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# Perspectives

## Rethinking Policies to Manage Immigration in Europe

by Francesco Aureli\*

### Abstract

Migration and integration are key issues in high-income countries. The need to develop new policies that take into account the many variables involved is a priority in Europe and particularly in Italy which has always represented a gateway to the old continent for migratory flows. An eye on the future is needed to rethink the old rules and design new policies.

### Keywords

policies, migration, Europe, Italy, immigration, migrant, integration.

Last summer, in addition to the Afghan crisis, another one exploded at an international level, which saw Poland and Lithuania accusing the Belarusian government of pushing migrants from Syria and Afghanistan, but also from African countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Cameroon, to go beyond the borders of the European Union<sup>1,2,3</sup>. On this occasion EU countries have erected barriers, increased border patrols, pushed back and restricted access to

humanitarian organizations at the borders with Belarus. We witnessed once more how the mental and physical health of migrants and asylum seekers is often at a major risk. Victims of violence on both borders, trapped in inhumane conditions, some died, while other reported different mental and physical traumas<sup>4,5</sup>.

Today with this new war between Russia and Ukraine, millions of refugees are heading to Poland, Romania and many other countries to escape the war. Before the war there were about 250,000

Ukrainians only in Italy and it is expected that many more than the almost 100 thousand who already arrived in this country will try to reach them, especially if family members<sup>6</sup>.

The European Union and the countries directly involved are called to rapidly organize effective reception and, most of all, integration systems for this new humanitarian emergency. This is also happening against the backdrop of a renewed sensitivity of European and Western public opinions in general, and this could be an opportunity to propose a

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change of approach, because these public opinions were struck by the tragedy that Afghans are experiencing, by what has happened on the border between Belarus and Poland and, today, by the tragic outflow of Ukrainian refugees.

However, it is necessary to dwell on a fact. Migrants fleeing persecution, wars, natural disasters, hunger and poverty, especially in the last decade, have arrived in Europe mainly by sea. The flows are probably destined to remain important, as well as the statistics of the dead and missing, and unless reforms at the European level are implemented, it will not be possible to treat the phenomenon in a structural and not perennially emergency form.

These are reforms which, in addition to allowing lives to be saved, could prove to be less expensive than what was spent in the last decades to tackle the migratory phenomenon in such an emergency manner. Important innovations can be brought by Italy and other Mediterranean countries, which could allow us to further increase our negotiating strength with origin and transit countries.

Today a foreigner can immigrate and then remain

legally in European countries practically only if upon arrival he applies for Asylum, and subsequently obtains a Refugee Status. However, net of the recent humanitarian crises mentioned above, since 2011 we continue to note that 80/85% of migrants who arrive every year at the Mediterranean borders by sea are not entitled to obtain the refugee status. They are the so-called economic migrants. Furthermore, to remain in Italy as an example, demographers foresee a decrease in the population by 2050 equal to about 10% less than the actual inhabitants. Moreover, the Italians who emigrate every year are between 100,000 and 200,000, and the pension system together with the economy are bound to come under increasing pressure<sup>7,8</sup>.

It, therefore, appears necessary to adopt policies that encourage births and prevent emigration. But we can also plan to review the management of the migratory phenomenon, modifying our approach. Also because from a health point of view it appears urgent to intervene.

Migrants suffer more than other groups from the obstacles related to health deter-

minants and universal health coverage, both as IDPs and in transit or hosting countries if reception and integration systems are not well prepared. Addressing migrant and refugee health is complex, of course, and conditions surrounding the migration process can also increase the vulnerability to ill health. Thus, it is critical to address both the factors influencing migrant access to health systems as well as health-related goals and targets outlined in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda to ensure “no one is left behind”<sup>9,10</sup>. Tackling mental health and the well-being issues of immigrants is vital to guarantee human security and the well-being of the incoming and hosting communities. We must focus on how to change approach from a policy point of view and facilitate the creation of a different environment that may strengthen regular immigration in Europe and therefore guarantee better and more effective integration paths for immigrants, ensuring the health and well-being of both migrants and hosting communities.

It could, then, be wise to take into account that for years, now, data from Inter-

national Agencies have told us that regular immigrants in Europe contribute 70% to employment flexibility, and that the continent needs 3 million immigrant workers every year<sup>11</sup>. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted how immigrant workers make up for those jobs that the natives no longer want to do (e.g. collecting food products in the agricultural field, housework and wellbeing support, construction). Official statistics tell us that foreigners regularly present in Italy, for example, work legally and contribute about 9% of gross domestic product (GDP), with a positive annual surplus for the state coffers which in the last 5 years has reached up to 4 billion euros, depending on the year<sup>12</sup>.

These are very significant figures, from which we could start to reimagine a change of direction in our migration policy: reviewing the existing legislation to allow migrants to enter on a regular basis not only to apply for Refugee Status, but, also, to legally work in Europe.

To take the Italian case as a possible example from where to start, it would be sufficient to review the actual legislation, reopening the entry quo-

tas for work reasons, having perhaps, identified in advance, with the business and trade associations and with the local authorities, the economic sectors and geographical areas where there is the greatest need for work and population growth in our country. This would also avoid having thousands of illegal immigrants who work illegally and are channelled towards deprivation and marginalization, rather than being inserted into reception and integration paths for the benefit of all, and would allow the organization of a structural reception and integration system, a system that could become weighted and effective, being able to predict numbers and places of entry each year.

Furthermore, this objective would also be possible in consideration of the fact that the countries of origin are interested, more than anything else, in the remittances that arrive from their compatriots who reside and work regularly abroad. In 2020, global remittances sent to their country by migrants working abroad amounted to 470 billion dollars. And at least another 40% is estimated to be untraceable<sup>13,14</sup>. While public develop-

ment aid and private foreign investments in developing countries were respectively 161 and 229 billion dollars, for a total of 390 billion dollars (World Bank data). In this context, it does not appear unrealistic to imagine that the countries of origin themselves would be interested in entering into agreements to limit and control the departures from their countries, in the face of greater guarantees on the possibility, for those who leave, to work and reside regularly in the country of destination, with prospects of integrating and bringing added value to the general health and wellbeing, to one's life, to the GDP of the countries of origin and to the economy of the hosting countries.

Thanks to a greater opening of the working-quota system, the issuance of entry visas could be increased in a weighted form, pre-departure training modules on site could be provided, especially for the most fragile categories, and coordinated repatriation from European countries to the countries of origin by the IOM (International Organization for Migration) could be agreed in an orderly and safe manner.

A revision of the current legislation on the management of the phenomenon would therefore bring benefits in

demographic, employment, economic terms and, thanks to a more efficient organization of arrivals, also in terms

of health and wellbeing. It is a great opportunity for which Europe is ready.

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