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The EU integration project through the lens of the Balkan-corridor 'migrant crisis'[1]

1. Introduction

This chapter examines the impact of the European 'migrant crisis' of 2014-2016 along the Balkan corridor on the EU integration project. We understand EU integration as both enlargement and deepening. We draw on data from a mixed methods study, which consisted of popular discourse analysis, policy analysis and elite interviews with EU-level decision-makers and national-level decision-makers in Germany and the UK.

The first round of popular discourse analysis was conducted in July-August, 2017, covering the time span January 2014 to August 2017, with the aim of informing the compilation of the interview topic guides. There were two subsequent rounds in November and December 2017, which update the themes generated in the first round. The popular discourse analysis was guided by search terms around the topics: post-2014 'migrant crisis' along the Balkan corridor - significant moments of contestation of EU integration project - both deepening and widening; Brexit and intersection with 'migrant crisis'; and Brexit and implications for Free Movement in EU. In total, 59 media outlets were considered from different countries and regions: 35 from six (then) EU countries (the UK, the Netherlands, Ireland, Greece, Germany and Belgium); nine from the EU level; three from two counties on the Balkan route (Serbia and Turkey); one representing the Balkan region; one from a key refugee producing country (Afghanistan); nine from other countries (the USA, Australia, Russia and Qatar); and finally one without any anchoring in a particular country or region. All the media outlets appear oriented towards an international audience as they are available in English and the majority is explicitly described as international. Both right- and left-wing leaning sources were included (e.g., Occupy.com (world-wide liberal), Daily Sabah (Turkish pro-governmental)). The articles within these sources were thematically analysed. A number of representative quotations from the discourse analysis are used in this chapter to supplement the findings from the elite interviews – the main data source drawn upon.

24 semi-structured elite interviews were conducted: 16 in Brussels, Belgium; 7 in Berlin, Germany; and 1 in Sheffield, UK. The purpose of elite interviewing is to shed light on what people think, how they interpret events or processes, what they have done or are planning to do, what their 'attitudes, values, and beliefs' are (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002; Tansey, 2007). It enables researchers to move beyond formal documentation, confirming and elaborating interpretations, while establishing rich historical detail on the thoughts of and actions of key participants (Tansey, 2007). When exploring the evolution of a policy field, there is arguably no substitute for talking directly to those involved.

Most of the interviewees were representatives of decision-making bodies either on the EU level or national levels of Germany and the UK, with the remaining being researchers or policy analysts working for NGOs or think tanks. The sample was purposeful, designed to capture expertise in areas of work linked to migration, both internal and external – EU Freedom of Movement and third country nationals (refugees and 'economic migrants') - as well as EU integration, Brexit and issues linked to security and border control. There was also an element of snowballing in constructing the sample. Interviewees who could comment on all the targeted areas were recruited. Despite our efforts, we did not secure

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participants from DG NEAR at the European Commission, which is the department that deals specifically with enlargement. However, other people were competent enough to discuss this matter due to their prior work at that department, or current work with the EU candidate countries. All the interviews were conducted face-to face, except for three that took place over Skype and one that happened in the form of e-mail correspondence. The interviews were undertaken between September and November 2017. The same topic guide was used for all the interviews, and the topic guide for the interviews in Berlin and Sheffield had additional questions that aimed to further clarify the German and UK stance, respectively. The face-to-face and Skype interviews were voice recorded, transcribed manually using edited transcript type, and analysed thematically along with the interview that took place over e-mail. Thematic analysis is recorded in a Word document on 51 pages which includes the list of themes and their subthemes and quotes that illustrate them. The confidentiality of responses and anonymity of interviewees was ensured by omitting the names of all the respondents and assigning a code to each interview (Brussels: 1-16, Berlin: 17-23, Sheffield: 24). The affiliation of most of the respondents was omitted except for a couple of those who did not mind to reveal it, although their position in the organization was not revealed. This chapter makes direct references to 17 out of the 24 interviews; however, the original codes assigned to each interview are retained.

The interview data, informed by popular discourse analysis, were supplemented by policy document analysis, which aimed to uncover more details about the ideas raised by the interviewees. Most of the policy documents were collected before the interviews to generate a timeline of the EU policy actions taken to support refugees prior to the 'migrant crisis', and later the policies that were produced to manage the 'migrant crisis'. Further documents were collected after the interviews in response to particular points raised by the interviewees. This chapter makes references to a few of those documents to support the analysis.

In this chapter, we consider what the 'migrant crisis' revealed about the state of affairs in the EU prior to and during the 'migrant crisis', and how this understanding informs the future vision of EU integration. This framework was inspired by some of the key findings from the interviews. One was a recurrent definition of the 'migrant crisis' by interviewees as the crisis of solidarity in the EU rather than merely a crisis of big numbers of migrants. Other related findings are that the 'migrant crisis' exposed pre-existing weaknesses and tensions in the institutional architecture of the EU. There were also questions raised about the future of the EU in light of the experience with managing the 'migrant crisis'. The rest of this chapter discusses how the European 'migrant crisis' has informed our understanding of the EU integration project in the three periods. The separation of the three periods is an organizational tool only, and it is important to note that the reality is more complex, with overlaps among the three periods.

2. What pre-existing weaknesses in the EU the 'migrant crisis' revealed

The 'migrant crisis' has shed light on a number of latent weaknesses in the EU, including: political divisions among the EU countries, the lack of the EU's preparedness to deal with such a crisis, a transparency deficit in the work of the EU institutions and questions around whether a common European identity existed.

2.1. Pre-existing divisions in the EU

The data suggest that the greatest controversies have been revolving around two regions: the Visegrad group (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia) and the UK.

A number of scholars discuss the idea that the Visegrad-group countries, or the V4, play a specific role in the EU integration project and stay on the margins of the integration promoted by the 'Mitteleuropa' - one of the German terms for Central Europe. In particular, Pakulski (2016) maintains that recent illiberal transformations in the V4 countries, sparked by the 'migrant crisis', question the benefits of the V4 for the deepening of the EU. The author also questions the survival of the V4 itself because of the recent controversies among the four members. According to Pakulski, this is despite the fact that the group was originally founded 'with the aim of coordinating the process of post-communist transformation often described as "a joint return to Europe"' (p.7). Similarly, Nagy (2017) discusses the 'drifting away' of the V4 countries from the rest of the continental EU particularly because of the reluctance of the V4 to take in refugees (p.2).

Apart from these debates, there is also a body of literature that discusses the integration of the V4 in the aftermath of its accession. Dangerfield (2008) highlights their underestimated success in integration. The idea that there was a general expectation that the region would integrate to a lesser extent implies that the region had its strong common interests linked to post-Soviet transformations, which differed from the processes other European countries were going through. Gotz (2006) is more explicit about the V4 group's separate interests, talking about non-convergence tendencies in the EU after the V4 group's accession, and a resulting 'clustered Europeanisation' (p.109). Our data from the interviews with EU-level decision-makers develops these ideas, highlighting a wide-spread acknowledgement that the V4 response to the 'migrant crisis' could have been predicted because of the pre-existing divisions between this group and the rest of the EU. The following quote from an interview with a Policy Officer at the European Council on Refugees and Exiles in Brussels illustrates this idea:

'The 'migrant crisis' has been a testing ground for a number of political trends that had been developing over the last years. This was a perfect issue to have those trends crystallised and come forward. If we look at this Visegrad group and other MSs – this hasn't been created by the 'migrant crisis'. The issues had been there and the 'migrant crisis' made them visible' (Interviewee 1).

The issue with the V4 group is not the only example of pre-existing divisions; another is the UK. It had often been seen as a 'reluctant member' even before the 'migrant crisis' and its decision to leave the EU:

'They [the UK] were always out of this Europe. They always opted out from things' (EU official, Interviewee 9).

Similar sentiments are present in popular discourse. The American *Brookings blog* refers to *'U.K. Prime Minister's David Cameron['s] usual awkward relationship with the rest of Europe'* (October 5, 2015). Obviously, this 'awkward relationship' was the case even before the 'migrant crisis' since Mr Cameron became Prime Minister four years before the beginning of the 'migrant crisis' in 2014. While some interviewees further explain that the UK has not been bound by all the actions of EU legislation, it is the opt out that the UK had from Schengen that seems to have been at the core of these debates. Below is an extract from quite an emotional recollection of an EU official about the UK-EU discussions of Schengen:

'I remember that in the early days of the development of the EU integration policy, the-then Home Secretary Jack Straw became ballistic during one of the Council meetings because the UK was mildly

criticised for lacking the focus on EU integration in its home policy, and because he told his interlocutor 'who are you to give us lessons about integration policy'… Well, the UK always wanted to be an island in the sense it didn't want to be part of Schengen' (Interviewee 2).

Such oppositional rhetoric from the UK was, of course, present before the 'migrant crisis', and has long been a topic in the EU integration scholarship. For instance, Fletcher (2009) discusses the 'balancing of the United Kingdom's 'Ins' and 'Outs'' in the EU (p.71). Although this rhetoric had not been significant enough to lead to a Brexit referendum and a leave vote prior to the 'migrant crisis', the anti-EU discourse in the UK seems to have moved to the forefront of the recent scholarly, policy and media debates.

2.2. Policy weaknesses

Another latent weakness of the EU exposed by the 'migrant crisis' relates to migration and refugee policy, and specifically to gaps in the Common Asylum System (CAS), which includes, but is not limited to, the Geneva Convention (1951), the Dublin Convention (1997), Dublin II Regulation (2003) and Dublin III Regulation (2013):

'It [the 'migrant crisis'] has revealed some cracks and it has revealed that Dublin is not efficient. It doesn't work in some cases' (a representative from the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS), an NGO for promoting open and inclusive decision-making, Interviewee 15).

Immigration into the EU, including through the refugee route, pre-existed the 'migrant crisis'. Despite some controversies over the Dublin Regulations (Kugiel, 2016), the established system had been adequate because the numbers had not been high prior to 2014 (Pastore and Henry, 2016). A researcher from a think tank in Berlin states:

'We had CAS on paper but there was never any consensus. No one cared because the system was not challenged. This system was put together over a period of about 15 years but it was finalised in mid and late 2000s when the inflow was very low, both in Germany and other member states' (Interviewee 20).

The interviewee refers to the Dublin Convention of 1997. However, the refugee policy in Europe dates back to the Geneva Convention of 1951, which is also acknowledged in popular discourse:

'The [Geneva] convention's relatively generous rules for accepting refugees were designed in 1951, when refugee numbers were lower and people-smuggling was not a big business' (UK newspaper 'The Economist', March 25, 2017).

Asylum policies in Europe prior to 2014 had not been criticised in the literature as strongly as they have been since, when the 'migrant crisis' exposed their weaknesses in managing the inflow of the refugees. One of the aspects of the asylum policies that had been criticised pre-2014 was poor reception conditions for refugees in Greece (Lenart, 2012). Indeed, the European Court of Human Rights had ruled in 2011 that Greece's degrading treatment of migrant detainees, along with deficiencies in its asylum system, meant it was not safe to return asylum seekers there under the Dublin Regulation. The EU's own Court of Justice had also ruled against transfers (European Commission Fact Sheet, 2016). Hurwitz (1999) meanwhile had criticised the Dublin Convention by stating that '[T]he scope of the Convention does not include applications for humanitarian protection, the conditions for family reunification are too strictly defined, and most importantly the difficulty of providing strong evidence of illegal entry into one of the Member States renders the Convention useless in many cases' (p.646). Apparently, the focus of the criticism of the asylum seeking policies in Europe had been different before the 'migrant crisis'.

It had been about the deprived rights of refugees and their limited opportunities for integration into the European society. The focus of criticism shifted somewhat subsequent to the onset of the 'crisis' from refugees to the EU itself, and how the EU could protect itself from the refugees and ensure that no member state was overburdened.

2.3. Problem with the EU institutions

The inadequate policy basis discussed above had been integral to a wider problem with the EU institutions. An EU official states that:

'There is a strong weakness related to democracy [in the EU institutions]. A lot of people have the impression that there is something above them that they don't have the influence on' (Interviewee 17)

Although this official talks about this problem in the present tense, it had clearly existed before the 'migrant crisis' since it is related to the nature of decision-making and institutional structure:

'The transparency of the EU institutions is needed, especially the EC. Most of people see Brussels and the EC as democratic institutions but it isn't, basically. People in Germany see the EU as a whole as a democratic institution but not the EC. Those people are nominated and not elected. Another big debate here was the transatlantic trade deal. It was negotiated behind closed doors and people were given very limited access to the trade agreement ahead of the time… This leads to the disenchantment of the EU' (Representative from an NGO in Berlin, Interviewee 23).

Even though a perceived lack of transparency in the EU institutions existed before the 'migrant crisis', it was not so salient a sentiment. Literature written before then reflects this tendency. It can be exemplified by Zurn's (2000) work about the EU as a case of democratic governance beyond the nation-state. In addition, literature which looked into a democratic deficit in the EU existed (e.g., Follesdal and Hix, 2006); however, it was not as common as it is now.

2.4. Cracks in the idea of a common European identity

European identity before the 'migrant crisis' had not been questioned as much as it has been in the retrospect, post-2014. The idea of diversity had been emphasized, and some cracks in this idea had been implied in the literature published before the 'migrant crisis'. In particular, Derrida (1992) highlights diversity by stating that the European identity-seeking process is about building commonality together with the unavoidable respect for differences. Some weaknesses of the idea that European identity is about the respect for differences is suggested by Dale and Robertson (2009). The authors argue that a single view of Europe and what it means to be 'European' is missing. Both of these statements suggest that European identity never just existed out there, it is something that is always in the making. In light of this, Checkel and Katzenstein (2009) describe European identity both as a project and as a process.

The issues analysed in the literature above had not been positioned as *a crisis* of identity. The discourse that an invisible prequel to the crisis of European identity had existed even before 2014 emerged in the context of the 'migrant crisis'. It was a tipping point that challenged the collective identity which, in its turn, did not 'pass the test'. This discourse can be traced in the interview with an EU policy officer whose speculation implies that there had been a lack of collective identity in Europe before the 'migrant crisis':

'We have to think whether we are ready to become multi-religious, multi-cultural region' (Interviewee 7).

There is a recognition in popular discourse that in the context of the 'migrant crisis', far-right groups position religious and race diversity in Europe that existed before the 'migrant crisis' as the crisis of identity:

'One of the collateral damages of post-truth politics is that not only the present gets distorted – the past gets rewritten as well. Racist videos online depict fantasies of Europe "before" and "after" migration. "Before" is depicted with orderly scenes of 1950s streets, shops and parks where an all-white population strolls or plays happily. "After" is groups of dark-faced men attacking women, rioting against the police, shouting "Allahu Akbar"' (UK newspaper 'The Guardian', October 31, 2016).

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Clearly, the 'migrant crisis' has revealed a number of weak dimensions to the EU that seem to have existed before 2014, although most of them were not visible, or at least were not in the centre of political, public and media attention. Key weaknesses back then included: political divisions among the EU countries, the lack of EU's preparedness to deal with such a crisis, the lack of transparency in the work of the EU institutions and the lack of a common European identity.

3. What problems the 'migrant crisis' of 2014-2016 brought about

The year of 2014 marked the start of a dramatic increase in the numbers of refugees in Europe, particularly along the Balkan corridor. The EU's widely perceived inability to deal with the challenges hit on its weak sides and deepened the cracks. Furthermore, the 'migrant crisis' contributed to EU disintegration in the case of the UK by generating confusion over the categories of migrants, and thus, reinforcing pro-Brexit sentiments. These also had some ripple effects elsewhere in the EU and its candidate countries in growing right-wing electoral gains.

3.1. More problems around a common European identity

The aggravation of the European identity question became quite prominent. Postelnicescu (2016) claims that 'Europe is nowadays at a crossroad, divided between the need to remain faithful to its core democratic values and freedoms, maintaining an area of freedom and justice and the need to protect its citizens against the new terrorism and the rise of nationalistic leaders and parties that require less Europe and more power back to the nation states' (p.201). This development became correlated with the raise of xenophobia, particularly biases about religion and sometimes 'race', in many EU member states. This was expressed in the reactions of certain member states to the EU quotas on the relocation of refugees. The EU attempted to promote burden sharing and help Greece as the country of first entry of refugees along the Balkan route who travel to the EU by suggesting relocation quotas. Council Decision (2015) is an exemplary document where provisional measures were suggested. However, the idea of burden sharing based on solidarity and common European identity met strong opposition in some EU member states:

'When you've got the Commission proposing solidarity between the member states: the relocation of people coming in so that it won't be one or two states dealing with all of them. That looked like a very logical conclusion to draw. A lot of Home Office ministers agreed with that. Parliament agreed with that. And then it looked like Home Office ministers turned to other ministers in their countries and they said

to Home Office ministers, "What were you thinking?"… When Germany hoped that other counties would step in, the opposite happened''. It raised questions about how united the EU was. These cracks existed before but this made them more visible' (EU policy-making level official, Interviewee 6).

The following quote from the UK media outlet *The Huffington Post* further illustrates this disunity by emphasizing how Islamophobic many member states turned out to be:

'British, Bulgarian, Czech, Dutch and Hungarian government representatives and politicians have recently made xenophobic comments about migrants. Poland took in some 60 Christian-only families from Syria in July [2016]. The Baltic States are also becoming increasingly anti-Muslim, and in Lithuania there is a discussion about banning the wearing of the burka to prevent Muslim migrants from coming to the country' (September 1, 2016).

Such Islamophobia in certain countries in the EU in the context of the 'migrant crisis' ultimately questions the idea of a common European identity. It shows that only some member states may be ready to accept and integrate the refugees the majority of whom are Muslim and not white. Such readiness of some states to integrate refugees signals that the identity of the local population in these states is inclusive. Other member states have not appeared as open to such developments.

3.2. Brexit

There is a wide literature which emphasizes that EU Freedom of Movement was the main area of debate leading up to Brexit (Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Freeden, 2017; Sayer, 2017). In particular, Freeden (2017) argues that '[A]t the height of the crisis of refugees from Syria, Africa and other middle eastern countries, I pointed to one striking difference between sentiments on migration on the European continent and in the UK. In continental Europe, people were afraid of refugees; in the UK, people were afraid of Europeans. Of course, this needs the kind of fine-tuning that a media soundbite cannot provide' (p.1). The scholar recognizes that the media has little potential to explain the nuances of the underlying issues. There are also more provocative accounts of the events in the UK Leave Campaign, such as this one: 'The Leave Campaign, and particularly UKIP, made immigration a wedge issue in the referendum, one of whose most enduring images was of Nigel Farage standing in front of a billboard-size poster showing an endless line of refugees with the caption: "BREAKING POINT: The EU has failed us all. We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders." So did Britain's tabloid press, which amplified local horror stories (whether true or false)... Opinion polls repeatedly showed immigration to be a major concern among potential Leave voters.' (Sayer, 2017: 99).

Our research takes these statements further and suggests that the media and right-wing politicians in the UK did not simply fail to convey the distinction between refugee migration into the EU and the movement of EU citizens within the EU under Freedom of Movement provisions, but rather generated confusion over the categories of migrants. This was a very strong theme in the interviews. An EU official speaks for most of the decision-makers that were interviewed, stating that:

'It ['migrant crisis'] gave Farage and his friends some meat on the grill' (Interviewee 4).

Another official from the European Commission explains how the confusion was encouraged by politicians and the media:

'There was a media driven campaign to confuse or equate humanitarian migration with economic migration. Further confusion was created by mixing up intra-EU migration with the migrants coming

from the Syria crisis. The former type of migration relates to the EU Treaty rights to reside and have access to social services… In the case of the UK the migrant crisis has been confused and conflated with the issue of net immigration especially from the new Member States leading to a media maelstrom which lent credibility to misinformation and erroneous analysis presented by the Brexit camp' (Interviewee 13).

This was in the circumstances when the UK did not actively engage in the redistribution of refugees:

'British involvement in the management of the 'migrant crisis' has been minimal. We've seen the UK dragging its heels in the migration policy in Europe, it's been slow to cooperate except in some negative instances. For instance, they are very happy to avail the Dublin regulation but not so happy to show solidarity to the arrivals in Greece' (Policy analyst on the EU level, Interviewee 16).

The interviewees were also asked whether the EU could have done anything to prevent Brexit. A common answer to this was that it, indeed, could – by informing the public in the UK about the work and principles of the EU. However, there is also a justification for why this was not done:

'…the EU has a reputation of not mingling, not talking because it's taken as propaganda for the EU. If I refute some of the questionable statements of Farage, it looks like I do propaganda and give Farage even more power. This could have been done by the UK leaders to refute every single line of fanatics and liars. Here is the truth, if you like it you stay, if you don't like it you leave' (EU official, Interviewee 4).

3.3. Right-wing political gains beyond the UK

The anti-EU sentiments in the UK strengthened significantly during the 'migrant crisis' and led to the leave vote in the 2016 referendum in the UK. We can trace a similar right-wing boost beyond the UK, expressed in countries suspending Schengen by reestablishing national borders, and even putting up fences along the borders to restrain the movement of refugees. This resulted in confrontations among the member states. It coincided with the 'migrant crisis' and Brexit campaign and the aftermath of the referendum. Thus, this boost can be seen, arguably, as a ripple effect of the relationship between Brexit and the 'migrant crisis'. The following two quotes from the interviews reflect this link to both phenomena:

'We can see that more and more right-wing governments are appearing everywhere - last week in Austria, before also in Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, there are movements in other countries. There is a development which is more national, and it weakens the European idea. This is linked to the European 'migrant crisis'' (Representative of a decision-making body in Berlin, Interviewee 17).

'AfD which is a new right-wing populist party used similar arguments [to what UKIP used]. I am not sure if they referred to Brexit as a position to follow in Germany. But their position is Euro-sceptic and sometimes Euro-hostile. They would vote for border controls, moratorium on Schengen and freedom of movement' (Researcher/think tank representative in Berlin, Interviewee 20).

The respondents do acknowledge the rise of the right but they do not see it leading to further disintegration of the EU. On the contrary, the UK media outlet *Venitism Worldpress* paints a more dramatic picture, which was perhaps a technique to reinforce the support for exiting the EU in the post-Brexit-vote UK:

'Slovaks want a referendum right now. Nevertheless, Slovexiteers are at the helm of the Council of EU! Frexit, Nexit, Auxit, Dexit, Czexit, Slovexit, Italexit, and Grexit are coming soon. Nobody can stand the diktats of Brussels' (July 2, 2016).

The potential for further exits from the EU is acknowledge by Oliver (2017). However, the author positions such a scenario as one of a number of possible directions for EU development, and examines it as a theoretical debate about EU disintegration, rather than a route to be expected in practice in the future.

Not only have the right wing aspirations strengthened in the EU member states. There is a similar tendency in the EU candidate countries as well. Turkey is a telling example. Radicalisation in Turkey questioned the ultimate desirability of Turkey's potential membership in the EU, despite the success of the EU-Turkey deal:

'…everybody [in the EU] is happy with the EU-Turkey deal because there almost 3 million of refugees in Turkey… I know that all political parties are against Turkey's candidacy after what happened in the past year. The whole political system of Mr Erdogan, the current Turkish government has no support in the European Parliament at all' (EU policy-making level official, Interviewee 3).

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This section has examined how the pre-existing weaknesses in the EU were aggravated during the 2014-2016 'migrant crisis' and how they served as a fertile ground for more problems to grow with the onset of the 'migrant crisis'. Examples of this are related to the deepening of the cracks in the idea of a common European identity, the rise of the right in the EU in the cases of Brexit and recent similar confrontations beyond the UK.

4. Way forward for EU integration

The problems that the 'migrant crisis' brought about challenged the EU as an institution, its established ways of work and its prospects for further survival and integration. However, one of the messages of our research is a strong belief of decision-makers on the EU level and selected national levels that the EU should be able to survive despite the problems it has been facing. At the time when the interviews were conducted there was a lack of clarity as to the future of integration. Nevertheless, the interviewees expressed some ideas as to how EU integration may unfold in the future.

4.1. The EU is likely to survive

All sorts of divisions in the EU reinforced by the 'migrant crisis' sparked a debate in the media about whether the EU would survive at all. Examples include:

'Professor who predicted Brexit and Trump claims European Union will cease to exist in 2017' (UK newspaper Express, January 4, 2017).

'Brexit will create new dividing lines within the EU... Brexit will also create new dividing lines within the United Kingdom; Scotland already demands a new independence referendum. I would not be surprised if both negotiating partners – the EU and the UK –fall apart as a result of Brexit.' (German newspaper Zeit, March 29, 2017).

This concern was also acknowledged by a number of interviewees; however, none of them thought that the collapse of the EU was a realistic possibility. Rather, they were all optimistic about the survival of the EU. Here is an exemplary quote by an official working on Strategy *European Migrant Smuggling Centre* at Europol, which is an agency of the European Commission:

'I don't see the EU disintegrating… I see this crisis as a disintegrating factor but I also see this as an opportunity now for integrating the EU more' (Interviewee 14).

Despite the optimism about the EU's future survival, respondents were much more uncertain about 'the how' of achieving it.

'There is a need for a new vision. There is a job to be done in terms of helping people understand why the EU matters. The post-war peace project is losing ground, so what's the project now?' (EU policy-making level official, Interviewee 6).

4.2. EU integration strategies for the future

The belief that the EU has a future but, at the same time, its unclear vision in the eyes of the decision-makers prompts the need to discuss the prospects of the EU integration after the 'migration crisis'. Interviews with decision-makers on the EU level and selected national levels suggest that the EU integration in post-'migrant crisis' may unfold in the following directions: locating migration in the center of EU policy-making, questioning the ultimate desirability of further enlargement, finding ways to cooperate with the UK after Brexit and focusing on the deepening of the relationships among the existing member states.

4.2.1. Putting migration at the centre of EU policy-making

Since the Lisbon European Council meeting on March 23-24 in 2000, the main goal of the EU had been to become the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world (European Parliament, 2000). This aim has been reinforced through a number of initiatives, such as the Bologna Process, which predominantly relies on facilitating common European identity through integrating European topics in education and harmonising educational structures in Europe (Kushnir, 2016). According to Grek (2008), education had been emerging as a key policy-making mechanism in the EU prior to the 'migrant crisis' – '…education is slowly moving from the margins of European governance to the very centre of its policy making' (p.208). The 'migrant crisis', however, has displaced this process somewhat, moving migration more centre-stage in EU policy-making. According to a representative of the European Commission who was interviewed in the framework of this research:

'It's a very new policy area on the agenda in Europe... Migration concerns were always seen as a side dish way down in the list of priorities... Today, immigration policy is in the centre' (Interviewee 2).

The growing focus on migration can be traced in a number of recent developments. One of them is the work on shaping a Common Asylum Policy in Europe. A number of steps have been taken, such as, for instance, working out an EU List of Safe Countries of Origin (2015), the EU-Turkey Agreement (2016) and proposal for Dublin IV Regulation (2016). Each of these new steps was surrounded by controversy Here is an example of the struggles around a safe list of countries, discussed in the EU level media outlet *Euroactive*:

'12 member states have compiled "safe lists", yet there is not one single country that appears on all 12 lists, emphasising the bloc's failures to coordinate on a common refugee policy' (April 14, 2016).

The focus on migration is likely to dominate EU policy-making in the future, too. In particular, there is growing investment in refugee-producing regions in the world in order to stop migration at the point of origin (Kühnhardt, 2017). The logic behind this investment is explained by an EU official:

'It was once said that if you take the world as a global market, if you have capital, money, investment capacity in one part of the world, and you have human capacity in another part of the world, there will be adjustment. Either the bank power comes to where human capacity is, or vice versa. If you don't want migrants then you share prosperity with the countries that produce refugees' (Interviewee 2).

EU decision-makers understand that this investment has potential to reduce migration but it will never completely stop it. Therefore, there is a need for the creation of legal routes of migration to prevent the dangerous ways refugees from the Middle East used to reach the EU during the 2014-2016 'migrant crisis'. One of the most significant developments in this respect is opening up to refugees a skilled migration route:

'Highly skilled refugees can apply through the Blue Card route. Refugees can have skills and be economic migrants. That's a very new idea. The idea is that we can choose third country economic migrants on the basis of their skills, income, etc' (Representative of a decision-making body in Berlin, Interviewee 18).

The Blue Card initiative dates back way before the 'migrant crisis' (Blue Card Directive (2009), now replaced by Blue Card Directive (2021)). It is an EU-wide work permit program that allows high-skilled non-EU nationals to work and live in any country within the European Union. This initiative excludes Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom, as they are not subject to the proposal.

The prominence of migration in EU policy-making is echoed in all the debates about the future development of the EU. This pertains to the questions of further EU enlargement, the EU-UK relationship after Brexit, and deepening of the relationships among the remaining member states.

4.2.2. Questioning further enlargement

Questioning the ultimate desirability of EU enlargement to the candidate countries – that at the time of the interviews were Turkey, FYROM, Macedonia, Albania and Serbia – is a very strong theme in the answers. The following quote illustrates this:

'…the president of the European Commission said that there would be no enlargement during this period. There are many political negotiations but the enlargement to Serbia or FYROM or any other country is not a political reality just now' (EU policy-making level official, Interviewee 3).

The official refers to Jean-Claude Juncker's speech *State of the Union Address 2017* on September 13, 2017 (European Commission Press Release Database, 2018).

Speculations of decision-makers during interviews provide further explanations. One of the explanations of the lack of prospects for enlargement is that it has been difficult to reach consensus around the redistribution of migrants and the idea that re-establishing national borders compromises

good relationships among the member states, as the same EU policy-making level official, mentioned above, claims:

'…nobody is interested in bringing new actors in this process. The process with 28 MSs is already absolutely complicated because everybody says we have some national specifics, far-right parties... It's all difficult but still possible' (Interviewee 3).

Deepening the relationship among the existing member states is prioritised now over widening. This preference is also strengthened by the concern of facilitating more intra-EU migration from the new member states if they are accepted, although this concern is not very strong:

'…potential workers coming from Albania or Kosovo, there will be no one open to that idea. This is one of the biggest problems if we talk about enlargement, such as Albania or Kosovo coming into the European Union... There would be more social tensions than we already have' (EU policy-making level official, Interviewee 3).

What is discussed above is a potential fifth wave of the EU enlargement after the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 that formally established the EU. There were also waves in 1995 when Austria, Finland and Sweden joined; then in 2004 when Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia joined; in 2007 when Bulgaria and Romania joined, and finally in 2013 when only Croatia joined (European Council, 2017). The advantages of EU enlargement for the EU as an institution during each of the prior waves back then was also questioned, for instance, in Sjursen (2006) and Grabbe (2014). However, such strong concern that the interviewees expressed in relation to any further enlargement was not captured in that literature.

4.2.3. Shaping the UK-EU relationship post-Brexit

The question about how the EU-UK relationship should look like after Brexit had yielded, at the time of the interviews, endless public, media and political debates. A dominant voice in the media maintained that despite the agreements made between the two parties, Brexit would mean the end of the privileges the UK had enjoyed as an EU member. This was visible both in the UK and non-UK media. The following quote from the UK media outlet *BBC* exemplifies that:

'Free movement of people between the EU and UK will end in March 2019, UK government ministers have said' (July 27, 2017).

Despite this seeming readiness of both parties to cut off their ties, the interviews with the decision-makers on the EU level suggested that at least the EU as an institution would favour retaining the close cooperation with the UK as much as possible after Brexit because of security, for instance:

'The UK is an extremely important player when it comes to the international security of the EU. Since Brexit is happening, we hope that the UK will remain in security agencies such as Europol. It wouldn't be a good decision to stop participating in such agencies and cooperating with other MSs on the multilateral level in security. It has already been mentioned by the UK authorities that they would remain in Europol at least' (an official working on Strategy European Migrant Smuggling Centre at Europol, interviewee 14).

This cooperation was favoured by the EU regardless of its strong stance about cancelling the benefits that the EU membership presupposes for the states that decide to leave, wishing to avoid some disadvantages of being a member:

'If you want to get out, like the UK, you get out… It depends on what Theresa May wants to do. Europe sticks to its principles. This is Europe… These are the rules of the club... If you are not very receptive and can't change anything, you have to leave the club' (EU official, Interviewee 4).

4.2.4. Deepening of the relationships among the remaining member states

Deepening has become a necessity in the EU in the context of the growing controversies among the member states about the relocation of refugees and the erecting of country borders, as well as in the aftermath of Brexit and mushrooming right-wing movements throughout the EU. The interviews with the decision makers on the EU level suggest that the deepening of the EU integration for a better future is based on the securitisation of the EU, and considering the reformation of the EU into a two-tier region. These two tiers mean the core and peripheral countries that would have different levels of commitment to the common EU principles, and would also benefit unequally from the privileges the EU membership would offer.

An EU official in the internal security domain presents the securitisation of the EU as the foundation of EU deepening. This involves working out mechanisms to protect the EU from external terrorism, as well as preventing the radicalisation of the citizens in the EU. This is ensured by security services of the EU through the cooperation among the member states and, more importantly, through the cooperation with the neighbouring countries of the EU:

'There is cooperation with third countries, counter-terrorism dialogue with countries of origin, countries of passage, countries at the borders of the EU. All of this can play an important role in preventing the movement in the first place… There is cooperation with countries along the route, with Turkey in particular, countries in the Western Balkans… There are countries that are so close to the EU that the effective use of our internal instruments there can help to protect the security of the EU… Security is the foundation. We have already involved the Ministers of Education, of Healthcare, etc' (Interviewee 8).

The same EU official in the internal security domain further explains how the promotion of local level democracy in the EU states facilitates security in the EU overall:

'The quality of democracy on the local level matters…All of this needs to come together in reality. And reality is the street, the school, the family. That's the world where security happens or fails to happen… It's about having trust in oneself, believing that the other one trusts you, trusting the rule of law, the state, the objectivity and the effectiveness of the institutions, trusting that if you do anything illegal, you will be in trouble, that there are boundaries' (EU official in the internal security domain, Interviewee 8).

Another direction for EU deepening is linked with the debates around two-tier Europe. These debates started long before the 'migrant crisis'. For instance, Radosevic (2004) analysed the prospects of two-tier or even a multi-tier Europe ten years earlier, and argued for the multi-tier EU because based on the national innovation capacity there were three groups of countries in the EU, with the Central Eastern European countries falling into two groups. The concern about various types of divisions in the EU has been heightened following the 'migrant crisis':

'The lack of solidarity in the EU has been noted by Western European countries. There will be an interesting development in this direction… The EU would move on with a two-tier approach… This would be the difference between those countries that want more integration in terms of economical and tax harmonisation, migration, and some countries that want to stay behind. It would be their choice not to move forward. This would have consequences for financial solidarity. At the moment, these are only words, but it may happen. This development has been in the documents for some years but it's more valid now' (European Commission official, Interviewee 5).

It was felt that the chances of implementing multiple tiers in the EU in practice were stronger than ever. Even though the idea behind such a reformation of the EU is to improve solidarity among those member states that desire solidarity, some interviewees have expressed a deep concern about a potential negative impact of this plan on the EU as an institution:

'I am worried that we will have deepening integration without some member states… It would be the end of the European dream if you have a centre with 15 or so countries in the Eurozone, and all other countries on the outside. There will be bad consequences for many countries… Since we are not able to bring all these countries together, then the EU in today's form is over' (EU policy-making level official, Interviewee 3).

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The future of the EU is unclear; however, decision-makers on the EU level have identified a number of directions to shape EU integration. These include: putting migration in the center of policy-making in the EU, questioning the ultimate desirability of further enlargement, finding ways to cooperate with the UK after Brexit and focusing on deepening the relationships among the existing member states.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has attended to data from a mixed-method study to analyse the impact of the European 'migrant crisis' along the Balkan corridor on EU integration. This chapter has considered what the 'migrant crisis' revealed about the state of affairs in the EU prior and during the 'migrant crisis', and how this understanding informs the future vision of EU integration.

The EU had had a number of weak elements prior to the 'migrant crisis', although they were not so visible. These included: political divisions among the EU countries, the lack of EU's preparedness to deal with a crisis like that, the lack of transparency in the work of the EU institutions and the lack of a common European identity. The numbers of refugees and other types of migrants making their way to the EU grew significantly between 2014 and 2016, particularly through the Balkan corridor. The aggravation of the European identity question became quite prominent. Moreover, the 'migrant crisis' contributed to EU disintegration by reinforcing pro-Brexit sentiments in the UK. These also echoed in other EU member states. Right-wing parties gained strength in the EU candidate countries too. The problems that the 'migrant crisis' brought about challenged the EU as an institution and its prospects for further integration. Although the future of the EU is unclear, decision-makers on the EU level have identified a number of directions to shape EU integration in the post-'migrant crisis' context. These include: putting migration in the center of policy-making in the EU, questioning the ultimate desirability of further enlargement, finding ways to cooperate with the UK after Brexit and focusing on deepening the relationships among the existing member states.

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