



THE ASYLUM MIGRATION CRISIS IN THE BALKANS AND ON THE ROAD TO EUROPE: UNFOLDING THE DRIVERS COMPLEX

Etienne Piguet¹ 

¹University of Neuchâtel/Institute of Geography, Switzerland, e-mail: etiennel.piguet@unine.ch

The year 2015 saw a significant increase in the number of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe, mainly from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. It was so-called “European refugee (or migration) crisis”. Many of these migrants travelled via the Balkan route: After reaching Greece, they crossed the Western Balkans to reach the northern EU countries. Others took the Eastern Mediterranean route, crossing the Aegean Sea, or the Central Mediterranean route from North Africa to Italy. The geopolitical causes of this migration have been extensively analysed, with the Syrian conflict playing a central role as a push factor. The consequences and political context of the crisis—from Chancellor Merkel's “*Wir schaffen das*” (“We can do it”) to its role in the UK's Brexit from the EU—have also attracted much attention.

The present paper takes a different stance, looking at the deeper structural and geographical transformations that explain why such an influx of people into Europe was possible in 2015, whereas it had never happened before in similar contexts of violence in the regions of origin. I draw on recent theoretical advances in migration theories that bridge the gap between forced and voluntary migration (push-pull-plus models, aspirations and (cap)abilities theories, etc.).

I propose three long-term factors that have facilitated access to European borders but led to urgent and often dangerous migratory situations for asylum seekers: the “shortening” of distances (Europe is easier to reach), the crisis of containment policies (local help for people on the move is difficult to find), and the geographical asymmetry of rights (migrants enjoy substantial protection once in Europe, but not on route and near their country of origin). I believe that these factors played a central role in 2015 and still explain the current situation of migration to Europe and the new increase in migration observed in 2023. In this context, I interpret the current EU policy of closing borders as an attempt to (re)create a geographical buffer separating refugees from their destinations in the context of the globalisation of asylum issues.

Keywords: migration; asylum; crisis; migration drivers; Europe