“Crisis, Oh That Crisis”! The Financial Crisis and its Impacts on Migration in Europe.

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The seemingly perennial Eurozone crisis has been front-page news for several years now, and it shows only scant signs of settling anytime soon. The crisis is discussed everywhere, and in all conference settings dealing with Europe its reverberations have come to be a natural topic for discussion and analysis. To devote yet another edited volume to the manifestations of the crisis might, therefore, seem to be a redundant thing to do, but we feel there are aspects that are not really caught by the daily media angle on the theme. In much of the daily coverage, attention is geared towards addressing the crisis as a protracted but acute phenomenon that will eventually come to pass; the harsh truth is that it may not necessarily come to pass. Rather, the crisis may be a symptom of a long-term, chronic decline of the European Union in relation to other parts of the world, most notably the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). If decline is still regarded as too strong a word—a reaction that we have often encountered—then it may at least be apt to talk about “diffusion, defusion, dilution, fragmentation” or “mutation” into something more adapted to the changing circumstances (Walker 2013: 10). It is imperative to address the long-term consequences of these occurring shifts, and it is a responsibility for scholars to engage in critical discussion about them.

Starting in 2008, as the severe financial crisis first hit the United States and then spread to other parts of the globe, the protracted downturn in world economic growth has been especially notable in the Eurozone. However, variation between countries in the zone should be acknowledged. In Figure 1 and Table 1, the economic development (in GDP) for a number of countries over the last ten years is described. In Figure 1, the GDP development in the Eurozone is compared to the corresponding development in the US, Japan and three BRICS countries (China, India and Russia).
The financial crisis hit all regions of the globe, especially in 2008 and 2009. The US development begins a somewhat longer downward trend already from 2004 on, with – like the EU, Russia and Japan – negative growth for 2009. Japan’s GDP shows significant ups and downs over the second half of the period. Moreover, compared to the Eurozone countries, China and India display less negative effects of the crisis and still had positive growth rates even during the crisis years of 2008 and 2009. Finally, whereas the BRICS countries show substantially higher economic growth during the pre-recession years, Russia’s GDP development since 2008 is in line with that of the Eurozone, Japan and the US. Its plunge was remarkably deep in 2009, but its recovery has been quick in the following years.

After 2010, both China and India show lower growth rates compared to the period before the recession. These indications add to the gravity of the problem, as it cannot be automatically assumed that China and the other BRICS will be able to come to the financial rescue of the West. No quick fixes seem to be on offer; moreover, to the extent that rescue by the hands of the rising economic powers among the BRICS has finally been somewhat grudgingly accepted by the elites and the public in the US and the EU, this kind of help may simply not be available for very long. To put it differently, the cavalry might not necessarily be coming when needed.
Complementing Figure 1, Table 1 shows the percentage change in GDP split by period and country. Comparing GDP developments over time, all countries experienced positive GDP growth rates during 2003-2007. In particular, many former Soviet-bloc countries—as well as Turkey, Iceland, Ireland and the other BRICSs—showed high growth rates during this period. In contrast, the crisis period 2008-2012 shows many countries with average, negative or very low positive GDP growth. Exceptions are Poland, Turkey and, to a lesser extent, Slovakia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, with growth rates over 2 percent per year. Other countries that are comparatively less affected by the recession are Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Malta, Montenegro and, again, the BRICS. The third column of Table 1, where we show the average GDP for each country in the years 2008 and 2009, offers a more detailed view of the GDP development during the crisis years.

“We will not come back to the old normal”

In his State of the Union address to the European Parliament on 11 September 2013, the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, seemed confident that economic recovery was finally in sight. Given his role and position, this is what could be expected: his task is to encourage and to try to inspire joint efforts and hard work, not to sow the seeds of despair. Yet, in his address, he cautioned that there was no room for complacency, and, in a rhetorical twist, he urged that “it is not time to throw in the towel, it is time to roll up our sleeves.” So, according to the President of the Commission, hard work was still required of all member states in order to reach the recovery that could be glimpsed around the corner. Yet, there was one interesting nuance offered in his speech with relevance for our thesis that the economic downturn might be more than a temporary and transient phenomenon:

These are challenging times, a real stress test for the EU. The path of permanent and profound reform is as demanding as it is unavoidable. Let’s make no mistake:
there is no way back to business as usual. Some people believe that after this everything will come back as it was before. They are wrong. This crisis is different. This is not a cyclical crisis, but a structural one. We will not come back to the old normal. We have to shape a new normal. We are in a transformative period of history. We have to understand that, and not just say it. But we have to draw all the consequences from that, including in our state of mind, and how we react to the problems (Barroso 2013).

Assessing global trends of recent decades, the EU seems, as indicated above, to have become more marginalised within the domains of politics and the economy as it is overtaken by more formidable actors in other parts of the globe. We believe that this is what lies behind Barroso’s warning. The EU is simply no longer best in class, if indeed it ever has been, and it is clearly being outpaced in terms of economic growth by the BRICS. Europe’s political and economic status is further compounded by its relationship with the seemingly similar-dwindling United States. Twenty years after the downfall of the Soviet Union, the US has started to reel from the consequences of imperial overstretch as forecasted by Paul Kennedy (2010). No longer the dynamic engine of world economy that it used to be, and increasingly beset by political sclerosis, the US seems slowly but steadily on its way towards losing its role, attained after the end of the Cold War, as the world’s sole superpower. Here we arrive at a question that is as interesting as it is potentially alarming: How will politicians and the public deal with the circumstance that even if fair weather will come at last, it might not be as fair as it used to be?

To introduce, then, the more specific focus of our volume, we turn to one structural, long-term problem which Barroso did not even seem to allude to in his State of the Union address: Europe’s demographic crisis and the resultant demand for labour migration. If anything, this problem appears likely to become more severe in the future, when the average EU population will grow older, leaving fewer people with the responsibility to work and cater to the needs of the retired and the generations that have not yet entered the work force. Labour migration from outside the EU thus seems to be the only viable remedy (Hansen 2012). However, continuous large-scale in-migration poses risks for European cohesion as it opens up for narrow, nationalist knee-jerk reflexes among politicians and the public (Rydgren 2012). Indeed, the extent to which Barroso managed to avoid this fundamental question in his address was striking; in fact, the term ‘migration’ was not used even once in the speech. (There was one quick reference each to
‘discrimination’ and to ‘diversity’, but that was all.) So, if the State of Union address and its omission of the issue of migration was indicative of the insights and priorities of the Commission with regard to one of the most fundamental, long-term issues the EU will have to address to establish some kind of sustainable economic development for the future, this sign was alarming indeed.

The problematic relationship between demands for large-scale in-migration, on the one hand, and adversarial reactions on the part of the majority populations, on the other, as well as resultant relations between majorities and minorities, form the basis of this anthology. This structural conflict is, in many respects, brought to a head in connection with the crisis as the chronic tension between economic sustainability, in the long run, and political cohesion (and sustainability), in the short run, comes to the surface of political discourse.

Unfortunately, in times of crisis there is an allure in the prospect of simple solutions. A fruitful explanatory perspective to this is the one suggested by identity theory and literature on socio-cultural risk; the point of departure is that individuals and groups, due to common human weaknesses of character, tend to present themselves in as favourable light as possible. Blame for shortcomings is externalised and attributed to individuals and groups deemed not worthy of belonging (Billig 1995; Douglas 1992, 2002; Petersson 2006).

The construction of the concept of the Other as an enemy or a threat has acquired added importance in the struggle for economic and political coping with the crisis in the individual EU member states. These Others may be of different kinds and are cast in different negative roles, ranging from inept well-intended do-gooders to outright and scheming enemies. However, the basic function of this kind of thinking and arguing tends to be the same; the collective Self is freed from blame. In the political myth-making, one’s own nation and ethnic group is still superior and without major flaws, but it is severely beset by different kinds of threats from the quarters of the Others.

In other words, in the context of the crisis, prominent political and socio-cultural discourses will tend to put the blame elsewhere, outside of one’s own collective. Given the negative assessments of multiculturalism and its tenets by the highest-level European politicians in recent years, it lies close at hand that migrants will be attributed the role of scapegoats in this populism-inspired
debate. Placing the blame on migrant Others is no more than a placebo which might alleviate the emotional pain of the consequences of European decline in the very short-term. However, it is a tendency that might decrease the social and political sustainability of the European project; consequently, the short-term gains risk being as costly as they are precarious.

Recession and the effects on migration

From an economic theoretical perspective, international migration is, on the one hand, the determinants of selectivity from the supply side, that is, the characteristics of the migrant. And, on the other hand, the demand side, receiving country opportunities as well as restrictions through immigration law (Chiswick 2008). Given the large pool of potential individuals that want to engage in international migration, the immigration law and reinforcement of it by a particular country influences the actual immigration flow together with the individuals’ ability, schooling, skills, health, occupational status and subsequently their employment and earnings prospects as well as their further integration in both the short and long run. One of the standard suggestions in economic migration literature is that migrants tend to be favorably self-selected on the basis of skills, health and other traits. In addition, non-economic migrants like, family reunion migrants and refugee migrants are less favourably positioned when it comes to labour market integration since other than economic reasons are important in their migration decision (Chiswick 2008). For an overview and analysis of refugee immigration in the OECD, see Hatton (2011).

To date, few have analysed the current recession and its effects on migration. One way to do this is by adopting a historical perspective (Khoser 2009). Studying Ireland, Spain and the UK and comparing the years 1995-2006 to 2009 and 2010, Kuptsch (2012) observes both that unemployment rates increased dramatically and that immigrants showed consistently higher unemployment rates than natives in crisis contexts.
However, the effects of economic crises on migration are complex, and the causality is often not easy to measure (Khoser 2009). Moreover, the effect is often lagged in time (Borjas 1994). Different forms of migration, mainly based on the migration policy applied both by receiving and by sending countries affect the extent to which migration is influenced by economic crises. Asylum seekers and family-reunion migrants do not move primarily for economic reasons, and this kind of migration should, therefore, be less affected than labour migration by the current crisis. Moreover, these migration policies vary between countries and, accordingly, affect countries differently. Also, in countries where labour migration is important, the effects of the crisis will vary depending on the human capital profiles of the migrants and the specific demands in the receiving country. In some countries, labour migrants are concentrated to specific sectors of the economy which can, to various extents, be affected by economic recessions. For example, in some countries, labour migrants are concentrated to the construction sector, which has been particularly hard-hit by the current crisis.

The migrants’ gender can also be an affecting factor. This is particularly important when migrant women are concentrated to certain sectors of the economy and these sectors are hit by an economic recession. As newcomers to the labour market, young people are another category likely to be particularly affected by unemployment during times of recession; consequently, the age of migrants is another important factor. Finally, immigration and emigration are also affected by the structural economic development of a country as different countries are in different stages of economic development; as a result, the propensities both of emigration from a country and of immigration to a country are impacted (Fisher et al. 1997).

Although difficult to assess, one can attempt to connect the migration streams to the economic crisis by studying net-migration into the Eurozone, BRICS countries and a number of other countries over the past decade. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2010), the number of foreign-born migrants from outside the EU grew between 2001 and 2008, with the highest growth rates for Spain, Ireland and Cyprus. Statistics shown in Table 2 demonstrate that net-migration in the period 2003-2007 (i.e., before the crisis) was clearly higher in the countries of the EU and in Japan than in the period 2008-2012 (crisis years), whereas no
change is visible for the US. On a more detailed level, the exceptions to this rule in the Eurozone are the UK and France, which both have higher positive net-migration in the latter period. The same can be said for Turkey, perhaps due to its positive economic development in spite of the recession. Comparing net-migration in the two periods and in relation to the Eurozone, the US and Japan, the net-migration of the BRICS countries shows different results. Russia and South Africa, countries with positive net-migration in the 2003-2007 period, clearly display a lower net-migration in the 2008-2012 period. During the entire period Brazil, China and India share a similar pattern in migration. They all move from high levels of negative net-migration to lower levels of negative net-migration, at the same time as they experience positive economic growth from high levels to lower levels. Summarising the results of Table 2, we observe changes in net-migration during the recession period for most countries, with a few exceptions (such as the UK, France and Turkey). It is not far-fetched to evaluate both the lower positive and the negative numbers of net-migration as being due to weaker economic opportunities because of the economic recession. Thus, the negative social and political reactions against migration, spawned by the crisis, do not reflect an increased pace of regular migration (while keeping in mind that irregular migration is not considered here).

Nevertheless, for the individuals and groups affected, castigated and scapegoated by populist responses to perceived increases in migration, this does not make the problems less severe. For the migrants affected, the bottom line is that everyday experiences matter most—the social encounters with resident majority populations and the consequences brought to bear on daily life. Studying day-to-day experiences at the grass-roots level goes a long way towards being able to analyse problems of social sustainability and cohesion in countries affected by crises. At the same time, both micro and macro perspectives are needed to provide a thorough understanding of the migrants’ predicaments. Popular reactions on the micro level need to be fitted into a contextual framework of policy responses and regulatory patterns at EU and at EU member-state levels to be properly understood and interpreted.

As said, arguments abound in all EU member states that migrants constitute a drain on national resources and that they provide, on balance, negative contributions to national economies. In order for scholars and practitioners alike to be attentive of the inherent dangers of such rash and
simplified arguments and to address their possible consequences, several pertinent questions crave empirically grounded answers, such as the following: Who is blamed for the negative developments in Europe? What patterns, if any, can be observed? What political strategies are devised to suggest remedies, and what are the popular responses? These are all matters dealt with in this volume. Before presenting the analyses in their entirety, however, the individual chapters and their contents will be introduced.

**Structure of the volume**

In summary, this book begins with an overview at the macro level and connects the current economic crisis to migration and migration policy. It discusses its effects and variation on national and EU levels. The case studies included in the volume show how the effects of the economic downturn can have various implications in daily life. In general, the volume offers reflection and analysis on the crisis and migration nexus from a number mutually enriching and supplementary perspectives. The more detailed contents of the individual chapters are as follows.

Chapter 2 provides a historical perspective to the general subject of crisis and migration. Timothy Hatton’s starting point is that historical experiences suggest that a period of rising immigration followed by a sudden economic slump can trigger a policy backlash. However, Hatton argues that this has not occurred in the current recession. First, according to his analysis, although immigration flows have responded to the slump and immigrants have borne more than their share of the burden, this has done little to protect the employment of non-immigrants. Second, despite the recession in Europe as a whole, popular attitudes to immigration have not changed much and where they have changed, they have seemed to be more influenced by fiscal concerns than by rising unemployment. Certainly the attitudes have often been negative to start with but they have thus not become further polarized during the crisis. Third, while far-right parties no doubt have used the recession to renew political pressure for tougher immigration policies, governments have been constrained both by the composition of immigration and by EU regulations.
In his Chapter 3, Linus Kullving analyses discursive structures in EU policy articulations concerning irregular migration and mobility in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011. Based on discourse theories by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Vicky Squires, Kullving argues that both the irregular migrations and the correlated situation in the Mediterranean region were articulated in highly exceptionalist terms, linking the migratory movements to the phenomenon of crisis. He argues that the discursive articulations of a migratory crisis were firmly linked to the manifestations of the financial crisis, which created a crisis nexus in the public debate. Finally, his chapter shows that, discursively, the subject of the ‘irregular migrant’ was often articulated through racialised and gendered verbal means, contributing to the image of migrants as undesirable and as posing serious threats which need to be countered by swift and decisive political action.

In her Chapter 4, Hortense Jongen deals with the crisis context in the Netherlands. Since the early 1990s, successive Dutch governments have pursued an exclusionary policy towards undocumented migrants. Following Jongen, two questions can be raised regarding this policy approach. First, she asks what kind of relationship exists between policies aimed at excluding irregular migrants from registration (i.e., institutional exclusion), on the one hand, and through registration (e.g., surveillance), on the other. Second, she turns to the question of how the adoption of the Dutch policy approach towards undocumented migrants can be explained. Jongen argues that policies of institutional exclusion and surveillance have had contradictory policy effects. Despite frequent claims that this policy strategy forms a response to a security problem, her chapter states that the Dutch migration policy is based on flawed assumptions and expectations. Jongen refers to this as a ‘clash of securitisations’: a process where different, often competing threat perceptions of undocumented migrants have indeed created a security problem that hardly existed before.

The link between the economic crisis and the upswing of populist politics is discussed in Eleni Tampakoglou’s Chapter 5. Tampakoglou describes the current situation in Greece, in many ways the country hardest hit by the crisis. According to her study, some social and political changes that took place in Greece during the economic crisis have had serious effects on immigrants’ lives, deteriorating their already difficult living conditions. Tampakoglou argues that this was not
only the result of the rise of unemployment due to the crisis and the consequent loss of income, but it was also due to the proliferation of racial, physical and verbal violence instigated by the rising radical right parties as well as the anti-immigrant populism coming to the surface even in the mainstream parties. Using discourse analysis to bring this out, she discusses the depiction of immigration during the mid-crisis parliamentary elections in May and June 2012.

Moving towards the micro level of analysis, Sarah Scuzzarello analyses in Chapter 6 the justifications put forward by policy community actors in Malmö, Sweden, to legitimise their policies for migrants’ integration, not least in the context of earlier crises. Specifically, Scuzzarello addresses two questions. First, how did policy actors define migrants’ integration in the city of settlement? Second, how, within the identified definitions of integration, did actors in the policy community evaluate migrants as ‘integrated’ and ‘non-integrated’? On a more general theoretical level, Scuzzarello wants to contribute to constructivist debates in policy analysis which advocate the importance of narratives in policy-making. In line with this endeavor, she shows how local integration policies exist in an environment characterised by different, and at times competing, normative narratives about political space and the people who inhabit it. Policy-makers and politicians privilege certain constructions of the social relationship between migrants and the majority society, she argues. These constructions provide the justifications for adopting one particular direction in policy-making rather than other alternatives.

In Katrina Hirvonen’s Chapter 7, scapegoats of the current crisis are discussed. Focusing on Sweden, Hirvonen finds her starting point in the vandalism of an accommodation centre for unaccompanied minors in Vallentuna, a suburb of Stockholm. Her aim is to discuss the connection between representations of unaccompanied minors in online environments and the offline implications of these representations. The method used is netnography, and the sites of research are the comment fields on Internet sites. In the material, unaccompanied minors are described as migrants threatening the economy and the social cohesion of Europe. They are often depicted through the Eurabia imagination as occupants with an aim to Islamise Europe and Sweden. Hirvonen’s key argument is that the comment fields of the websites function as ‘echo chambers’ where disagreements are discouraged and only variations of the extremist discourse
accepted. This function leads to the radicalisation of ideas, to the normalising of extreme opinions and, therefore, to possible violent offline implications in real life.

David Brehm Sausdal’s Chapter 8 grapples with the Copenhagen Police Force’s depictions of pickpockets of migrant origin. Based on unique fieldwork—participant observation when following police patrols on their beat—as well as on the basis of unpublished, internal police working documents, Sausdal suggests the police’s often surprisingly high degree of annoyance at certain categories of migrant pickpockets can be understood as stemming from a mixture between difficulties in ‘practical apprehension’ (that the police have troubles catching the migrant pickpocket perpetrators) and ‘cultural apprehension’ (that the police see the culture of the migrant pickpockets as incomprehensible and, therefore, threatening). The non-resident migrant pickpocket is not just a petty legal culprit but also a cultural culprit. In other words, the migrant pickpockets are in conflict both with the law and with the police’s cultural perceptions, making them ‘more criminal’ in the eyes of the police when compared to perpetrators of similar petty crimes who are not non-residents.

References:


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