

## The unbearable lightness of being the European Union



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Things are not going so well for the European Union lately. The seemingly endless economic bailouts for Greece displayed the increasing beggar thy neighbor approach of some EU member states. The lack of a unified EU policy concerning Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine injured its credibility. Finally, the haphazard and chaotic response by the EU concerning the flood of migrants coming to the continent has further exposed its internal rifts and bankrupt principles concerning human rights and democratic governance.

More than half a million migrants - some seeking economic opportunities in Europe and others fleeing war-torn regions - have arrived on Europe's shores and made their way through the Balkans over the last half a year. This surge of humanity should have been no surprise. The conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan continue unabated. Yet, the EU has been caught completely unprepared for this wave and some of its member states have responded with ugly, ultranationalist reactions.

It should not be like this. The European Economic Community grew out of the experiences of World War II, which ended with huge refugee flows across the continent. The 1957 Treaty of Rome was designed to ensure that war would not be possible again by integrating the economies of its original six member states into a common market. Tariffs on goods and services were removed, a customs union was implemented, and the laws of each member state were harmonized. There were also equalization payments as Greece, Spain and Portugal received money from Brussels, the EU capital, to build up their respective infrastructure to foster sustained economic growth. By 1992, under the Maastricht Treaty, the EEC grew to 12 countries to form the European Union, it continued its drive towards full economic integration through free flow of capital and labor, eventually forging a common foreign policy and for 19 of the member states, a common currency - the euro.

Voilà, a resulting borderless Europe - the world's first truly supranational bloc. For those members states that agreed to be part of the so-called Schengen Area, there were no internal borders inside the EU. The Dublin Convention covered migrants, establishing EU-wide rules for the orderly processing of migrants - specifically those seeking asylum. But when

this huge wave of migrants arrived this year, all bets were off; the rules did not apply. It was every country for itself.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel first welcomed new migrants to her country - that's where they were all headed given Germany's generous welfare system - and then on Sept. 13 reversed course imposing border controls along her country's borders with Austria. Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia and the Netherlands all imposed their own border controls. Even Denmark joined in, stopping migrants en route to Sweden, another target country for the migrants. These moves violated EU rules allowing for freedom of movement throughout the bloc. The EU itself waffled, taking two weeks to have a summit to address the pressing issue and then failed to reach an agreement for a binding quota system that would allocate 120,000 migrants around the various EU members states. Finally, the EU broke from its custom of operating by consensus when Hungary, Romania, the Czech Republic and Slovakia voted against the measure. Finland abstained. Some of the migrants will be settled but in countries that may not truly welcome them.

It is perhaps understandable that some EU member states are upset by the refugee flows. International immigration law and the EU's own laws for asylum are being flouted - people seeking asylum should generally apply for this legal status in the first country to which they arrive and not country shop like the migrants currently do, seeking the best health, education and welfare benefits. FRONTEX, the EU's border administration, is under siege trying to coordinate policy in sovereign countries that are not playing well together, many of whom themselves were considered not up to snuff to join the EU in its enlargement venture over the years.

The EU is a monstrous bureaucracy, full of Kafkaesque rules mixed with political expediency. Its haphazard responses to the migration crisis demonstrate its fragility and hollow values. That some of its member states have defaulted to xenophobic politics of the past - the very thing that the EU was created to prevent - does not portend well for the continent as it faces the largest humanitarian challenge of our times and betrays the very principles for which it was founded.

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