

**Lina Kolesnikova examines the threat to EU borders posed by the flood of immigrants from North Africa, and warns of severe consequences if a new border security policy is not soon agreed**

# EU BORDER CRISIS

Issues of external and internal migration have become top priorities in political agendas in many countries. Moreover, in some countries, the risks associated with the uncontrolled inflow of migrants, economic and/or political refugees have become more acute than the “old” security risks. The struggle for resources of any kind and, consequently, for better lives has spurred an exodus of millions of people each year from Africa, Middle East, Eastern Europe, Latin America and other regions.

In Russia, violent clashes between Caucasian diaspora and football club supporters during last December (provoked by the killing of one young football supporter), as well as a growing number of nationalist and skinhead movements and hostile groups, pushed the Kremlin to admit the unsettled situation. Intra-country North Caucasus migration north towards the Central Russia and elsewhere, and inter-country migration from ex-Soviet Union Central Asian Republics to Russia have become a high-level security risk, threatening the stability and social peace of the country. In addition to migration to Russia, migration from Russia and other ex-Soviet Union republics towards Europe might be lessening but still remains a problem as well. Meanwhile, facing similar problems, the US has famously been building barriers on the Mexican border. These have been built to deter the transportation of illegal drugs manufactured in Latin America, as well as to decrease the pressure of illegal immigration from southern regions on the US border.

Europe, and in particular what used to be called Western Europe, has multiple problems too, which often interact to make situation even more difficult to manage. The Schengen area, which extends along 42,672km of the external sea borders and 8,826km of the land borders, comprises 25 countries (including a number of non-EU states). The Schengen area effectively allows free internal movement of people between the countries participating in the Schengen system. We are talking here about nearly half a billion people. Removal of checkpoints at internal borders enhances the crucial importance of the controls established on the external borders. This naturally



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*Under pressure: refugees from North Africa are overwhelming the island of Lampedusa*

leads to the situation whereby all Schengen members (to higher or lower degree) must now rely on the checks executed by other members.

The EU and Schengen states face both internal and external migration issues. Old members of the EU are trying to accommodate the internal migration of Eastern Europeans from the new EU member states. Millions are moving across the borders in their search for better or any jobs, more perceived stability and promise for the future, as well as for a variety of other reasons. At the same time, the mounting difficulties faced in controlling both external and internal borders have already had a significant impact on EU policies and politics. These problems prevented the widening of the Schengen to include Bulgaria and Romania at the beginning of 2011, for example. France and Germany expressed their serious concerns on the level of corruption and organised criminal activity in both countries, that could subsequently further undermine controls on the Schengen external borders.

While the main concern over internal migration is

often that Eastern Europeans will accept lower pay for the same jobs in Western Europe countries (as compared to locals), it is the external migration issues that threaten to shake regional political stability. The number of people arriving from outside of the EU – as refugees of various sorts, overstayers (those people who entered the EU or Schengen area legally but then breached the law by not returning home prior to their visas expiring), and illegal migrants – has reached the staggering number of eight million per year.

From the beginning of 2011, the southern external borders of the EU has faced an unparalleled influx of refugees from North Africa. Italy in particular was placed in extraordinary circumstances and overwhelmed, with Lampedusa becoming a focal point for the problem. Lampedusa is a small island in the Mediterranean Sea close to Sicily. While it belongs to Italy, it is closer to the Tunisian shore in northern Africa – it is around 113km from the Tunisian shore, compared to about 202km from Sicily. With its local population of about 4,500 people, this island was taken hostage by more than 25,000 people who arrived from Tunisia following the overthrow of the long-time Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in February. Increasingly, refugees have started also arriving from Libya, Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia.

There are continuous tensions between migrants and the local population, who have lost their normal way of life, and their tourism-related business and income.

But this is still not all. Tens of thousands of people have already fled from Libya to neighbouring Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Niger since the start of the unrest in Libya in February. Many of these are expected to start coming Europe's way. Italy's Interior Minister, Roberto Maroni, has compared the collapse of the Tunisian and Egyptian governments to the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the sudden end of previous rule in Eastern Europe sparked decades of illegal immigration.

So far, most of the Tunisian migrants have journeyed on from Italy, where they were issued with a six-month residence permit. Theoretically, such residence permits allow these migrants to travel within the Schengen countries, as there are no internal border controls to prevent them doing so. Many have consequently chosen to travel. Tunisia is a former French colony, and many Tunisians have relatives or friends in France. The current situation offers them a good opportunity to visit them and, possibly, stay there. Not all countries – and, in particular, France – have been happy about this, however. France even began limiting traffic between Italy and France, although only for a short period of time. At a recent summit Italy and France pleaded in favour of re-establishing temporary controls on internal European Union (and Schengen) borders.

EU laws mandate that migrants shall be processed by the first country they arrive at. Given the record-breaking numbers it is facing, Italy's Interior Minister, Roberto Maroni, has started asking Brussels for backup. Italy requested FRONTEX, the EU's border-security agency, to send more vessels to patrol the Mediterranean. In February, FRONTEX launched the Joint Operation EPN Hermes Extension 2011, in order to help Italy deal with vessels carrying migrants and refugees. EUROPOL has also deployed a team

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of experts to Italy, to help its law enforcement authorities identify possible criminals among the irregular migrants who have reached Italian territory. Mr Maroni also asked the European Commission to contribute 100m euros (\$135m) for the costs of immediate accommodation and expected deportation of migrants.

At the same time some governments, including Austria, France and Germany, have already made it public that they don't plan to relax their visa requirements for migrants from Tunisia, provoking rage in countries most under pressure from the influx. EU Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia Malmstrom also said talks would be set in motion with Tunisia's new Interior Minister, Habib Essid. The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) might also get involved in analysis of the situation.

In 2009, Italy pressed Libya to join Tunisia in accepting financial assistance in exchange for keeping a close watch on its coastlines and admitting intercepted migrants back to its shore. The boats stopped arriving. But since the fall of the Tunisian dictator, Rome has struggled to find counterparts in the government in Tunis. The Tunisian government rejected an Italian proposal to deploy armed forces to Tunisia to patrol the country's borders, but pledged to do more to halt the exodus pent up by years of autocracy. Dictators may be able to seal their borders with ease, but it is another thing altogether for a democracy, never mind an unstable transitional government like the one currently in place in Tunisia.

Amid all the dramatics of the current situation, France and Italy have now pressured the European Commission into accepting revisions in the Schengen Treaty to allow greater powers of individual nations to impose border controls. Most recently, Denmark has announced it will re-instate border and customs control over its borders with Germany and Sweden at ports and harbours to curb trans-border crime. Denmark has also decided to: rebuild border stations; employ more customs officials; begin extensive video surveillance of cars crossing Danish borders; and make rapid police assistance available whenever customs officers need them. Suspected trucks are to be checked by scanners aiming at discovering possible illegal immigrants.

The large scale of the problems demands corresponding large-scale decisions. Is Europe ready to make such decisions? This would likely have been easier in the past, but now the limited and divided support for fragmented and varied political forces within EU countries makes it difficult to arrive at decisions with such sweeping implications. This is further complicated by the recent and on-going changes to national elites.

Economic and migration issues might further empower nationalist movements in Europe, with extremist groups in member states gaining more popularity if no real solutions are found. The row over frontiers comes as the economic meltdown is shaking



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**Access all areas: a Tunisian refugee shows the passport given to him when he entered Italy**

the world's faith in European monetary union, which was as much a part of EU's founding vision as the free movement of goods and people. Elsewhere in the region, right-wing Eurosceptic parties are capitalising on fears of immigration and the meltdown of the Euro. In France, Marine Le Pen's Front National is threatening President Nicolas Sarkozy in next year's elections. In Finland, May's general election created a new headache for the EU, with the right-wing True Finns gaining a foothold in the government and challenging the Portuguese bail-out.

We are witnessing the beginning of a new type of refugee politics, in which newly-free countries are no longer able to imprison their populations; these populations tend to migrate in masses, and wealthier countries struggle to decide between rejection and aid. As long as the European Union does not have a sound European policy about immigration, and illegal immigration in particular, each single member state will try to build up a little fortress to protect their own national interests. We are seeing the beginnings of such a situation now. There are different asylum criteria and procedures in each EU country; we see the so-called asylum shopping – the practice by an individual receiving asylum in one country as a refugee – to then use this status to attempt migration to the other country.

In this new still to-be-defined migration policy, EU countries which are less exposed to immigration due to their geographical position should still take part in dealing with the problem. It is necessary to further strengthen the FRONTEX mandate, so that FRONTEX can act more decisively and effectively at the external borders. There is also a real necessity to scrutinise the Southern Neighbourhood Policy and look for new partners in new governments in North Africa; to combat immigration by pressing for "readmission accords" with countries in the Middle East and North Africa to send refugees home. Such a new policy must be defined; the alternative is the erection of national fortresses which might severely shake the European foundation.

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