Global Migration Crisis*

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Never in history has so much attention been paid to human movement. Global migration yields demographic shifts of historical significance, profoundly shaking up world politics – as shown by the "refugee crisis," the rise of White nationalism in the United States, and the spreading of the populist right in Europe. Global migration is one of the defining issues of the 21st century, challenging the fabric of Western societies, remodeling the essence of sovereignty, and changing the way we think of borders and boundaries.

There are ten reasons why international migration is one of the greatest challenges of our time. The ten reasons are related to fundamental changes in the patterns of migration in Western societies, and in the world as a whole. Indeed, migration will be at the center of world politics in the years to come.

International Migration

The first reason relates to numbers. The world is on the move: There were 258 million international migrants in 2017, a record of 65 million forcibly displaced people, 50 million irregular migrants, 21 million forced laborers, and 740 million "internal migrants." While it is true that the percentage of international migrants remains relatively constant – 2.6% of the world population in 1960 and 3.4% in 2017 – it is seven times higher in the developed regions than in the developing regions. On the regional level, international migration has almost tripled in Europe – it climbed from 3.4% of the population in 1960 to 10.5% in 2017 (not including intra-European mobility) – and doubled in North America, from 6.7% (1960) to 16% (2017). On the national level, the numbers are even higher (see Table 1). All predictions show that migration will continue to grow tremendously in the near future. People will have more reasons to move to the developed world and more resources to do so.

TABLE 1: INTERNATIONAL MIGRANT STOCK AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL POPULATION BY SELECTED COUNTRIES, 1960-2017

Country	*Percentage*		
	1960	1990	2017
Belgium	4.8	8.9	11.1
Denmark	2.1	4.6	11.5
France	7.7	10.4	12.2
Germany	-	7.5	14.8
Ireland	2.6	6.4	16.9
Italy	0.9	2.5	10.0
Norway	1.7	4.5	15.1
Spain	0.7	2.1	12.8
The Netherlands	3.9	7.9	12.1
United Kingdom	3.2	6.4	13.4
United States	5.8	9.2	15.3

Source: U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017.

Global migration is only one aspect of human mobility. There are about 1.5 billion international border crossings every year. Tourists, students, business people, and temporary workers come and go on a regular basis. Free movement zones, such as the Schengen area and the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States),

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and technology – low-cost flights, high-speed trains, and the availability of apartments via Airbnb – have led to an increase in the number of visitors. Anti-tourism protests are spreading today across Europe. Local residents complain that tourism generates noise, pollution, and traffic, and leads to an increase in rents, decrease in parking spaces, and the ousting of locals. "Tourists go home" is now a popular slogan in European cities. Venice, Dubrovnik, and Barcelona have introduced legal measures to restrict the influx of visitors. In other places, such as Beijing, internal migrants – the Chinese rural residents who move to the big city in search of a better life – are also faced with restrictions on their freedoms and provoke grumbles.

The changing character of migration is a second reason for the perceived migration "crisis." Until recent decades, migration consisted mainly of labor workers. Today, however, family migration presents the largest share of migrants in the West – more than 50% when excluding refugees and asylum seekers. Family migration has four features: (a) it is usually not temporary; (b) it is more difficult to restrict family migration because citizens have a right to family life; (c) it is likely to increase migration – studies show that family ties in a different country are the most important factors in the decision to move to a new country, more important than wages and human development; (d) it is not discretionary. Countries do not really "select" family migrants based on skills and merits; they arrive on the basis of legal entitlement. In addition, in some countries, migrants are coming from societies that profess a different religion than the majority population. In Europe, when excluding intra-EU movement, 39% of the total migration to the Union comprise people of Muslim faith.

The intensity of these changes is the third reason. The rapid pace of demographic changes we are witnessing now happened in the past only as a result of wars or occupation, not migration. There is a sense of a high traffic load. In just five decades, European states have turned from countries of emigration to immigrant-receiving societies on a large scale. While data do not support the popular claim that Muslims are likely to become a majority by 2030 in Europe – that is fake news – Muslims will become a sizeable religious minority in Austria, Belgium, Britain, France, and Sweden. In the United States, white Americans are expected to be a minority (46%) by 2050; in contrast, Hispanic Americans, a tiny minority in 1960, are expected to reach 30% of the population by 2050. This fast-changing reality generates cultural anxiety in Western societies.

The fourth reason is the fact that migration has also become associated with cultural and security challenges. There is a growing body of literature on the cultural gaps between migrant and local communities, especially in Europe, dealing with issues such as liberal values (for example, free speech, gender equality, and gay rights); the rule of law vis-à-vis the rule of God; the legitimacy of the use of violence in resolving political conflicts; and the role of religion in the public sphere. The findings are troubling and indicate that these gaps are often wider in second and third generation immigrants than among their parents and grandparents. In addition, violent riots and terrorist acts have made the issue of migration central and visible.

Western Societies

The fifth reason relates to Western demographic changes. In almost all Western countries, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), the number of children that a woman bears over her lifetime, has dropped below the "replacement rate" of 2.1, which is the fertility rate required for demographic stability (see Table 2). Low fertility rates, combined with high life expectancy, affect the "old-age support ratio," which measures the number of people of working age (15-64) in relation to the number of people of retirement age (65+). Some states have already reached the point at which the elderly will outnumber the young. This means fewer people of working age and more people in need of welfare stipends, pensions, and healthcare. In fact, if Western states want to maintain their welfare systems, migration is inevitable.

Table 2: Total Fertility Rate and Old-Age Support Ratio by Selected Countries and Years

Country	*Total Fertility Rate*		*Old-Age Support Ratio*	
	1955-60	2015-20	2015	2050
Belgium	2.50	1.80	3.6	2.3
Denmark	2.55	1.76	3.4	2.6
France	2.69	1.97	3.3	2.3
Germany	2.27	1.47	3.1	2.0
Ireland	3.58	1.98	4.4	2.4
Italy	2.29	1.49	2.9	1.6
Spain	2.70	1.39	3.5	1.5
The Netherlands	3.10	1.75	3.6	2.3
United Kingdom	2.49	1.87	3.5	2.5
United States	3.58	1.89	4.5	3.0

Source: U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017.

The sixth reason relates to the Western identity crisis. From Australia to Britain, France to Germany, countries are struggling with a similar question: how to cultivate a common "bond" that goes beyond the global economy and political liberalism; a bond that is global and yet, keeps a core that distinguishes the "here" from the "there." In the post-World War II international system, Western countries did not need to set boundaries to their national identity; it was a given, not something that had to be defined. But times have changed. Migration – together with globalization forces, the rise of multiculturalism and, in Europe, the creation of the EU – have led to a reality in which it becomes difficult to know what it means to have a national identity. We are witnessing an interesting phenomenon in which states seek to protect their unique identity, but cannot clearly specify what it is. It includes, at best, a local version of political liberalism and popular culture like films, carnivals, and sports. The very idea of searching for national identity is the clearest indicator of its devaluation. Newcomers arrive in societies that are insecure about the essence of their identity.

The seventh reason relates to multiculturalism – which has become popular in Western societies in the last decades. Cultural group rights – demands for linguistic rights, Shari'a law, and exemptions from general laws relating to school curriculum and food – are the fashion of the day. At the infancy of multiculturalism, there was a clear distinction between "national minorities" and "immigrant groups." Unlike national minorities that often cannot choose between different ways of life without cultural privileges, migrants can choose. Voluntary migration is exactly this – an expression of choice. Yet the proposition that migrants seek to integrate into the national culture, rather than to maintain their original cultural identities, no longer describes the Western reality. Cultural group rights, originally developed for minorities, are demanded nowadays by immigrant groups in the West.

Multiculturalism is based on some false assumptions. To begin with, it protects only "needy" minorities, whose culture, without legal protection, may be marginalized or excluded. But not every minority group is culturally "needy," and not all majority groups are not culturally needy. In addition, multiculturalism has failed to distinguish between "illiberal minorities," which do not seek to change the liberal way of life of a political community (e.g., the Amish), and "anti-liberal minorities," that seek to use their political power to change the way of life of others, non-members in the group. And last, the idea that all cultures are equal is logically false. There are cultures that do not recognize the idea that all cultures, not even all individuals, are equal; the existence of multiculturalism thus depends on the premise that the dominant culture recognizes the idea of equality. Paradoxically, it is the expansion of minority rights that gives rise to the revival of "majority nationalism" and puts multiculturalism at risk.

Global Transitions

The eighth reason relates to dramatic geopolitical changes. The global population has rapidly grown – one billion in 1804 to almost eight billion in 2018. This profound growth, however, has mainly occurred in the developing countries: e.g., India, China, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Indonesia. The European population shriveled from 25% of the global population in 1900 to 12% in 2000 and, if current trends continue, only seven percent of the world population will remain "European" by 2050 (see Table 3). This dramatic demographic transition is likely to lead to increased mobility to Europe, that will sharpen the moral panic against migration.

TABLE 3: CHANGES IN THE WORLD POPULATION, 1900-2050 IN PERCENT OF THE TOTAL

Area	*1900*	*1950*	*2000*	*2050*
World	1,650	2,519	6,071	9,772
More Developed	33%	32%	20%	13%
Less Developed	67%	68%	80%	86%
Africa	8%	9%	13%	26%
Asia	55%	56%	61%	54%
Europe	25%	22%	12%	7%
Latin America & the Caribbean	6%	7%	9%	8%
North America	6%	6%	5%	5%

Source: U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017.

Geopolitics has changed not only geographically, but also religiously. Islam is the rising demographic star of the last century. The Muslim population made up twenty percent of the world population in 1990, and it is expected to be 26.4% in 2030. A Pew Research Center study indicates that in 2030, nearly three out of ten children in the world will be Muslim.

The ninth reason relates to global transport. People can live today in one country while retaining close ties with another country; distances are becoming shorter and moving costs are becoming lower. Cheap transport and communications facilitate the existence of "inside-out

communities," that physically reside inside a country yet culturally remain outside. The forces of globalization narrow the cultural gaps in the world (say, between Europe and India), yet global transport still makes them more visible. Ideas come and go – through free markets, international media, and the Internet – and the notion of cultural exceptionalism faces multiple challenges. The "other" is present not just physically, but also spiritually. Even if a state can control the flow of migrants, it cannot control the flow of ideas and cultures.

The tenth reason relates to digitalization. The concept of national citizenship is no longer sacred and it has even become a commodity that is put up for sale; on some islands in the Pacific Ocean, it is even possible to buy citizenship with Bitcoin. Emerging technologies offer non-territorial forms of political membership that transcend national borders and boundaries, challenging the definition of the "state" as we know it and weakening the state as a primary source of identity and rights. These technological changes occur regardless of migration; however, in this context, migrants are often unjustly blamed for the erosive effects of globalization and migration has become the axis on which contemporary dilemmas in the liberal state meet.

Almost every mass migration in recent history has been perceived as sui generis, a new case, and generated fears of "the other." Is the challenge different this time? The answer is disputable. Some would argue that the current situation is not historically unique. Maybe. If we single out each of the ten changes described here, we may find historical precedents for each. Yet, the combination of all of them at one point has no precedent. Current debates challenge some of the most fundamental assumptions on international migration and require new approaches to governing migration.

At the heart of the issue are human rights; not only the tragic stories of thousands of people who die every year in an attempt to find a better life, but also millions of people whose lives are at risk in their home country. The Somali poet Warsan Shire powerfully noted: "No one puts their children in a boat, unless the water is safer than the land." Yet, any future regime must go beyond a humanitarian approach to address the root causes of the crisis. Another wall, smarter border, or criminal sanctions are just an incremental solution to a wider picture; a complete reassessment of the challenges and consequences is essential for global political sustainability. Disregarding the challenges is not only theoretically wrong, but also politically unwise, given the growing popularity of extreme right-wing movements in the West. ■

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