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Migration roils global politics, even as it ebbs

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These are hard days for political refugees and economic migrants seeking safety or a job in the places that used to welcome them, such as Europe and the United States. Countries on both sides of the Atlantic, once seen as safe harbors, are barricading themselves behind tighter southern borders as immigration begins to dominate political life. It's ironic that tough talkers like President Trump have come to the fore in Europe, too, when the numbers of immigrants are actually falling. But in a delayed reaction to earlier waves, European governments are trying to fend off nationalist and populist challengers with more strongly anti-immigrant attitudes. And Mr. Trump's rhetoric appeals to a substantial minority of Americans. Still, polls in Europe and the US have found that large majorities still see immigration as a force for good in their countries; it's just that they want to feel more in control of the numbers coming in. "Then they can be reasonable," says Paul Nesse of the Norwegian Refugee Council. "Basic solidarity and humanitarian support are still alive" at street level.

Around the globe, from Myanmar to South Sudan to Venezuela, more people are fleeing for their lives or escaping from poverty than ever before. But their chances of finding safety or a living wage are dwindling as Western governments erect new barriers to keep them out.

In 2018, the United States is set to take in fewer political refugees than in any year since 1977. President Trump is revoking the protected status Washington has offered for decades to more than 400,000 immigrants who fled turmoil in their home countries.

In Hungary, border guards have withheld food from rejected Afghan and Syrian asylum seekers to convince them to drop their appeals. Sweden, traditionally among the most welcoming countries in the world, has a new asylum regime set to the bare minimum allowed by the European Union.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the issue of immigration has thrown traditional politics into disarray, blurring the distinction between political refugees and economic migrants, and fueling the rise of populist politicians who have thrived in recent years by advocating harsher treatment of immigrants, even as the number of new arrivals has fallen.

Such politicians are tilling fertile ground. Immigration is likely to be the defining issue in the European Parliament elections next year as increasing numbers of voters, seeking to protect their sense of identity, worry that large immigrant populations will overwhelm their cultural defenses.

Those politicians also play on widespread fears that an influx of immigrants will mean a new crime wave. Such fears are unfounded (crime is actually down in the two European countries that have taken the most immigrants, Germany and Italy), but they are real.

How can Western democracies assure their own people that they are protected, while living up to their humanitarian ideals at the same time?

It's not because of immigration itself that immigration has become such a divisive issue, says Andrew Selee, president of the Migration Policy Institute in Washington. Rather, it makes some people nervous about their neighborhoods and their jobs.

"There's a lot of symbolic politics," he suggests. "I think immigration is a touchstone for other fears. Fear of demographic change is a major issue. Fear of economic change is another issue, and fear of not controlling our borders."

"There's a perception that immigration is out of control," adds Paul Nesse, senior adviser to the Norwegian Refugee Council. "That has forced mainstream politicians to be stricter."

The perception, though, is false. The unauthorized immigrant population in the US has been falling since 2007; the number of illegal migrants apprehended by the US Border Patrol on the southern frontier (the best proxy for irregular crossings) has dropped each year since 2014, from 555,185 to 341,054 in 2017.

In Europe, the million-plus flood of economic migrants and political refugees that seized the world's attention in 2015 is a memory; so far this year only 70,000 have landed on Europe's Mediterranean coastline – half last year's figure and just 20 percent of 2015 arrivals.

But that memory of Syrians, Afghans, Eritreans, and others trudging north in a steady stream still reverberates around Europe, as the nations that welcomed them struggle to settle them. In a delayed reaction, their arrival has continued to stoke anti-immigrant populist parties that are now in government in Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Poland, and a rising force in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, and elsewhere.

Sweden is the most recent case in point. The Sweden Democrats, a party with neo-Nazi roots, took 18 percent of the vote in parliamentary elections last month by campaigning on a harshly anti-foreigner platform. They now hold the political balance of power.

The center-left government, jettisoning Sweden's long tradition of extreme generosity to refugees, had borrowed some of the Sweden Democrats' policies and rhetoric after 165,000 asylum seekers arrived in 2015, the highest number per capita in Europe. That did not halt the Sweden Democrats' advance, but it did help change the national mood.

"Integration and immigration are always portrayed negatively by politicians and the media as a problem," complains Natassia Fry, who runs "Sweden Buddy," a nonprofit helping new and established Swedes to mix. "That makes it easier for people to be openly xenophobic."

When Afghan refugee Sam Lami was applying for asylum 10 years ago, he felt welcome everywhere, he recalls. Today, though he says most ordinary Swedes are still friendly, he is upset

at the way “politicians invent problems, and paint a darker picture than reality. They blame all society’s problems on immigrants.”

“Everyone in Sweden used to defend multiculturalism,” says Andreas Heino, an analyst at the free market think tank Timbro. “Now you cannot open a newspaper without reading an article arguing that it’s a problem. Most people agree.”

The word has spread: Only 22,000 people sought asylum in Sweden last year, less than 15 percent of the 2015 numbers.

Arrivals are down also because the European Union has been barricading itself behind a tougher southern border to keep out people trying to cross the Mediterranean.

In 2016, the EU did a deal with Turkey, under which the Turkish government agreed to strengthen its control over the frontier with Greece (and thus the EU), and to host refugees itself, in return for more than 6 billion euros. Turkey now has nearly 4 million refugees on its soil, more than any other country in the world, almost all of them from Syria.

The EU has also stepped up its aid to the Libyan coast guard, providing it with vessels, training, and money so as to boost the force’s ability to detect, detain, and return refugee boats before they reach international waters. The policy has worked, but has been condemned by the United Nations as “inhuman” in light of the appalling conditions in the Libyan detention centers to which the migrants are returned.

An Afghan refugee holds his two sons after they disembarked from the Eleftherios Venizelos passenger ship at the port of Piraeus, near Athens, on Sept. 7, 2015.

At EU headquarters in Brussels, the mood is militant. Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, used his “State of the Union” address last month to propose an eight-fold increase in European border guards and stronger moves to deport irregular migrants who are not granted asylum back to their home countries. Currently, only 36 percent of failed applicants are sent home.

Such policies may be less theatrical, but they are designed to save the same purpose as the wall along the southern US border that President Trump has proposed.

Mr. Trump’s inflammatory language on the 2016 campaign trail, accusing Mexicans of being “rapists,” has helped make immigration one of the most prominent wedge issues in US politics. Trump amplified the views of the large minority of Americans in favor of stricter immigration controls, and he brought them to the fore.

“Trump said it in a different way and I guess he convinced people,” says Alex Nowrasteh, senior immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington. “He’s a brilliant political entrepreneur. He made people care about an issue they didn’t really care about before.”

That rhetoric has since led to significant and controversial policy changes, including several that have drawn accusations of inhumanity.

Among the most high-profile are Trump’s travel ban executive orders, which restricted entry to the US for citizens of a half-dozen mostly majority-Muslim countries, and the zero-tolerance policy of criminally prosecuting anyone caught illegally crossing the southern border. That resulted in the forced separation of children as young as a few months old from their parents.

The administration has also slashed the number of refugees the US will resettle this year to a 40-year low, making it harder for skilled foreign workers to get visas, and drafting a rule to deny legal status to immigrants if they are deemed likely to use public benefits such as food stamps or Medicaid.

Such policies may enjoy substantial minority support, but overall popular opinion in the US appears more positive about newcomers. A recent survey by the Bipartisan Policy Center of Texans' views on immigration – considered a bellwether given the state's growing diversity and proximity to the border – found that 69 percent believe that “immigrants are an essential part of American society.”

“Most Americans believe immigration is an important part of the country, think it's good,” says Mr. Selee, “but they worry we don't have enough control over who comes in.”

Colombian police officers check belongings in a house where undocumented Venezuelans migrants live during a raid in Villa del Rosario, Colombia, on Aug. 24.

Similar sentiments prevail in Europe. A Pew Research Center poll of 10 European countries last month found that 77 percent of respondents approved of taking in refugees from violence and war. “But people want immigration to be controlled,” says Mr. Nesse of the Norwegian Refugee Council. “Then they can be reasonable.”

Reason is often less persuasive than emotion, though, in the current debate, and even nations with proud traditions of generosity are bowing before the tide. “Europe is going the wrong way, which makes it hard for Sweden to take an exceptional position,” laments Goran Rosenberg, a writer and social commentator whose father, an Auschwitz survivor, settled in Sweden.

Divisions among its members are so acute that the European Union is finding it impossible to agree on a common migration policy, or a common asylum policy. The governments setting the continental agenda are those in Hungary and Poland, who are refusing to accept any of the asylum seekers that the EU would like to distribute more evenly around the continent, and Italy, whose new interior minister, Matteo Salvini, has declared he plans to expel 500,000 migrants.

“The sort of humane policies needed for Europe to maintain its moral stature need negotiating amongst European countries, and they are extremely divided on this issue,” says Mr. Rosenberg. “I see no chance of agreement.”

In the meantime, Europe is seeking to address the longer-term issues. For example, the prospect that Africa's population will double by 2050, inevitably spurring more migrants, is spurring the EU to look at bigger aid and development budgets for the African continent. In the shorter term, the EU is trying to deal with the immediate situation by tightening up border security and reaching more deportation agreements with migrants' countries of origin.

With populists driving the law-and-order agenda, “centrists do not dare challenge their rhetoric for fear of losing votes to extremists,” argues Nesse. “They've failed to live up to their principles.”

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He sees more hopeful signs, however, outside the world of politics, in the lives of ordinary citizens. “If you go to local communities in Europe or the United States or Canada, you see

people standing up for their immigrant neighbors,” Nesse says. “Basic solidarity and humanitarian support are still alive” at street level.

Nasim Soleimanpour, a vivacious young Iranian refugee living in Stockholm, has noticed the same thing. “It’s true that there is more hatred expressed and immigrants are blamed for all sorts of things” by politicians, she says. “But just because of that, support for immigrants from individual Swedes is even greater.