



# Migration to Europe: the numbers game

by Roderick Parkes

European authorities seem to be winning the numbers game. Throughout May an average of just 30 migrants arrived on Lesbos each day. This marks a massive dip since October 2015, when the daily figure was around 4,400. Today, 8,000 migrants are successfully contained in camps across the Greek islands, through which more than 500,000 people passed last year. This has allowed the Greek authorities to begin processing asylum claims, and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), to check whether asylum-seekers are admissible for relocation in Europe or due to return to Turkey.

But progress is fragile. The dip in flows is down to arrangements agreed in March between Brussels and Ankara, under which Turkey accepts asylum-applicants back from the Greek islands more quickly and better regulates the onward movement of would-be migrants. Doubts remain about the robustness of this deal, and EU officials are struggling to gauge the intentions both of Ankara and the migrants themselves. Given this uncertainty, it remains impossible to set European procedures on a firm footing. This shows how acutely the EU needs good migration indicators and intelligence.

A desire to up the EU's performance explains why EASO is upgrading its Early Warning and Preparedness System (EPS) not just to flag up

administrative backlogs inside the EU but also to anticipate migration inflows from outside; why Frontex has just undertaken a major risk-analysis exercise, and is boosting its analytical and overseas staff; why EU delegations in countries such as Egypt, Niger and Lebanon may soon host 'European migration liaison officers'; why the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) is hastily establishing in Berlin its first data centre; and why the UNHCR and OECD are upscaling their data and modelling work.

This is the real numbers game – a mastery of data and information. But it is no technocratic exercise: the game is being played in a disorderly new geopolitical context. The EU is battling against data black holes, disinformation and even rival civilizational narratives. An information war might seem the one kind of war the EU is suited to winning. But in reality, the Union is immensely vulnerable to this competition over intelligence and messaging.

## Linking experts and authorities

Last year, the EU was wrong-footed when Syrians abandoned central Mediterranean routes in favour of the Aegean. At the time, academics complained that decision-makers in Brussels had ignored their



warnings – and there is much truth in this. But it is true, too, that academics had not been making their forecasts with sufficient force – and indeed still do not. Without robust projections to guide forward planning, the EU today risks reactively plugging new border pressure points as and when they appear (such as, in early April, the Black Sea and the Serbian-Hungarian border, and in late April, rumours about the onward passage of migrants from Greece to Italy).

### Are Syrians returning to the Libyan route? Data clues

The price for being smuggled from Syria to Turkey has reportedly risen from \$40 to as much as **\$1,300**, meaning the central Mediterranean route may seem attractive. But, over the last three months, the Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans who dominated the Aegean route have made up just **1%** of the flows across the central Mediterranean. Rather, it is nationals of Guinea, Cote D'Ivoire and Egypt who account for the recent rise in flows on the central routes.

Of the known migrant population in Libya, Syrians are languishing in roughly **10th** place by nationality, just ahead of Bangladeshis. **50%** of the migrants identified in Libya had entered through Dirj, in the far west, suggesting that Libya is a transit point for West Africans, not Syrians.

EASO is making real efforts to close the gap between Europe's practitioners and academics. It has just catalogued hundreds of journal articles to create a database giving EU officials access to academic expertise. Well-briefed officials can now take an educated guess about pressing questions such as: 'will lifting visa restrictions for Turks strain border capacities in the EU – especially in the Mediterranean tourist economies which are already hard-hit by the migration crisis?' and 'will Syrian migrants, who find their passage through Turkey blocked, return to the central Mediterranean routes they took in 2014?'

Europe's policy planners will surely benefit from this new capacity. They can match the models on visa liberalisation created by Oxford University's International Migration Institute to Frontex's latest assessment of border capacities at key EU arrival points for Turkish travellers. And they can combine the longitudinal data on the number of Syrians in Libya from the IOM's 'Displacement Tracking

Matrix' with Frontex's latest Mediterranean boat-interception data. Yet, EASO's technical fixes – impressive as they are – will not *per se* resolve the EU's information challenges. These require a response attuned to new geopolitical realities.

If the EU is facing a crisis of information about migration, then this is down to much the same geopolitical factors as the migration crisis itself: the same wars displacing people across Europe's neighbourhood are making it harder for the Union to harvest reliable data there; the same 'democratisation' of communications channels that allow migrants to cross borders at will also helps them affect the flow of information; the same geopolitical players like Russia which are 'weaponising' the refugee flows from Syria and Afghanistan are also creating unpleasant new narratives about the migrants.

European academics have long struggled to apply their usual rational model of 'evidence-based policymaking' to the complicated field of migration. Now they must try to assert it in an unpredictable international environment – one characterised by hostility to Western-led globalisation and to the technocratic politics promoted by bodies like the World Bank. Faced with these odds, it is no wonder that Europe's experts have tended to duck the challenge, and to couch their migration forecasts in caveats. However, their timidity puts the EU in danger of repeating the mistakes of 2015.

### Importing chaos from outside

Last September, Frontex brought together a small group of experts and practitioners to produce a risk-foresight analysis. The result, just published, unwittingly reveals the first big geopolitical data-challenge facing the EU. As the experts neared the completion of their horizon-scanning exercise, they found themselves focusing less and less on migration trends, and more on EU migration policy, defining their various scenarios according to the political line taken in Brussels: the experts, convening at the height of the migration crisis, found that EU policy had become the biggest and most unpredictable variable in their calculations.

They are not alone. A review by Southampton University confirms that migration statisticians are likely to avoid making forecasts because of the sheer changeability of policy, feeling confident only in fields like the return home of European expats where policy is quite static. Academics even complain that the EU is 'exporting instability' to the neighbourhood with its changeable border rules. But scratch at the surface, and it

becomes clear this is an example of how the EU is *importing* external instability: the absence of reliable information from the neighbourhood is the factor which makes European migration policies so reactive and changeable.

'Ungoverned spaces' such as Libya are obvious black holes when it comes to data. But quick fixes are in fact available. Migration organisations like the IOM work in these lawless zones, and the local offices of these bodies harvest useful data almost by rote. The task is to persuade their hard-pressed employees to recognise the value of their information and pass it along to head office. When the UNHCR began collecting indicators on how poverty drives Syrian migration, for instance, it realised that its usual refugee registration forms contained better information than all its expensive new surveys.

### Will the Aegean route reopen? Data clues

As few as **34,000** Syrian refugees registered in Turkey between March and May. There are indications that they are settling down, too: Syrians have had nearly **150,000** babies in Turkey, and have completed **62,000** technical training programmes. Nevertheless, **500,000** Syrian children have yet to find a school place, and polling from the UNHCR suggests the search for education is a key motivation for Syrian refugees to move on.

Syrians have also helped drive unemployment rates in Turkey to **10.3%** and have pushed inflation rates in Turkish border towns at least **1%** higher than in the rest of the country. Turkey is pursuing readmission agreements with 14 migrant-source countries, in the hope of expelling migrants. Recent fighting in southeastern Turkey may have displaced as many as 200,000 Turkish citizens.

The real black holes are those countries with governments which are fully functioning but uncooperative or secretive. Ankara has staked its reputation on its good treatment of refugees, and is cautious about releasing information. The EU has few means to remedy this. Greece is currently permitted to send liaison officers to Turkey, but has few to spare; and European NGOs and journalists are not always made to feel welcome by Ankara. Turkish officials, by contrast, have surprised volunteers in Lesbos by arriving unannounced in the open camps there, perhaps to check on standards,

perhaps to search for criminals who slipped out with the refugees.

This creates a classic 'knowledge asymmetry', and it only deepens the EU's sense of dependence on Turkey. Logical reasoning would suggest that Turkey has benefited from the closure of the Aegean route almost as much as the EU (it has reduced the incentives for Syrians to enter Turkey, and disrupted people-smuggling networks). Logic would also suggest that Syrian refugees are settling down in Turkey (Ankara partially opened the labour market in January). But, in the absence of clear data and intelligence to confirm all this, the EU frets that Turkey will 'turn the tap back on', and that Syrians will once again flood the Aegean.

### The anarchy of communications

For most of last year Syrians routinely headed to the south of Lesbos. But then, overnight (literally, on 4 December), the flows suddenly shifted northwards. Similarly, flows which had been overwhelmingly male and only one-ninth children in September were, by February, suddenly one-third children and female-dominated. It turns out migrants were pre-empting official policies, and altering their behaviour accordingly: in the age of social networks like Facebook, migrants can share information quickly. This, the 'democratisation of communications', is the second great challenge for the EU.

UNHCR officials describe how migrants are no longer 'data objects' but 'data subjects'. If the EU wants better information about the migrants, it must find a means to cooperate with them. When EASO launches its new mobile app to provide information on relocation opportunities, therefore, it will hope to gain new means to locate migrants and draw them into official procedures – especially those in limbo on mainland Greece waiting for a Skype appointment with the authorities or the vulnerable families speedily removed from Lesbos detention camp even before they had a chance to register for asylum.

The UNHCR has taken a bolder step towards empowering migrants: the UN refugee agency gives migrants the chance to define its research agenda. This is a logical and admirable way of winning migrants' cooperation. Yet, it should not distract from the ethical pitfalls about harvesting data from vulnerable people. On Lesbos, humanitarian organisations rely on incoming migrants for information about how Turkish police tried to prevent their passage – about the police roadblocks in

Turkish port towns and patrols along the shorelines. The fact that migrants pass on this information may put future waves in a more precarious position *vis-à-vis* the Turkish authorities.

Such dilemmas make it hard to establish 'best practice' in this field. When Europe's authorities and NGOs try to make their procedures more transparent to migrants, for example, this often backfires. One European NGO last year tried to boost the credibility of the EU relocation system. It opened a Skype link between a group of migrants awaiting relocation and a group who had already been moved. The NGO wanted to reassure those migrants waiting, and so asked the relocated group to confirm that the EU had lived up to its promise. This they did. But they also advised the migrants in the hotspot that they would have a greater choice of destinations if they absconded.

Yet, numerous other examples illustrate how acutely migrants need transparent information. Migrants setting out from the Turkish coast have heard rumours that, under a Greek law adopted on 3 April, they will avoid expulsion from the EU if they are victims of a shipwreck: there are now reports of people purposefully puncturing their own dinghies. Migrants leaving Lesbos' detention camp, at the end of the statutory 25-day period, are being contacted via social media by sham lawyers promising refugee status for just €400 and by people smugglers demanding payment upfront for passage to Italy.

## Telling a tale

The EU-Turkey deal of 18 March sent a strong message to migrants intending to move to Europe, halting them in their tracks every bit as effectively as the police measures. This allowed the EU to re-establish the rule of law and boost the protection of refugees in Turkey – a strong message for Europe's voters. Yet, the EU has grown increasingly defensive in its communications both to refugees and citizens (insisting, for example, that it is not a 'deal' the EU has with Turkey but a 'non-justiciable Joint Statement'). Officials say this defensiveness is partly down to the hostility they face from academics.

Academics see themselves as neutral observers and critics. Yet the University of Sheffield is currently looking at their 'cognitive biases'. One of their favourite narratives is the 'balloon theory', according to which if the EU squeezes irregular immigration at one border crossing (like the Aegean), the pressure will inevitably re-emerge

somewhere else (the central Mediterranean). Another narrative (recorded as the main finding of a major conference sponsored by the European Commission in February) is that border controls do not contain migration: they merely turn legal flows into illegal ones. These ideas clearly clash with the EU's favoured narratives.

Yet the existence of competing narratives is good for democracy, and most voters take it for granted that, say, the OECD will deliver upbeat predictions on migrants' economic potential. Some analysts have indeed begun to embrace their 'cognitive bias' as part of their branding. But if politicians continue distorting academics' statements many will retreat back behind the mantle of academic neutrality. EU politicians last month quoted a UN advisor as predicting the influx of a million migrants from Libya. They were misrepresenting his words. The advisor had actually said that, if Libya stabilised, it would once again *host* one million immigrants.

If mainstream forces in Europe fail to provide strong and overt narratives concerning the migration flows, others will. Populist groups have circulated pictures of Iraqis, in shorts and t-shirts, at an airport in Europe, ready to fly home. The message: these are not helpless refugees but welfare tourists. The perpetrators of the Paris attacks, too, exploited voters' confusion about the size and nature of the refugee flows, going out of their way to register in refugee reception centres on their path into Europe in a bid to spread the idea that migrants are terrorists.

Much of the solution lies with simple data management. EU governments are currently required to share data about the migrants they help return home (data from 17 member states suggest that this amounts to at least 2,000 Iraqis this year). They must also release timely asylum figures, not just on the numbers of applications they register (an indication of member states' administrative capacity) but also how many asylum-seekers actually declare a desire to access procedures (an indication of the actual number of arrivals). As ever, data-sharing between member states lies at the heart of the solution.

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