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CRISIS

REVISITING EUROPE'S MIGRATION "CRISIS"

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Fund but disregard: the EU's relationship to academic research on mobility



The European Union funds extensive academic research with the potential to inform humane and effective border policies. Yet evidence-based immigration policy is undermined by the EU's increasingly repressive border regime. How do we make sense of this contradiction? And which transformations are needed to address it?

On Friday March 27th, 60 concerned migration scholars sent a letter to the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. We were among them, and our motivation was the urgent need for the EU and individual member states to change the inhumane and violent measures that migrants and refugees were being forced to endure as the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded.

Our letter called for immediate action and radical revision of current EU policies on mobility and migration governance, and all its signatories had experience working on projects funded directly by the European Commission (Horizon 2020, ERC, MSC, FP7, etc.). These projects have been aimed at improving migration governance, border crossing, and the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in the European Union. In the two days that followed its submission, the letter was signed by an additional 300 academic researchers wishing to join the call.

The developments that caused immediate concern included cases of open camps that housed asylum seekers becoming fenced-off enclosures, exposing those inside to extreme congestion in horrific sanitary conditions. They also included irregular migrants in detention facilities across Europe not being released, even as it became clear that deportation would not be an option in any foreseeable future due to the international travel restrictions. Instead, in some countries, detainees were placed in solitary confinement as a “protective measure.” While in recent weeks we have seen incidental releases of some detainees in some countries, there is no EU-wide directive ordaining this matter.

Our letter warned that the EU’s line of action would most likely result in an extremely dangerous situation for some of the most vulnerable people in and around the Union. We pointed out that the safety of people in camps was being neglected, that the humanitarian regime was under attack, and that an enormous protection gap was emerging. We also anticipated that failing to attend to the situation now would later perilously play into the hands of existing anti-immigration and xenophobic tendencies promoted by parties and groups seeking political gain from scapegoating Europe’s “others.”

We offered to put our time and expertise towards revising current EU policies and helping prepare new guidelines – together with EC officials – on some of the most burning issues. These included evacuating refugee camps and overcrowded hotspots, and alleviating the disproportionate load in treating asylum claims in

Greece, Italy and Spain. We are still awaiting a response from the Commissioner's office.

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The EU invests heavily in the production of knowledge in the field of mobility governance. Yet this knowledge is almost never included in revising old policies or drafting new ones.

The migration policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have underlined an entrenched contradiction in the structural thought-process that feeds EU policy making: a contradiction between financing and disregarding expert knowledge. On the one hand, the EU heavily invests in the production of knowledge in the field of mobility governance. On the other hand, this knowledge is almost never included in subsequent points of revising old policies or drafting new ones. From conversations we had with many of the signatories, a sense of deep individual and collective frustration emerged about the (in)ability of critical academics to influence policy making in the field of mobility governance in the EU. This contradiction is evident not only now in a moment of “crisis,” but on a regular basis.

For example, in the period 2014-2020, the EU allocated more than 3 billion Euros to finance research under the heading: *Asylum, Migration and Integration*. According to the EC, the aim of this fund was to ‘support[s] actions addressing all aspects of migration, including asylum, legal migration, integration and the return of irregularly staying non-EU nationals.’ Enjoying EU funding, numerous projects in recent years have meticulously studied pressing issues like asylum bureaucracies, deportation and detention regimes, commercial interests from security and military sectors in the management of entry and border control, protection practices and the criminalization of solidarity, rescue missions at sea, and much more.

But as with any knowledge production, a crucial question is, to what use is it put? For the hundreds of academic researchers who signed the letter, it is evident that most expert knowledge in the field of mobility governance in the EU is being outright disregarded by decision makers. How should we account for this peculiar fund-but-disregard dynamic in the usage of expert knowledge? Would a similar dynamic be imaginable in other EU-funded research fields like IT systems, astronomy, or safety standards for the agri-food chain?

For many years now, most politicians and policymakers – both in the EU and in member states – have pushed for evermore exclusionary and violent policies in dealing with asylum seekers and various types of migrants. Yet, these new, harsh policies often fail to meet minimal human rights standards or respect the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. They also regularly defy expert knowledge produced by researchers who have been given the task of studying these complex realities. Hence, there is a simple explanation for the perverse yet pervasive fund-but-disregard dynamic around mobility governance. Namely, political balances and populist reasonings within Europe shape migration policy much more powerfully than (and even in defiance of) academic knowledge and commitment to international humanitarian principles.

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Securitization policies operate in a self-reinforcing way. They feed directly into the production and reproduction of situations often referred to as ‘migration crises’

To bring this point closer to home, here are some concrete examples from our respective research projects. Barak recently completed a five-year project on deportation regimes, which received generous funding of €1.5 million from the European Research Council. Together with two doctoral researchers and two experienced post-doctoral researchers, he studied the implementation of deportation policies in multiple EU states and beyond. One of the findings was that, according to practitioners in the field, detention-for-deportation was not effective beyond the length of three months. Officials in different countries asserted that if a person could not be deported within the first month or two of his/her arrest, the chances for it to happen in subsequent months of detention was close to zero. This is because when deportation does occur, it usually only takes authorities a few weeks to assemble the necessary documentation (deportation order, ID or laissez-passer, etc.) and arrange the actual deportation (medical check, booking of flight, police escort, etc.). Statistical analysis of the relation between length of detention and chances for deportation supported this finding.

Other academic studies, as well as independent research by NGOs like Amnesty International and PICUM, reached a similar conclusion. Furthermore, they showed that lengthy detention often had no deterrence effect on irregular migrants. But contrary to all empirical evidence, the EU last updated its Return Directive to set a maximum detention term of 18 months as a standard, thereby inducing 21

individual member states to extend the maximum legal time limits of detention in their national legislation.

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The EU structure manages to separate production of expert knowledge from policymaking in the field of mobility governance.

Céline's experience revealed a similar contradiction. She received a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship to study migration solidarity sites and practices along the Balkan Route. Her research was concerned with assessing how grassroots modes of reception and resource distribution for and by displaced people offered solutions to some of the issues faced by refugees and the European societies receiving them. The project found that these alternative social and political practices should be supported. In fact, such practices produced spaces that offered answers to what some conceive of as the political and democratic crisis that Europe is currently witnessing. Such propositions are not new: there have been countless policy recommendations formulated by a range of researchers, NGOs, and field actors on how EU border and migration policies should be reformed to prevent systematic rights violations at the borders and on member states' territories. Yet they have not had any significant impact on European policymaking in the area of migration, where border reinforcement and the deployment of measures to securitise and control mobilities remain the main objectives of policymakers.

The ongoing securitization and illegalization of migration lead to the immobilization of migrants at various points along migratory routes, often in makeshift camps or dismal conditions. These circumstances easily lend themselves to sensationalist representations, which spectacularize exclusion and reinforce the figure of the migrant as passive victim or potential transgressor. Migration policies based on securitization also unmistakably direct people towards evermore perilous journeys, resulting in the multiplication of migrant deaths. These scenes contribute to a process of othering and criminalization that, in turn, confirms specific approaches to migration. In other words, such policies operate in a self-reinforcing way. In particular, they feed directly into the production and reproduction of situations often referred to as 'migration crises', an appellation that has itself been largely evoked to justify the implementation of further punitive policies.

In Céline's project, not only was the recommendation to invest support in alternative socio-political spaces and practices ignored, but the destructive and counter-productive nature of European and national policies became particularly striking when, at the end of her two-year project, Céline realised that all her research sites had essentially disappeared. This was due to their dismantlement through policies criminalising migration and solidarity work. The solidarity squats where she had spent time in Athens had been evicted, the street-level work of volunteers and activists in Belgrade had been made effectively impossible via the mass encampment of migrants in the city, while in Hungary a set of newly adopted policies had made virtually all support activities towards asylum-seekers punishable through fines or prison sentences.

Our experiences of working on EU-funded projects were not stories of personal failure at impacting policy making. Rather, based on our exchanges with hundreds of academic researchers who signed our letter, the failure appears to be systemic. Furthermore, according to the EU's own measures of academic excellence, our projects were highly successful – they generated many peer-reviewed publications, received media attention, yielded significant career advancements for scholars working on them, and even resulted in further successful EU funding applications on migration governance. However paradoxically, the EU structure manages to separate production of expert knowledge from policymaking in the field of mobility governance. While the onus is put on research proposals to demonstrate how they will implement impact-maximising measures to reach out to audiences and stakeholders, including policy-makers, the opacity of the policy process and the lack of engagement by decision-makers on the side of EU institutions is hardly accounted for. There are no mechanisms in place in the EU organizational structure that specify how the findings and policy recommendations coming out of EU-funded projects might flow into collective efforts towards the revision and improvement of existing policies.

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We must insist on installing mechanisms that ensure the inclusion of EU-funded knowledge production towards a more humane migration governance approach.

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Will work within our H2020 projects – involving collaborations with dozens of universities across Europe and beyond – be taken up to inform EU policy making in the future? Probably not. So why do we continue on this path? This is a fair

question. To answer it we must interrogate the internal logic of a neoliberalized academic field. In the past two decades, obtaining a permanent position or promotion in the academic sector has been crucially linked to the ability of scholars to emerge as winners in an ever more demoralizing competition with their colleagues over shrinking research funds. ‘Show me the money’ is the name of the game in academia 2.0, and scholars are forced to play along.

But for how long can this approach be sustained? More and more colleagues choose to leave academia, or are shown the door precisely because they fight to remain loyal to their critical work instead of playing the funding game. Others – mostly the winners in this game – too often bask in the financial and social gratification that obtaining a large research grant affords them, or they struggle to appease their conscience, realizing that the impact of their intellectual work is reduced to little more than the impact factor of the journals in which they publish their articles.

The danger in calling out the EU fund-but-disregard dynamic is that the same politicians and policymakers who regularly deflect our critical findings and systematically ignore our expert knowledge will decide to cut research budgets even more aggressively. Yet, calling out the current state of affairs and becoming ‘ungrateful academics’ is dangerous only if we continue to compete for funds in order to conduct research that will be disregarded. This is a vicious cycle that divests academia from its wider critical role in and for society. To break out of it, we must insist on installing mechanisms that ensure the inclusion of EU-funded knowledge production towards a more humane migration governance approach that enhances the protection of refugees.

This is a goal worth fighting for. It is not simply an act of protest, but a sincere attempt to resist the co-optation that results in what we can call: *empowerlessness*. A process whereby scholars are internally empowered within the academic field, in ways that lead to having no influence on the subject matter of the research in the broader society. Too often, EU-funded academics are given the luxury of research time and resources in return for an un/conscious understanding that their critical findings will be ignored. Unlike exploited workers who had ‘nothing to lose but their chains’, EU-funded academics have much to lose. On the line is a boost to their career, handsome salaries, reputed status, and endless international conference invitations. Against these perks stands our integrity as critical thinkers.

This short essay could be read as a righteous rant if the stakes of our complacency were not so high. Thousands of fellow human beings are dying at European

borders and camps, youth are committing suicide on alarming levels in prison-like “protective facilities” or are forced to sell sex in our city parks, families are being separated and ruined, migrants with an irregular status are languishing for months under horrendous conditions in detention centres, refugees are being deported to countries like Afghanistan that are declared a “safe destination,” and the list goes on.

The next time we contemplate applying or working for an EU-funded project, we should ask ourselves a simple question: Why are we doing this? If we are not going to be successful in installing mechanisms that effectively incorporate our knowledge production into EU decision-making processes, then we must admit to becoming part of the problem rather than the critical agents for the change that we seek to be. It seems the only way out of this trap of scholarly complicity involves resisting the degeneration of evidence-based policy on migration by demanding that EU functionaries become responsive to knowledge production.

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Céline Cantat is a postdoctoral fellow at Sciences Po with the H2020 project MAGYC-Migration Governance and Asylum Crises. Previously, Céline was a Marie Curie Fellow at CEU, Budapest, studying migration solidarity groups along the Balkan route. She holds a PhD in Refugee Studies from the University of East London and is co-editor of Refugee Protection and Civil Society in Europe (Palgrave, 2018) and Challenging the Political Across Borders: Migrants’ and Solidarity Struggles (CPS Book Series, 2019).

Photograph: Aggelos Barai