCR, 2020b).

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### **Social Distancing Does Not Stop Mediterranean Sea Crossings**

Social distancing has however not halted the hopes of many sub-Saharan and North African migrants of reaching Europe. In April 2020, the number of crossings had almost doubled compared to the same period in 2019. According to the IOM, 1,132 people crossed from North Africa to Italy and Malta, compared to 498 in 2019 during the same month (IOM, 2020). In Tunisia, crossings towards Europe between May and June 2020 have been four times higher than in 2019 during the same period. The flow of migrants is likely to continue in light of the looming economic recession that southern Mediterranean economies will face. Tourism prospects in Tunisia and Morocco are rather low for the summer of 2020. In Tunisia, the pandemic has revealed the depth of the structural issue of corruption when it comes to food shortages. Combined with the lack of employment prospects, the main trade union UGTT has called for a general strike, and women in Tataouine were demonstrating in June 2020 to denounce corruption and the lack of employment. Weak asylum and migration systems in the region, along with the ongoing and worsening Libyan conflict, continue to be sources of instability for migrants and asylum seekers. Medeninne in the South of Tunisia has become a new hub for people fleeing either the conflict in Libya or just looking for better prospects in Europe. Some sub-Saharan migrants and asylum seekers also try to enter Tunisia via the port of Zarzis, leading the Tunisian navy to be more actively involved in rescue at sea. Sfax is another crossing point towards Italy, and in the Spring of 2020 several boats have had to be rescued by the Tunisian

navy, sometimes only to report deaths of migrants at sea (UNHCR, 2020a).

### **Increased Vulnerability of Migrants in Times of Pandemic**

The vulnerability of migrants and asylum seekers is on the rise in Europe and the Mediterranean. First because it increases discrimination and inequalities in access to basic resources, but also because in many countries, asylum applications, relocations and resettlement have been suspended.

Migrants and asylum seekers are populations likely to be increasingly discriminated against and excluded as the pandemic amplifies inequalities across the globe. Inequalities are stark with reports throughout Europe highlighting the fact that foreign-born people and ethnic minorities are more likely to die from Covid-19 than those born in Europe or who are white. In Norway, people born in Somalia “have infection rates more than 10 times above the national average” (Cookson and Milne, 2020). In France, the National Statistical Office found that in March and April 2020, the death rate of foreign-born people was more than twice that of French-born individuals (INSEE, 2020). The temporary suspension of administrative procedures also exposes migrants and asylum seekers to increased vulnerability. In Europe, the Covid-19 crisis has halted arrivals and suspended asylum applications. In France, the enforcement of the lockdown has led to the postponement of interviews with the OFPRA, the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons. In Portugal, migrants and asylum seekers have been granted permanent residency, albeit a temporary measure allowing them to be able to access health services.

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Processes of relocation, and resettlement have been halted temporarily by EU Member States, UNHCR

and the IOM (European Commission, 2020:15). Although practical guidance has been issued on how to implement relevant EU provisions in the area of asylum and return procedures and on resettlement in times of Covid-19, the cancellation of flights and the closure of the EU's external borders have meant that many refugees who were expecting to be resettled are now stuck at the EU's external borders. This has led illiberal regimes surrounding the EU to behave in even more unethical ways. NGOs have reported violence at the Greek-Turkish border in April 2020, as Turkey decided to open its borders with the EU in February 2020. Having adopted a national law suspending new asylum applications temporarily in March 2020, there were reports of hostility towards asylum seekers and refugees, including evidence that Greek border forces were involved. Similarly, abuses from Croatian border forces have been reported.

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### What Next?

A thorough rethink of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) is paramount, as the current pandemic tests the limit of EU solidarity. This challenge will be taken up by the Germany Presidency in the second half of 2020, which needs to find a compromise amongst EU Member States regarding the "New Pact on Migration and Asylum" introduced by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. Like for the recovery programme launched by the Commission in the spring of 2020, the pandemic offers new opportunities for reforming European solidarity. In order to force Visegrad countries to discuss solidarity mechanisms in the EU, a joint letter from the interior ministers of France, Spain, Italy and Germany calls for reform to be kept on the agenda and for the creation of "binding mechanisms for fair distribution" in the event of pressure within an EU Member

State. The ministers also called for "Search and Rescue Solidarity Mechanisms," which could involve processing asylum applications of people rescued at sea more rapidly. (Barigazzi, 2020). But like for the 2008 financial crisis, EU Mediterranean countries are again disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Spain, Greece and Italy are combining the incredible difficult tasks of being at the forefront of welcoming migrants and fighting the pandemic with health systems that have suffered from austerity measures. While some countries, like Greece, have been managing the crisis extremely well, they are likely to continue to face disproportionate pressures from the looming economic recession and increased challenges at their borders.

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Solidarity, therefore, must also extend beyond the EU's borders. In July 2020, a package of €80 million was adopted through the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa specifically to protect migrants and vulnerable groups in the region in times of Covid-19. Most noticeably, a €9.3-million programme targeting the delivery of protection services to vulnerable migrants and improving their access to healthcare was put in place for Tunisia (European Commission, 2020). Libya remains the biggest beneficiary of the package, targeted by programmes to the value of €455 million, "with the majority going towards the protection of migrants and refugees and community stabilization, alongside actions for border management" (*Ibid*). While some of the new measures include the provision of protective equipment for medical staff in Libya, as well as health assistance to migrants and vulnerable groups, a significant part of the programme, amounting to €30 million, has been earmarked for supporting the Libyan Coast Guard and Port Security for search and rescue capacities, as well as supporting the creation of the Libyan Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre.

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As well as being a first step, these measures are also temporary. Although social distancing has temporarily shifted discussions of European solidarity from the realm of migration to that of health, it has not stopped migrants from crossing the Mediterranean Sea to flee conflict and in the hope of better economic prospects. The pandemic offers a salutary pause to reflect on the essential role that migrants play in European economies, in the farming industry or in the health sector, as well as in the numerous lower paid jobs that are vital to our society. Similarly in the Mediterranean, there is little in the way of reflection on the crucial role migrants play in economies and societies. But who will dare to have the political audacity to shift migration narratives, especially in the Mediterranean?

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