

Legitimising Popular Anger Over Migration is a Bad Idea

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Among the cornucopia of issues facing the well-off countries of Western Europe, migration remains a particularly emotive subject that can rear up at any moment and polarise society and politics more quickly and deeply than many other questions. This was seen recently in the Netherlands, where the government is in crisis over attempts to slow the arrival of asylum seekers after it let the situation in the main reception centre deteriorate and one resident's new born baby died. Despite this, among a significant part of the population anger at immigrants, and at the authorities that seemingly allow migration to continue, is unabated, leading to renewed calls, also from the Left, to gain better understanding of where this anger comes from.

Migration in its broadest sense has long been fertile grounds for exploitation by populists who seek to harness popular discontent and distrust of the state and system. It was used effectively by the Leave campaign during the 2016 referendum and is still a hot button topic in the UK, with the focus on flights to Rwanda and stopping small boats from crossing the Channel. This despite the UK, because of its geographical position, receiving only a fraction of the number of asylum seekers that other European countries see. In the second quarter of this year, the UK granted just 700 in-country asylum requests, reflecting the very small number of people who make it across the Channel to apply for the procedure. Even so, the Channel crossings remain in the headlines in a way that often implies a large-scale threat.

But the UK is no exception and migration is highly controversial in the whole of Europe, with the European Union border agency Frontex standing accused of pushing back migrants into the Mediterranean and several European countries taking steps, like the Netherlands, to restrict newcomers. Denmark, even under a left-of-centre government has some of the strictest measures to keep out and repatriate migrants, which it partly is allowed to do under its EU opt-out clauses. Austria is reluctant to take in more asylum seekers and is seeking changes to EU rules. The Dutch government floated several ideas in recent weeks, such as a temporary stop on family reunification, that have been deemed in breach of international agreements. The so-called frontline countries in Southern Europe, meanwhile are calling for their Northern neighbours to take in more, rather than fewer asylum seekers.

As in the UK, actual numbers, the factual situation in the countries of origin and even international obligations seem to matter less than raw emotion. Increasingly (social) media in the Netherlands find it acceptable to give vent to relatively unfiltered popular anger. While migration alone is probably not the main cause of several phenomena that we've seen become more prominent over the past few decades, such as the rise of populism, anger at, and distrust of, the establishment, loss of faith in the political system and/or class, and, in many countries, a rightward drift, it is a consistent element in these developments.

Especially at a time when Europe in particular is faced with a major war on its borders, cost-of-living crises, energy insecurity, environmental risk, a preoccupation with migration might seem somewhat contrived. On the other hand, some would say that exactly at times of increased hardship or insecurity, it is as ever the migrant, the stranger, that gets scapegoated. The current Dutch asylum crisis seems to be more because of a lack of capacity in the reception centres than an increase in numbers. Capacity to process asylum seekers has been scaled down on purpose by a right-of-centre government and anti-migrant sentiment has become a political football.

Often, resistance to migration gets lumped in with racism and xenophobia. And to be sure, across Europe, from the Netherlands to the UK and further afield, this does seem to play a role. Racism might not be the only driver or cause of anti-immigrant sentiment, yet it is never far away when the issue is debated. When the asylum issue recently flared up in the Netherlands, many pointed at the relatively frictionless reception of Ukrainian refugees. New arrivals even from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan, and certainly from North Africa, were by contrast branded as 'fortune seekers' by protesters and some commentators. Particularly migrants from Morocco and Algeria, were painted as 'mere' economic refugees, even though Algeria is no longer on the Dutch list of so-called safe countries of origin.

This renewed resistance to migration might be somewhat inflamed by the above-mentioned multi-faceted crisis and pressures, although that is unlikely to be the whole story. The question is, for example, whether in the UK anti-migrant feelings, including against EU-migrants, were fanned by years of Tory austerity. When interviewing people in the Midlands in 2019 on why they voted Leave, jobs supposedly taken by Polish migrants did sometimes come up but so did alleged Romanian criminal gangs and even Asian no-go areas. The latter two having little to do with the economic situation and representing a more generalised resentment or fear of migrants.

In the Netherlands, one of the main issues seized upon by anti-migration protesters and commentators is the housing crisis. Many Dutch residents are on decades-long waiting lists for affordable housing. When the authorities fulfil their international obligations by providing housing for asylum holders, this causes enormous resentment among many. But this resentment is in many ways selective; the number of asylum seekers given priority is very small compared to the scale of the housing crisis and the critics ignore that asylum seekers are not the only ones receiving priority for housing but that many other vulnerable, but of course originally Dutch, groups get similar treatment.

One way for the critics of migration to try and avoid the racism label has been to argue that plenty of non-white inhabitants of the country are equally opposed to it. In the UK there were some in the Asian community who played that part, possibly hoping that Brexit would allow more migration from Asia. In the Netherlands, the large group of descendants from mostly Turkish and Moroccan labour migrants from the 1960s and 1970s partly fulfils that role. When someone of Turkish descent brands asylum seekers as fortune seekers, it becomes news. This in itself of course reflects the racist attitude of the people who use this argument: to *a priori* assume that someone has a certain view because of their ethnic background, is already deeply offensive. What is worse is that many of those who now criticise the arrival of asylum seekers, only yesterday spouted racist tales of crime and abuse of social benefits by those same Turkish and Moroccan descendants of labour migrants.

To ignore this ever-present popular anger and resentment is perhaps foolish. But to elevate its importance has in part backfired over the past few decades. There is a fine balance between addressing legitimate grievances, especially over cost-of-living issues, austerity and the like, and legitimising quite blatant racism. Capitalising on popular anger and resentment has resurfaced as a much more accepted political practice in the West in recent decades. In order to exploit this, it needs to be stoked constantly. The real question when looking into this popular anger might not be what it is actually based on, but rather, who is fanning it?