in short

Between Crisis Management and Sustainability – An Interim Review of the EU's Migration and Refugee Policy

Since the beginning of the migration and refugee crisis, the EU has made considerable progress with short-term crisis management. The numbers of irregular migrants have significantly decreased, the administrative chaos is resolved and humanitarian emergencies are overcome. The EU is no longer in crisis mode. Yet, several areas – especially the Common European Asylum System – are still in need of improvement.

Migration and refuge are still pressing issues

The highest number of refugees worldwide was recorded in 2016. Today, more than 65 million people – nearly twice as many as 1997 – are in need of protection. People predominantly flee from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Sudan. The main receiving countries are located in the EU's immediate neighbourhood – most notably Turkey.

The impact of war, terror, forced displacement, hardship and lack of prospects in the Middle East was clearly felt in the EU even prior to 2015. Over the past few years, the number of irregular border crossings alone rose from 72,500 (2012) to 282,900 (2014) to 1.8 million (2015). In 2016, facilitated by the EU migration and refugee policy, the figure decreased to approx. 511,600 people. This trend continued during 2017: 201,300 irregular border crossings were recorded. The number of asylum applications developed in a similar way, but with some delays. Many of those who came were in need of protection: In 2016, over 700,000 people were granted asylum in the EU.

Despite the decline in irregular migration to the EU, the number of people in need of protection across the world remains high. The EU's support continues to be essential in finding solutions.

Significant progress – with room for improvement

The EU's external borders have been strengthened. The rapid expansion of the EU border agency Frontex into a European Border and Coast Guard, is a success. There are now more than 1,400 EU security officials in operation – alongside the over 100,000 national border guards. More-over a reserve of 1,500 EU border guards was formed. In addition to the financial and personnel increases, the competences of the EU border guards have been expanded. There are shortcomings, however: The coordination of return-operations with member states needs to be improved, and some member states still need to fulfil their commitments, especially with regard to the equipment. But in the long term a further developing of the Border and Coast Guard is indispensable. This would require higher funding. A total of approx. 2 per cent, provided in the upcoming EU's multi-annual financial framework would be necessary to live up to the task.

Hotspots ensure that irregular migration is stopped and secondary movement prevented. In 2015, the EU set up hotspots in Greece and Italy as reception and registration centres. Here national institutions cooperate closely with EU authorities. In a first step, the identification and registration of all incoming migrants is carried out. The second step enables migrants to apply for asylum. If protection is granted, the refugee leaves the hotspot. If an application is rejected, it can be legally disputed before voluntary repatriation or deportation. In practice, however, legal standards are often not complied with when it comes to conditions of admission, legal assistance or the duration of the proceedings. Urgent improvements are needed.

The EU-Turkey Agreement is good for all parties. Scarcely any agreement has been subject to as much criticism as the EU-Turkey Agreement dated 18 March 2016. However, both sides have benefited from cooperation in the refugee policy. Protection and living standards of refugees in Turkey have been improved and irregular and risky migration to the EU confined. But some things need to be changed. This includes the creation of channels for coordinating and implementing the agreement (for example via "ombudspersons"), and determining an admission quota for refugees from Turkey to the EU.

Long-term plans – patience, consensus and coordination are a must

Reform of the Common European Asylum System. The current asylum system requires greater solidarity and fairness as the standards still vary widely. Although important reforms have been passed, consensus is yet to be reached on the Dublin Regulation. Despite the fact that it is necessary to find a compromise acceptable to all member states, the future system will not be able to avoid a binding distribution of asylum seekers among all EU countries.

Migration partnerships – closer cooperation with Africa. The concept of migration partnerships is in the process of development. It is specifically targeted towards countries of origin in Africa. The partnerships aim at promoting positive developments in the countries of origin and transit, and thereby reduce migration pressures in Europe. This is to be achieved by joining new forces, refocusing EU policy as well as the provision of funds. The introduction of new legal migration paths which shall be advantageous for Europe, is part of this endeavour.

Time is ticking

Migration, forced and voluntary, continues to increase on a global scale. The measures adopted over the past few years gave the EU room for manoeuvre. It is imperative that this time is used to determine long-term reforms beyond short-term crisis management, to critically evaluate steps taken and improve them where necessary. The summit of the European Council in June 2018 should be used to achieve a breakthrough on difficult issues (above all the Dublin reform). In doing so, the EU will demonstrate the capacity to act in a central policy area before the European elections in 2019.

An in-depth analysis is provided by a Facts&Findings Paper