



In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia a father carries his daughter to Gevgelija train station where they will register with the authorities before proceeding north towards Serbia. Like many others here, this family is from Syria. Flickr photo: Stephen Ryan/ IFRC

## Crisis and the European Union, Part Two: The Refugees

Jeremy Kinsman

*The European Union was born as the dream of pragmatic visionaries as a response to and bulwark against the manifest horror of organized evil. Its strengths were evident for decades before two successive calamities—the 2008 financial meltdown and the 2015 refugee crisis—exposed its vulnerabilities. While both have tested the EU’s structural and philosophical soundness, veteran Canadian diplomat Jeremy Kinsman warns never to bet against Brussels.*

**T**he greatest migration crisis since the Second World War is testing the European Union’s resiliency, some say its survivability. The problem is here to stay, as the Syrian war has no end in sight.

Chancellor Angela Merkel insists Germany can settle a million arrivals this year. But Germany’s EU partners, reflecting a surge in nativist public push-back, are cautious.

The 21st century has been rough on the historic European project. The “Europe, whole and free” that emerged

in 1989 is fractious, stumbling, and in Ukraine, violent. Retiring US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey recently told Politico that “As recently as four years ago, white papers and plans within the (NATO) alliance began with some version of the following sentence, ‘Europe is experiencing an age of prosperity and peace unlike any in its history.’ My challenge to my NATO colleagues now is, ‘If you can still write that sentence with candour and a straight face, please give me a call. Because I just don’t see it that way.”

Publics push back against the voluntarily pooling of sovereignty symbolized by the marquee achievements of a common currency, and a border-free common travel space under the Schengen Accord. Euro-skeptics doubted the EU would survive the evidence of dysfunction exposed by the financial crash and economic slump in 2008 that ultimately prompted the Greek insolvency crisis.

**B**oth crises, financial and refugee, challenge the principle of solidarity that has been the *leitmotif* of the European project since its beginnings in the rubble of the Second World War.

But a longer positive view sees such crises as normal for the never-ending EU work-in-progress that adapts the unprecedented political project from crisis to crisis. It emerges strengthened from each, institutions and dynamics adjusted to ever-changing political complexities of a 28-member union of half a billion disparate inhabitants.

For international media, the Greek debt crisis was a perfect storm of destructive collision on financial, behavioral, political, and even cultural levels that exposed fatal flaws in EU governance. Today, that crisis has subsided. The Greek economy has challenges but Spain, Portugal, and Italy have stabilized. Structural design in the management of the European monetary zone has been improved. The dialectical debate be-

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tween austerity and Keynesian stimulus goes on, but not as a fatalistic discussion of the EU’s survival.

The new crisis over refugees seems more catastrophic because it cuts to pre-existing existential issues of identity and community. While it combines the same conflict—pitting national political sovereignty against deference to solidarity and common rules—it is considerably more combustible politically because it is a crisis about people rather than about process.

The staggering number of displaced people in the world—60 million—is the greatest since the end of the Second World War.

Stalin and Hitler uprooted and forcibly relocated 30 million people between 1939 and 1943. At war’s end in 1945, the process was reversed: seven million Germans fled from the Red Army; three million were expelled from the Czech Sudetenland, millions more from Poland, ex-Yugoslavia, Romania and Hungary. Other ethnic groups shifted; Romanians, Hungarians, Poles, Ukrainians changed places. Historically pluralist nation-states became ethnically homogeneous.

Yet, Germany acquired a massive vocation for refugee settlement. The German Constitution (the Grundgesetz) stipulates refugee acceptance, an obligation taken up by all European democracies in 1951 for asylum-seekers from Europe itself, and extended to refugees from elsewhere in 1962. (Turkey declined to do so).

**B**ut re-integrating ethnic Germans as the collateral outcome of a Germany-launched European war is a vastly less daunt-

ing challenge than integrating people of other cultures and religions from distant wars and continents and distributing them to countries that see historic social achievements challenged by what they regard as backward and alien beliefs.

While German opinion has cooled under the flood of arrivals, initial polling this summer showed 96 per cent of Germans welcomed refugees in principle, while 71 per cent of Czechs opposed them.

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Czech anxiety at being “overrun” seems misplaced as Muslims represent only 0.1 per cent of the population. But in more immigration-experienced states such as Holland and Denmark, people recoil at the notion that hard-won achievements such as gender equality and the separation of religion from public life can be jarred by newcomers who shroud women in black and hold for Sharia law.

The rise of nativist, populist political parties predates this year’s refugee

wave but immigration now tops voters' concerns for the first time in 42 years of Eurobarometer polling.

Identity-based parties such as Marine Le Pen's Front National, the Belgian Vlams Blok, the Pim Fortuyn list in Holland, the Danish Peoples' Party, the True Finns, Austria's Freedom Party, or UKIP claim two central grievances: domination by a bureaucratic top-down Brussels machine and being over-run by "others."

In reality, their political fuel is fear of change. Immigration is a surrogate. Many believe the EU expanded too far and fast. Economic downturn ushered in corrective austerity that has cut into publicly financed pension programs. New issues of religious clothing and separate cultural facilities rattled old cultural certainties. Jihadist terrorism added to the anxious mix.

Attachment to the EU of countries that joined from the former Warsaw Pact is fraying. The Europe they longed to re-join imposed a process of diligent examination of their credentials for membership they found humiliating and is now mandating internal imperatives of unfamiliar pluralism. Authoritarian Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban warns "Europe's Christian identity is under threat." Promoting "illiberalism" over democratic liberalism, he challenges the inherent democratic vocation of the EU enlargement process.

Immigrant integration in EU countries has generally not gone well. Newcomers are not "immigrants" in the meaning Canadians give to applicants from outside. We recruit potential new Canadians via a dual contract—they accept our society's terms (the Charter of Rights) and we judge their ability to integrate economically and linguistically. Canada's annual take of about 25,000 refugees a year acclimatize within a larger pool of 250,000 committed, qualified, or family-based selected entrants in a process that aims at integration. Newcomers are sourced from a dozen states and religions.



French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have been the progressive leaders of the EU during the refugee crisis. Flickr photo

EU countries largely stopped recruitment immigration decades ago. Their unsought "immigrants" today are refugees with no prior dual contract, usually concentrated in two or three nationalities per destination. They band together in ghettos and can dominate school districts, inhibiting assimilation.

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Most governments have been slow to promote public visibility of different faces, whether minority police on the beat, or news anchors on TV. Alienation has been generations in the making. French kids from the “Alge-

rian” high-rise ghettos beyond the Paris *peripherique* are French kids, but don't feel it.

Is the surge of people into the EU avoidable?

Refugees and economic migrants pour into Europe from war zones and from Africa because of the magnetic attraction of the EU economy, the generosity of its provisions, and because they can reach it. International efforts to smash the smugglers' networks are stymied by the anarchy reigning in Libya and by ambivalence over the effectiveness and cost of robust protection of Europe's coasts. The principle of processing refugees at perimeter points of entry has failed in practice in part because of inadequate support for Italy and Greece from EU partners.

For about \$2,500 each, refugees undertake voyages of terrible hardship and danger, breaching an EU front-line too extensive to control effectively, across the Mediterranean to Italy from Libya in perilous vessels (4,000 have died this summer), or over land to the Turkish coast to Greece, and through Macedonia to central Europe. Once they reach the EU, their claims to asylum from life-threatening danger at home are

weighed by EU member state authorities. Increasingly, economic migrants are denied entry, starting with Balkan countries that accounted for 40 per cent of asylum applications that are now designated “safe” and ineligible.

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The process of validation (others now pretend to be Syrian) and the separation of refugees from economic migrants has been expedited and simplified, but still takes months and months. The young male migrants are tenacious and, to Europeans, curiously entitled in belief that their quest for lives in the EU represents a human right.

This international crisis should not be for Europeans alone to manage, but North Americans and others are hanging back, leaving the EU exposed practically and politically. Success will depend on political leaders’ ability to sustain public confidence in the capacity to process and absorb asylum-seekers, while closing the borders to straightforward economic migrants, knowing that a longer-term process of settlement immigration will still be needed to address the EU’s underlying demographic deficit.

The emergence of Germany as uncontested European leader is the decisive new development. A Merkel-led working circle including François Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls in France, Matteo Renzi in Italy, EU Council President Donald Tusk of Poland and Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker drives policy response and program construction. Cautious buy-in from most of the rest of the EU recognizes the EU obligation to admit refugees if not to impose national quotas.

But are elected leaders up to taking on populist adversaries at home? As in Canada, where the Harper gov-



A Syrian refugee from Deir Ezzor, holding his son and daughter, breaks out in tears of joy after arriving via a flimsy inflatable boat crammed with about 15 men, women and children on the shore of the island of Kos in Greece. Daniel Etter/The New York Times Flickr photo

ernment’s divisive attempts to pander to bias against “the other” have created a counter-storm, constructive optimism can ring truer with people than radiating the fear of a worse future ahead.

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Constructive optimism has always been the point of the European project, borne from a calamitous past that now is beyond most living memories. It has succeeded, crisis by crisis, in shoring up and fine-tuning the voluntary pooling of interdependent national sovereignties that

is the political reality for Europeans.

Of course, major disputes and hurdles always loom, including the threat that the historically ambivalent UK will withdraw altogether.

But the project has nourished, over time, shared reflexes of a contested but ultimately consensual political culture that is the everyday reality of governance in Europe. That there is no common identity among the EU’s historic nationalities is no weakness as long as there is a commonality of view that at the end of the day EU members are in this together. Don’t bet on them to fail this ultimate test. **P**

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