

EU-third countries cooperation in managing irregular migration

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Abstract: *The Arab Spring and the armed conflicts that followed in the MENA region led to unprecedented mixed migrant flows towards the EU. As a result, various measures to cope with irregular migration have been proposed and implemented both at the national and regional levels. This paper tries to analyse those of them that regard the relations between the EU and third countries bordering it. Special attention is paid to the agreements that involve the provision of financial assistance to third countries in return for stemming the flows of migrants. We argue that such a practice is not only controversial per se, but it does not lead to significant success in tackling irregular migration, as it has been already observed on several occasions. We therefore make some recommendations aimed at better addressing the issue of mixed migration management at the EU level.*

Keywords: *IRREGULAR MIGRATION, MIXED MIGRATION, EU MIGRATION MANAGEMENT, MIGRANT SMUGGLING*

1. Introduction

Armed conflict, human rights violations, poor economic situation and climate changes are some of the widespread reasons for millions of people to flee their countries of origin. Due to the better economic, social and security conditions, and the relative vicinity to unstable regions, it is not surprising that the European Union (EU) attracts a fair share of the mixed migration flows, including a large number of irregular migrants. Over the last decade, this has led to political, social and economic tension between and within the member states. In its intention to limit this phenomenon, the EU, and sometimes even single states, have reached some agreements for cooperation with third countries used as transit ones such as Turkey and Tunisia.

However, these deals have proved to be limited in bringing some positive changes, that is, in limiting significantly irregular migration. In fact, since the beginning they have been seen as controversial, mainly due to the fact that the member states committed to pay external actors, while some of the latter are known for human rights abuses and other non-democratic aspects of their ruling. In other words, the EU externalized migration controls through the agreements with third countries without much focusing on the way they perform in this respect. As generally externalization depends mainly on the countries of origin and transit ones' cooperation, those are pushed and incentivized to follow specific legislative and policy measures [1, p. 2]. As a result, this role has been used by the same third countries as a tool for pressure on the EU, through which to obtain financial resources and or other type of benefits [2, p. 2]. In order to shed more light on this issue, we focus on two agreements involving the EU, those with Turkey and Tunisia respectively, as they are more comprehensive and the mixed migration through both countries have a particular effect on the political and economic life in the EU.

At the same time, the economic, political and security conditions in some third countries, especially in border regions, create a context where smuggling activities thrive. Being a very profitable activity, migrant smuggling attracts both organized crime groups and single individuals to become part of the problem. In fact, in some cases once can suggest that there has been a direct relationship between migrant smuggling and other smuggling activities over the years.

2. EU-Turkey Statement and Action Plan

As a direct response to the armed conflicts in the MENA region and the increased mixed migration flows to the EU, the latter has been trying to impose some measures to limit the number of newcomers. However, the measures implemented so far vary across the member states and typically include diplomatic efforts and some firmer policies. Since many of those trying to reach the EU, have been using transit countries close to the member states' borders, the main focus of the EU has moved to stopping irregular migration there, that is, before reaching the member states.

In this line of thought, in 2015, the EU started a series of meetings with Turkey dedicated to fostering the relations between the two parties in terms of cooperation in the field of migration. On 29 November 2015, the so-called EU-Turkey joint action plan was activated, with two main points in particular – to support the Syrians under temporary protection and their Turkish hosting communities, as well as to strengthen the common efforts in preventing irregular migration. The latter included various measures such as upgrading border surveillance equipment and increasing patrols activity through stepping up collaboration with the member states, especially with Bulgaria and Greece [3], just to name a few. In financial terms, the EU committed to provide necessary resources through the EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis, and additional funds shortly after that, this time through the Facility for Refugees in Turkey.

Given the increasing migration pressure on the member states, on 18 March 2016 the EU and Turkey reached another agreement, formally named EU-Turkey Statement and Action Plan, aimed at stopping irregular migration via the Turkish territory, by '*breaking the business model of the smugglers and offering migrants an alternative to putting their lives at risk*' [4]. Nine action points were set to be achieved in order to make the agreement work properly. As part of the deal, the EU started allocating three billion euro for refugees related projects in Turkey, and committed to provide another three billion euro by the end of 2018, again under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey. As a whole, since 2011, the EU has allocated around 10 billion euro to the Turkish state to support refugees and host communities there [5].

3. EU-Tunisia agreement

The EU has been assisting financially Tunisia in the field of migration, including by providing the necessary equipment, since 2011, when due to the change in the country's ruling regime political instability and worsening economic conditions paved the way Tunisia to become both a country of origin and transit of irregular migration. Several billions of euro have been provided to Tunisia as a financial assistance, mainly under the form of loans, for the 2011-2020 period, while at the same the main transit country for irregular migration from Africa to Europe was Libya. Changes in the political ties between the EU and Libya, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, however, have changed the panorama in the Mediterranean region, making of Tunisia the principal point of departure for irregular migrants.

Not surprisingly, the EU pushed for further cooperation with Tunisia in the field of migration and in July 2023, both parties signed the so-called Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic and global partnership. The deal was aimed at enhancing the socio-economic reforms in the African country as well as tackling the irregular migration towards the member states. Concerning the latter, the measures planned to be implemented in practice comprise promoting sustainable development in less developed areas in Tunisia, including improving employment and empowerment of their inhabitants [6]. An important feature of the agreement is that Tunisia will stick to securing its own borders only and will not be a

place for the settlement of irregular migrants. In financial terms, apart from the support to the Tunisian socio-economic development, the EU commits to provide sufficient funds for the necessary equipment, training and technical support for securing the country's borders as well [6]. The total amount of the whole aid package is approximately 1,1 billion euro, of which 105 million euro for addressing irregular migration. It is important to note that most of the financial aid (up to 900 million euro) will be provided as a loan and under meeting certain conditions related to another loan, this time from the International Monetary Fund.

Despite of the agreement, the irregular migrant arrivals from Tunisia to the Italian island Lampedusa largely surged in September, with almost 8000 people coming from North Africa in just two days (Ministro dell'Interno, 2023), which is more than the whole island's population. Following these events, on 22 September 2023, the European Commission announced some 127 million euro in support of the implementation of the MoU, about half of which for operational assistance in the field of migration [7].

4. Discussion

Against the background of increased mixed migration towards the EU and billions of euro spent under the form of financial support to third countries, taxpayers and politicians within the member states have expectedly started asking questions about the benefits of having the previously mentioned agreements. With regard to this, Fig. 1 below sheds some light on the most important feature of the agreements, that is, the number of arrivals to the one of the EU borders, in that case from Turkey to Bulgaria.

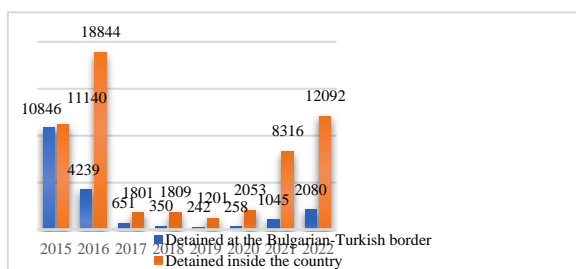


Fig. 1. Detained irregular migrants by the authorities of the Republic of Bulgaria

Source: Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Bulgaria

The data in Figure 1 suggest that the measures implemented by the EU to tackle irregular migration, more specifically the agreement with Turkey, have seemingly worked. However, if other circumstances are taken into account, for example the political changes in the US and some Western European countries in 2016-2017, as well as the restrictive travelling measures associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, then the agreements' outcomes can be interpreted in a different way. Certainly, this is more about the EU-Turkey deal, as the one with Tunisia was achieved in 2023.

In the case of the migrants arriving through Turkey, it should be noted that the relatively smaller number of irregular migrants detained both at the Bulgarian-Turkish border and on Bulgarian territory is mainly due to the lower migration levels to Bulgaria during this period. What is more, the statistics clearly shows that these, caught inside the country are much more than the people detained while crossing the border illegally, which suggests that there are some serious gaps in the protection of the state border, and thus, that of the EU as well.

As these agreements obviously do not reach their main goal, that is, to significantly limit the irregular border crossings, or they do that only temporarily when the EU does provide the promised financial support to third countries, some problems inevitably arise. One surely may suggest that if no agreement was put in place, then the number of irregular migrants in the EU would have been much larger. Yet, such agreements are not surprisingly seen as a tool that

makes the EU more dependent on external factors such as third countries. Concerning this, we should bear in mind that in Turkey alone there are currently more than 3.2 million Syrian refugees [8].

As for the EU-Tunisia agreement, the available data from the Italian Ministry of Interior indicates that between 1 January 2023 and 27 October 2023, 142384 migrants disembarked in Italy. This represents a crucial increase compared to the previous two whole years, when the number of arrivals was 82152 and 53189 respectively. What is more, in 2023, the citizens of Tunisia, already the main point of departure for migrants from Africa, reached 15537, third to Guinea and Cost of Ivory only [9]. According to some scholars, this increase in migrant arrivals to Italy is to a large extent due to the damage that the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have caused to the tourism sector in Tunisia and in Egypt over the last three years [10].

Given all this, Italy has been trying to secure its borders also at the bilateral level, and not only through the EU. The importance of Tunisia to Italy in terms of stopping irregular migration is evident also from the series of high-level visits to the North African country of the current Italian government, three of which were of the Italian Prime minister, all the more within less than two months between June and July 2023 [11].

Understandably, this type of deals have normally their critiques. In the case of the agreements with Tunisia and Turkey, however, they reach a higher level of controversy due the respective ruling in both countries, including human rights violations and strategic importance. Moreover, there is no guaranty that the agreements will be respected or that they will be a long-term solution to irregular migration. At the same time, they create conditions for the EU to further rely on external actors and possibly ignoring current and future human rights abuses against their citizens and migrants currently staying there.

Taking into consideration all the above-stated, it can be argued that most of the EU's action in the field of irregular migration indicate to be rather reactive than proactive ones. This, in turn, leads to clashes between the member states and with third countries as well over the possible measure to tackle this common challenge.

5. Relation of migrant smuggling to other criminal activities

Migrant smuggling, as a crime, has become one of the most profitable and desirable activities of the criminal circles globally. The reasons for this lie in the possibility of quick profits that the smugglers earn to get people across the border or through the territory of a given country combined with poor legislative measures and economic situation in some states. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that two of the principal smuggling routes - leading from East, North and West Africa to Europe and from South America to North America - generate for criminals about \$6.75 billion a year [12]. At the regional level, in 2015 alone, migrant smuggling business was estimated to be of between 3 and 6 billion euro [13]. Such profits, earned in a comparatively easy way, suggest that some certain organized criminal groups and individuals turn to this increasing in scope type of crime. For instance, the decrease in the illicit trade in tobacco products in Bulgaria coincided with the significant mixed migration inflows as can be seen in the figure below (Fig. 2).

As Fig. 2 reveals, the illicit trade in tobacco products as a percentage of the total consumption in Bulgaria has drastically fallen since 2015 onwards. Concerning this, one can suggest that some people involved in transborder criminal activities decided to divert to this new opportunity, given the possibility of quick and big profits. In other words, one of the potential reasons for the lack of effectiveness of the irregular migrant agreements implemented by the EU can be precisely the significant redirection of criminal networks and even individuals to this new highly profitable opportunity of migrant smuggling. In addition, Fig. 4 below

indicates more data that suggests that migrant smuggling has become of great interest to criminal networks and single smugglers.

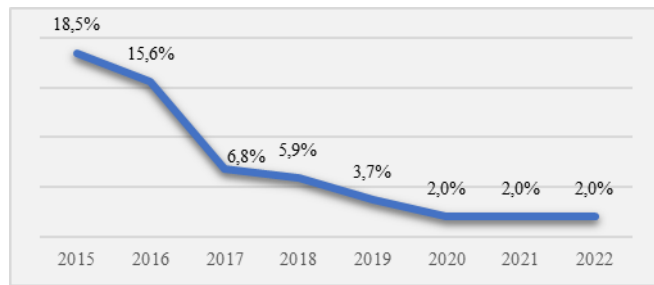


Fig. 2. Share of illicit tobacco market as a share of total consumption in Bulgaria

Source: KPMG, *Illicit cigarette consumption reports*

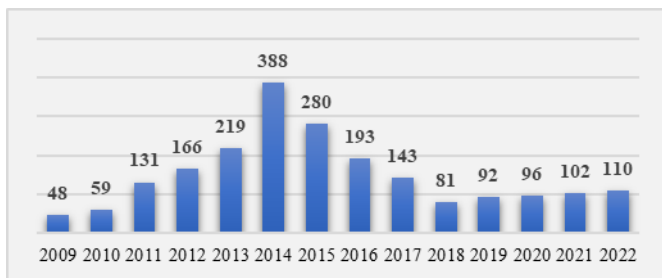


Fig. 4. Number of persons sentenced for migrant smuggling

Source: National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria

6. Conclusion

As evidenced in the previous sections, it can be argued that the approach based on diplomacy and cooperation with third countries, reflected in the agreements that the EU stipulated in response to the increased migration levels, have led to predominantly contradictory results. Apart from having a limited effect on reducing irregular migration, these agreements do not guarantee that the externalization of border control to third countries will improve respecting of migrants' human rights there. While this political decision may be seen as EU-centred, national problems within the bordering countries, including some member states, indicate that such agreements should take into consideration certain aspects of the national context as well. The opportunities that migrant smuggling provides to people from both third countries and some EU member states, are just one feature that should find its place in such agreements and general in the common approach in addressing irregular migration in the EU. Therefore, more studies of the nexus between migrant smuggling and other smuggling activities are needed, which would give a more detailed picture of the gaps of the EU-third countries agreements on managing irregular migration.

Acknowledgment

This work was financially supported by the UNWE R&D Programme (Research Grant No. R&D SR 16/2023)

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