

EXPERT OPINIONS

Migration Challenge and Pandemic: Scenarios for Europe

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EU member states will become more and more interested in cooperation with non-EU states, enhancing the actions and operations of EU countries and non-EU countries outside the EU zone. Asylum and other means of protection will become a more complex procedure, enlarging the gap and violating the rights of asylum seekers. As early as February 2020, the European Commission was about to announce a new pan-European vision on migration and asylum for the 27 EU states. The raging pandemic and other institutional challenges have changed the priorities of European politicians, who have delayed the adoption and announcement of a new pact on migration and asylum until better times. However, [a new pact](#) is in the 2020 work programme, and therefore it will certainly see the light of day. Now is a good moment to reflect on new migration challenges for the EU and think of possible scenarios for their prevention. **Real status-quo** A pandemic is a good opportunity for institutions, mechanisms and regulatory systems, including the migration regulatory apparatus of any state, to be reviewed. In preventing the spread of coronavirus, most EU states came up with amendments to migration and asylum regulations. Most countries – Poland, Germany, France, Belgium, Spain, Austria and others – have introduced exemptions into immigration regulations. Italy declared an amnesty and legalised unauthorised migrant domestic workers, as well as those working in agriculture and assisting the elderly. Portugal announced the legalisation of the status of migrants with expired documents, equating this group of the population to the citizens of the country so that they could receive state support, medical assistance and benefits during the times of crisis. Some EU countries – Spain, France, Germany and others – have introduced a simplified procedure for recognising qualifications and obtaining access to their labour markets, including medical services, for migrants living in the country. In order to counteract the spread of coronavirus, France and the state of Bavaria in Germany made an exception and allowed refugees with medical degrees obtained outside the EU to practice medicine.

The measures taken by most EU countries during the active phase of the spread of coronavirus were aimed at:

- strengthening control, including sanitation control and epidemiological security, on the internal and external borders of the EU states
- restricting population mobility within the country and between nations
- facilitating the return of EU citizens from countries outside the EU zone
- liberalising immigration processes, such as obtaining immigration documents and extending their stay
- suspending the unauthorised deportation of migrants to countries outside the bloc, as well as suspending the transfer of asylum seekers from one EU country to another in accordance with Dublin regulations
- [suspending the registration and submission of new asylum applications](#), as well as limiting the quota of asylum applicant transfers (excluding unaccompanied minor children from refugee camps in Greece and Italy), etc.

The coronavirus pandemic also exposed many of the EU's migration management problems, such as the "inhumane" conditions of the applicants' detention in migrant accommodation centres in Greece and Italy; the [illegal transfer](#) of asylum seekers to outside the bloc without any possibility of seeking asylum, the ban on NGOs conducting rescue operations at sea, as well as individual EU member states [refusing to comply with humanitarian law](#).

Future scenarios

As wars and revolutions determined the destiny of the 20th century, the way peoples and states react to pandemics and climate change will determine people's mobility and the further destiny of the 21st century. The expectation that the mobility of mankind on the European continent will come to naught will not come true because people have already moved to Europe and will continue to move in order to reunite with their families, to look for a better life, and even to avoid the consequences of wars, conflicts, and climatic and technological disasters. Unauthorised migration will be reduced, although it will not disappear completely, just because, on one hand, the economy determines demand for this form of human mobility, and on the other hand, the profitability of this criminal business, according to UNODOC, [will only increase](#).

Following the logic of the von der Leyen policy [statement](#), the key points in a new pact on migration and asylum should be the following: the return of unauthorised migrants to their countries of origin; increased cooperation with non-EU states; funding centres for potential asylum seekers outside the EU; and search for optimal IT solutions for EU migration management. The coronavirus pandemic will also have an impact on the migration policies of the EU and its member countries.

It seems that there are three possible scenarios:

1) Liberal scenario

Its implementation is possible only in the “EU core” countries – Germany, France, The Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg, and less likely in Spain, Italy and Greece. The countries of Eastern and Central Europe are unlikely to implement this scenario.

This scenario will be characterised by maintaining the freedom of movement of goods, work, services and people within the Schengen area without any restrictions. The EU countries will delegate more and more authority on managing national (internal) borders to the pan-European and Frontex area of responsibility and control.

The spread of the practice of asylum sponsorship may help to liberalise asylum policy where individuals and/or organisations take responsibility, including financial responsibility, for asylum seekers. The humanitarian law of the EU member states will become more liberal and all forms of protection in case of pandemics will be distributed without any restrictions to all migrants in the country, including unregistered asylum seekers and unauthorised migrants (following the example of the German courts’ [decision](#)).

A serious challenge for the implementation of this scenario is its political and economic costs. The EU leaders will have to determine whether the economic benefits of migration are justified and the implementation of this scenario benefits radical right-wing and populist parties.

2) Restrictive scenario

This scenario will be characterised by introducing long-term restrictions on individuals’ freedom of movement in order to ensure the national interests of EU member states. Frontex will also strengthen its authority on external borders and increase its control, including sanitary and epidemiological control, on EU national borders.

The EU will continue to make financial and administrative investments in the foundation and maintenance of migrants’ detention centres and their outsourcing outside the EU, as well as in migrants’ countries of origin that are not very suitable for these purposes.

Asylum in EU countries will become more of a lottery, where EU member states will independently determine the criteria for asylum seekers – their gender, age, religion, country of origin, etc., who they will provide with their protection and/or guaranteed transfers, within EU quotas. Illegal entry into the EU and the fact of illegal border crossings (as well as by means of smuggling and human traffickers) can become an aggravating circumstance that reduces the chances of obtaining asylum.

3) Transitional scenario

The EU will be interested in finding compromises on the division of migration liability among EU Member States in order to accept new humanitarian migrants, combining this process with the reinforcement of measures aimed at tightening border controls.

This scenario will be characterised by maintaining freedom of movement within the Schengen area and imposing a number of restrictions, such as immune passports to foreigners who have antibodies to coronavirus.

As for the protection of pan-European borders, EU member states will become more and more interested in cooperation with non-EU states, enhancing the actions and operations of EU countries and non-EU countries outside the EU zone. Asylum and other means of protection will become a more complex procedure, enlarging the gap and violating the rights of asylum seekers.

It is likely that none of the above described scenarios will be implemented in all EU countries in their original form. Merely because, as Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes correctly state **i**, another era on the European continent is coming to an end, the imitation of any (good or bad) practices is a thing of the past and an increasing number of European leaders have become interested in finding their own original solutions, including the area of migration management and border protection.

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