

Foreword:
**The global refugee crisis and the changing forms of
transnational migration and global governance**

*Attila Melegh*¹

The most recent global refugee crisis has hit various key social and political institutions globally, regionally and locally, and it has thus become an issue of concern in public debates. At the same time, there are legitimate fears that the continuing global political transformation, along with conflicts, wars and ecological crises “managed” within the framework of global competitive capitalism, will inevitably lead to further new challenges for global as well as various levels of regional and local governance.

Thus it is urgent to analyse the recent processes as a result of which some of the historical achievements of refugee protection have come to be quickly questioned and even thrown away. The first issue of *Corvinus Journal of International Affairs* focuses on this dynamic situation in which international, and among these intra-EU, developments pose a challenge to the existing system of legal arrangements. At the ultimate source of the crisis, one may speak of the complete collapse of a larger region, in Western Asia and Northern Africa, which produces the waves of refugees who now function as the “reasons” for the questioning of the norms of refugee protection.

The present issue of *Corvinus Journal of International Affairs* is one of the first products of analysis dealing with the multifaceted background of the crisis, and thus it deserves due attention. The articles here highlight at least four key elements of the crisis that need to be addressed in a complex manner.

Firstly, there is the crisis of an entire region which the refugees are fleeing from. This is eloquently analysed in the last piece in the issue, by László Csicsmann. Given the nature of its subject, perhaps this article may deserve attention first of all. It may have conveniently served as the introductory piece of a thematic issue of this kind. The long-

¹ Attila Melegh is a sociologist and historian. He is associate professor at Corvinus University, Budapest, and professor and senior researcher at the Demographic Research Institute. His research focuses on the global history of social change in the 20th century and international migration. He is the author of three books in English and Hungarian, and he has published over a hundred scholarly publications. He is the founding director of Karl Polányi Research Center at Corvinus University and he is president of the European Network for Global and Universal History.

term conflict it discusses (in and around Syria) has reached a level where it has major global political implications through its impact on regional stability. It calls into question the influence of the major powers (most importantly that of the various EU countries and their allies, among them the United States) that seem to have thought that they can intervene in the conflict in various ways without bearing the negative consequences of their political and military actions. Regional powers are proving similarly impotent in “solving” actually unsolvable problems, ones that they were drawn into as much as they manoeuvred themselves into these.

As Csicsmann’s article shows, among the countries of the region Turkey is already under dramatic strain. To expect that it can be a reliable partner of the EU and the United States is at least an illusion if not outright self-deception. Turkey is a country where even the local population, most importantly the Kurds, suffer, and now it has to deal with the arrival of masses of refugees who seek protection there.

There is a great risk that the refugees may suffer there from neglect (very little has been spent on them, and it only affects those who live in camps). They are also exposed to competition for scarce resources with local populations and even terrorist attacks should the EU wish to keep them in Turkey at all costs. This latter attempt is of great importance as Turkey has become the country hosting the greatest number of refugees, and no one sees clearly how the EU could seal itself off from the resulting humanitarian crisis. The EU’s approach contains various elements, such as limited but clearly inadequate levels of financial assistance, the use of various means of law enforcement at sea and on land, and it will also ask for stronger control of its territory by a Turkish government whose overall political record is already very negative.

A specific and salient element of the conflict, the issue of the “foreign fighters” is addressed by Péter Marton. His article analyses the transnational forms of “combatant migration” from a broad historical perspective. Foreign combatants are widely used by all of the forces on the ground and these “foreign” troops can be a major resource for the emerging and ongoing low or medium-intensity “transnational” wars around the world. Due to their cruelty, foreign combatants can significantly contribute to the flight of further waves of refugees – causing the flight of people who do not want to fight alongside them, besides making more refugees in victims of their excessive violence. This very interesting analysis questions the notion that “terrorists” originating from the region should be a key concern and that the halting of the refugee waves could dramatically reduce security risks. As we can see, we now live in a truly transnational era where Western European

combatants wreak havoc in faraway locations: an era in which national territories and sovereignties are constantly questioned, making nationalist claims louder and louder but at the same time more and more obsolete.

This leads to the second analytical element of the current crisis, namely how international and EU law develops, the issue of why and how it is used or not used, and how it is becoming paralyzed. In his study, Tamás Molnár shows in a complex and sharp analysis that after major international conventions such as the Geneva Convention there is almost always an unstoppable process in which principles like “non-refoulement” find their way into various legal texts and can become a cornerstone – if only these processes can evolve without major political interventions. The global human rights regime has made great steps toward becoming a well-established system of international governance. Molnár warns, however, that these principles and the related legal arrangements can “receive meanings and content” by the applying organizations and such interpretative exercises can lead to varying results, as widely divergent as life and death. Through the analysis of the author we can see that key elements of even the Geneva Convention and the related international and EU laws can be put aside when expressed national and regional interests go against them. Who would have thought that the Common European Asylum System of the EU could, as a result of a painful process, collapse within months after the recent refugee waves hit the region?

As the third analytical element of the crisis, namely with regards to the political use and misuse of legal systems, Péter Stepper very nicely shows that some of the bricks of this system were kicked out by the very countries which were among the first to sign during their EU accession process. At the time, these acceding countries thought that the legal pieces concerned were mere formalities, or beauty spots, which showed the humanism of the EU and that of the acceding countries. Having no historical experience of large-scale immigration, the countries of Central and East Europe thought that there would be no need to take these principles too seriously, and they basically imagined that the “European open space” was only for them to take advantage of, to compensate for the losses they suffer due to the stubborn economic inequalities within and around the EU. In a proper structural analysis it can be no surprise that precisely these countries were the first to “securitise” the inflow of refugees and migrants. They fought for maintaining their privileges within the open space of the EU. In addition, although they do have small immigrant populations from Western Asia and Northern Africa from before the crisis, there are no sizable diasporas in these countries that could have built links to the refugee

groups during the recent massive inflow. As opposed to these countries, there are areas in the EU that have been longer-term immigrant destinations where refugees could actually find previous diaspora groups to help them (as in Germany and Sweden). In contrast, Stepper demonstrates that the Visegrad Group countries used a rather brutal and vulgar language when they explained why certain elements of refugee protection and EU-level solutions should be annulled. They talked about diseases and parasites besides organised invasions and terrorist threats. They clearly held the view that the people arriving as refugees in Turkey were in fact “economic migrants,” to be expelled from their territory. The consistency of this negativity is surprisingly strong. Ironically, the group has become vocal and collaborative after it has been raised in recent years that its significance may have been significantly reduced, and that the Visegrad Group may be at the brink of dissolution. This otherwise inferiorised “New Europe” has now become the leading defensive force of “Fortress Europe,” somewhat repeating the scenario when the war on Iraq started in 2003. At that time, these were the countries that joined forces with the hardliners against France and Germany, and loudly supported the war that led to the collapse of the region that is the source of the present refugee waves. It seems that they did this without ever thinking over the possible consequences of such interventions. Now they are the first to demand the protection of Europe.

Clearly, the various identities of Europe and their political implications need further analysis in the manner of Stepper’s article, and we also need to link this analysis to the historical critique of such identities started in the 1990s by Bakic and Hayden, Larry Wolff and Maria Todorova. The works of these authors have been proven right by the recent reactions to the global refugee crisis.²

Behind such identities and the reactions that can be observed, we have to see how global capitalism operates and how various inequalities manifest even in seemingly apolitical developments such as in the area of climate change. In the excellent starting piece of the issue, Viktor Friedman stresses this complexity and eloquently shows that the problem of excess migration due to global warming or climate change cannot be separated from various state failures, and the “perpetrators” are often found far outside

² See among others: Wolff, L. (1994): *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press; Bakic-Hayden (1995): Nesting Orientalisms: The case of former Yugoslavia. *Slavic Review*, Winter, Vol. 54, no. 4, 917–930; Todorova, M. (1997a): *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Böröcz, J. (2009): *The European Union and Global Social Change. A critical Geopolitical-economic Analysis*. Routledge, London; Melegh, Attila (2006): *On the East/West Slope*. Budapest: CEU Press.

the relevant regions of the South. Thus, links of causality cannot be separated from existing economic inequalities. He also shows that certain elements of global governance are developing but even so the concept of “climate refugees” remains very new and very weak. We can be sure that its use is, and will be, limited even if climate change might exert its effect on people’s lives through various social mechanisms and filters. Nothing shows this better than the widespread claim in public discourse that refugees coming from Syria are “just” fleeing from bad harvests and climate change, and that consequently there is no need to use any form of international refugee protection related to this.

This also demonstrates why the approach of the authors and editors of this journal issue is so important, and why we need to continue our debates from a global historical perspective and in a structural way. Otherwise there will be no deeper and progressive analysis which might guide the further development of global governance: a system of governance that might actually protect the lives, and the livelihood, of vulnerable social groups around the globe.