

## **Should we speak of a “migration crisis”?**

*Conference in Malaga, Spain - April 7, 2016 – Louis Imbert*

The title of this presentation is “Should we speak of a ‘migration crisis’?”. Now, some of you may be wondering what exactly I mean with this question. To most Europeans, the so-called ‘European migration crisis’ is a self-evident reality, too obvious to be contested. Today, I dare to challenge the idea of a ‘European migration crisis’, both in terms of the reality it describes and in terms of the effect such a term might have on public opinion and public policies.

Of course, I am not here to deny the worsening situation of migrants in Europe. I am as disgusted as you by the ever-more restrictive migration policies of Europe. However, I believe we need to be more cautious when it comes to the terms we use to describe the current situation of migrants in Europe. Unwillingly, we often use official terms, terms used by the media and our politicians, terms which are rarely neutral. To me, the so-called ‘migration crisis’ is one of such expressions, supposedly neutral, yet in fact politically charged and biased towards a particular take on the situation.

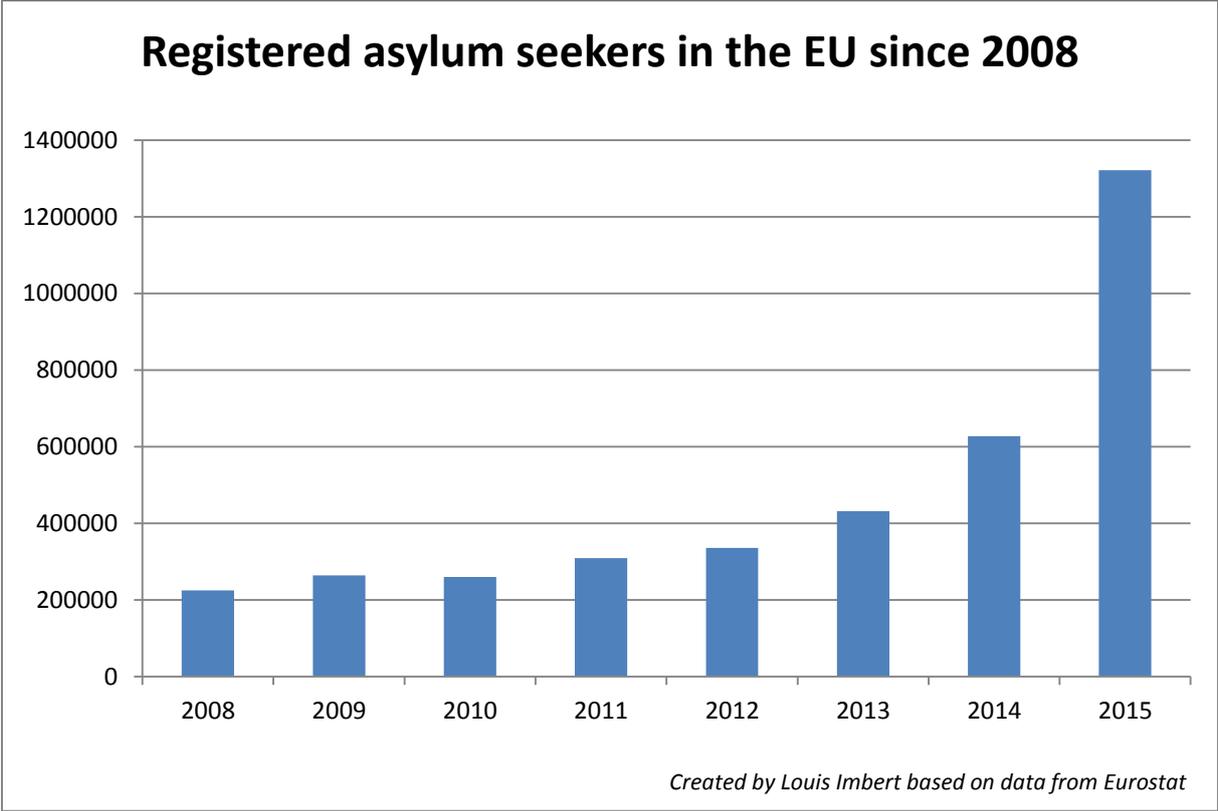
The aim of this presentation is not to deny that there has been a surge in migrant arrivals in Europe since last year. That is the reality. But we need to pause for a moment and analyze how the concept of a ‘migration crisis’ may or may not explain the current situation adequately and may or may not bring us closer to long-term, viable policies which respect the human rights of all migrants.

4 questions which will guide this presentation:

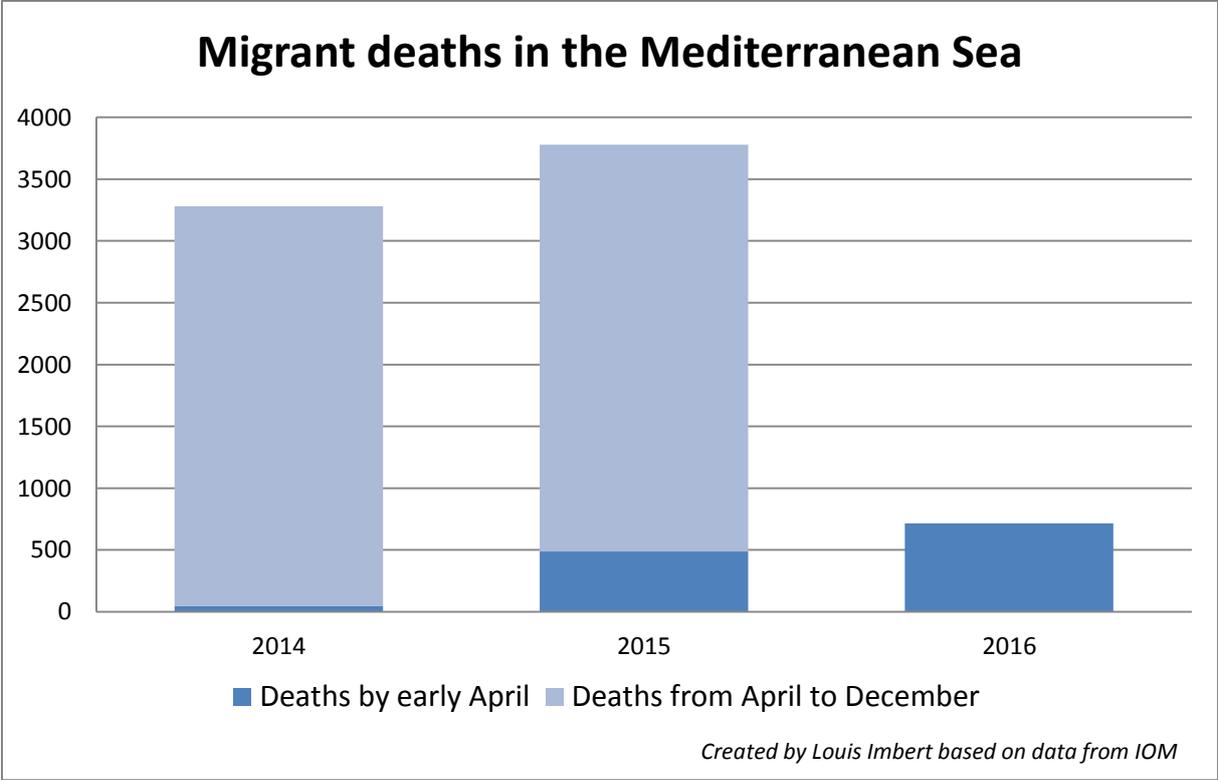
- How did the concept of ‘migration crisis’ emerge and what does it refer to? (basically what are we talking about)
- Does this concept enable us to understand the situation and its context?
- Does this concept lead to good policy-making?
- What do we do from here?

### **1) The ‘European migration crisis’: what are we talking about?**

**Observation #1: In 2015, Europe saw a significant rise in migrant arrivals.**



**Observation #2: In 2015, Europe saw a significant rise in migrant deaths at sea.**



**Observation #3: The ‘migration crisis’ appeared in April 2015.**

The notion that there is a migration or refugee crisis is not something new. There have been other moments in history when people spoke of migration crises.

But regarding the current situation, the daily reports on the so-called “European migration crisis” really started about one year ago. As we saw in the previous observation, migrant arrivals were rising quickly in 2015 and so were deaths at sea. In April 2015, several boats sunk in the Central Mediterranean. In just one week, more than a thousand lives were lost. It was at this point that everyone started talking about a ‘migration crisis’.

On April 20, 2015, Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs Ministers from all over the EU met and adopted a ten-point action plan designed by the European Commission and specifically presented as a first response to a so-called ‘crisis situation in the Mediterranean’. In the following days and weeks, there were other emergency meetings of EU officials, essentially focused on more repressive measures against irregular migration. On May 13, 2015, the European Commission announced a European Agenda on Migration, which included a number of emergency measures in response to what the Commission called the ‘migration crisis in the Mediterranean’. There have since been many other emergency meetings and other emergency measures on migration, all justified by the so-called ‘migration crisis’.

**Observation #4: The ‘migration crisis’ has since become an obsessive expression, progressively becoming the only way to describe the current situation in Europe.**

Since April 2015, the term has been used on a daily basis by the media, politicians, NGOs and international organizations. It is now normal to start a news article about migration with the idea of a ‘migration crisis’. A number of media websites now include a permanent ‘Migration crisis’ section. In my opinion, a certain number of journalists are using the crisis rhetoric to sell stories to readers and viewers. Others are simply quoting politicians or organizations, or firmly believe there is a ‘migration crisis’.

Politicians are also constantly referring to the ‘migration crisis’, as an insurmountable challenge which calls for more emergency meetings and more emergency measures.

Many non-governmental organizations, notably Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, are also using the term or speaking of a ‘refugee crisis’, obviously with a different goal in mind. They are trying to achieve radical changes in migration policies pursued by Europe.

International organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees are also referring to a ‘refugee crisis’, but rather to underline the need for emergency programs and emergency funds.

In the end, there are very few individuals or organizations who have actually challenged openly the very notion of ‘migration crisis’. The concept appears to be convenient for anyone looking for a relatively simple, ‘one-size-fits-all’ analysis of the situation.

## **2) Does the concept of a ‘European migration crisis’ really enable us to understand the situation and its context?**

Personally, I think that the concept of ‘European migration crisis’ has led many people to have misconceptions about the current situation and the context.

Here I want to focus on 6 of such misconceptions derived from or at least not challenged by the idea of a ‘European migration crisis’:

1. “We are dealing with a new, unprecedented phenomenon.”
2. “Europe has very little to do with why people are coming.”
3. “Europe is invaded by migrants.”
4. “Europe is attracting so many Syrians. Europe is their first destination.”
5. “Europe treats migrants humanely and has an open migration policy.”
6. “Europe is more threatened by migrants than by xenophobia and the rise of far right parties.”

### **Misconception #1: “We are dealing with a new, unprecedented phenomenon”**

**Fact: There have always been people migrating, with varying degrees and for a plurality of reasons.**

People migrate for many different reasons. It might be about joining their family or studying abroad for a few years. It can also be about looking for economic opportunities and/or escaping conflict or persecution. Reasons to migrate are often complex and intertwined. It’s usually not as simple as the refugee / economic migrant divide will have us think.

Migration is an integral part of human history. Humans have always been on the move. It is very clear in recent history :

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tens of millions of Europeans migrated to the United States. Between 1845 and 1855, 2 million Irishmen left their island because of the Great Famine.

There are many examples throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Between 1936 and 1939, up to half a million people fled Spain because of the Civil War.

World War II displaced tens of millions of Europeans.

Between 1975 and 1985: around one million people fled Vietnam.

During the early 1990s, hundreds of thousands fled ex-Yugoslavia because of war.

During the early 2000s, hundreds of thousands of Ecuadorians migrated to Spain because of the economic crisis in their country.

And the list could go on and on and on...

Migration is part of our history. Migration is not a new phenomenon.

### **Misconception #2: “Europe has nothing to do with why people are coming.”**

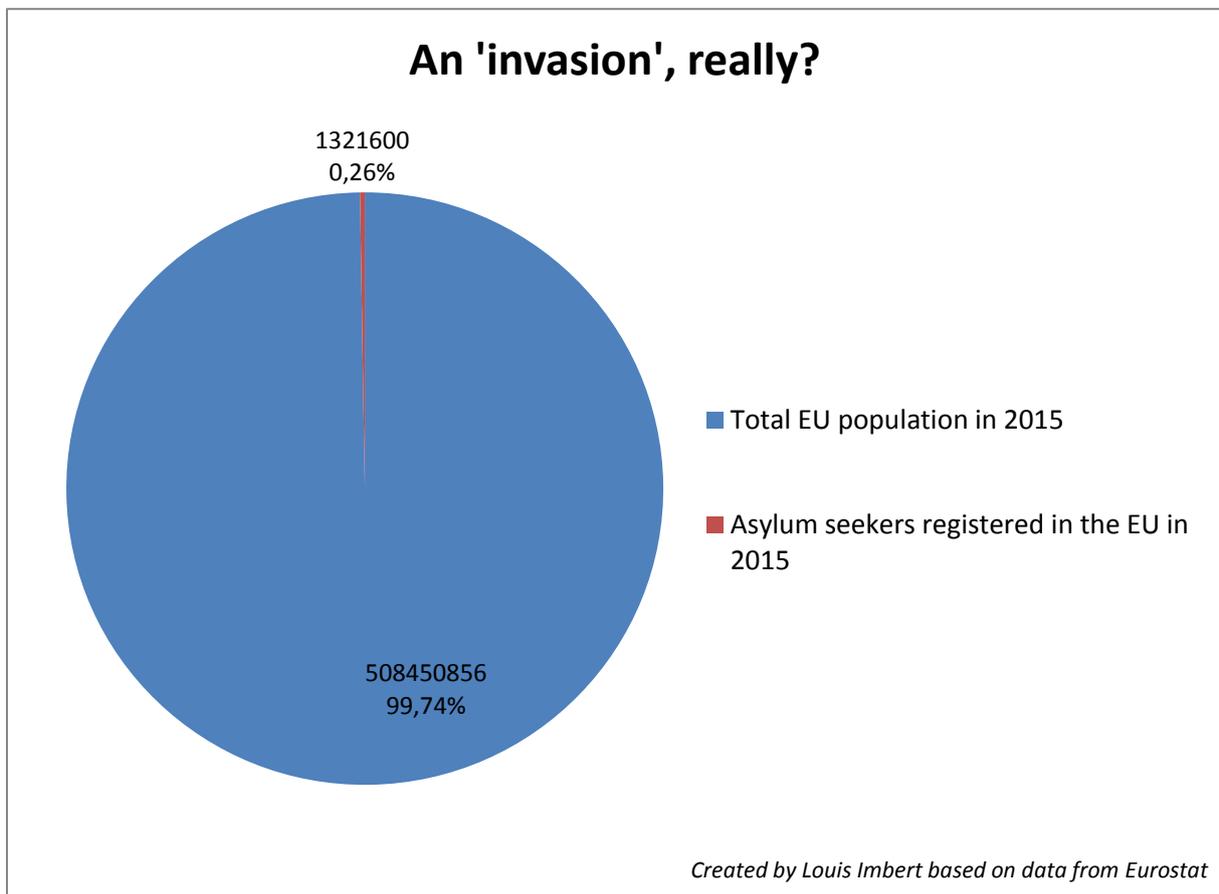
**Fact: Europe bears some responsibility as to why people migrate**

Europe has contributed to create the conditions which push some to leave their countries of origin. Despite being one of the richest places in the world and one of the most powerful, Europe has failed to foster a more peaceful and equal world. Here are a few examples of that:

- Europe has sold weapons to belligerent countries.
- Europe has contributed to military operations which have destabilized countries such as Iraq, which later enabled terrorist organizations to take over entire regions.
- Europe has been unable and sometimes unwilling to solve international conflicts through diplomatic efforts.
- Europe has pushed for neoliberal policies in many countries the world. Those policies have destroyed national economies and opportunities for people to study, work and have access to dignified conditions of living.
- In the so-called 'fight against terrorism', Europe has been feeding radical Islam by stigmatizing and marginalizing European Muslims.
- Last but not least, Europe has collaborated with dictatorships in a number of ways, instead of demanding that they respect human rights.

**Misconception #3: “Europe is invaded by migrants.”**

**Fact: Asylum seekers who registered in 2015 represent 0.26% of the European Union’s total population.**

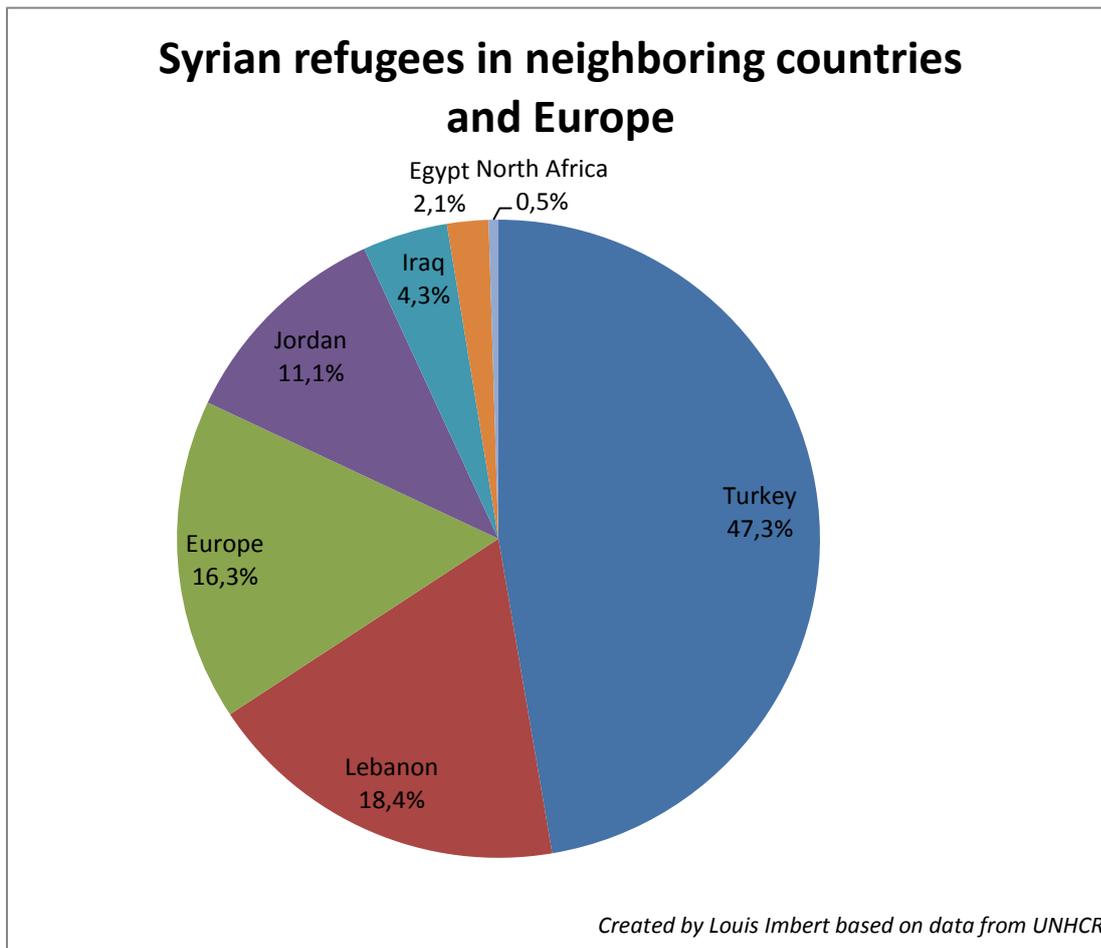


**Misconception #4: “Europe is attracting so many Syrians. Europe is their first destination.”**

**Fact: Europe is far from being the first destination of Syrian refugees.**

Before the war, Syria had a total population of 22 million. Today, 6.5 million are internally displaced and living in very harsh conditions. 4.8 million refugees are living in neighboring

countries (mainly Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan). And approximately one million refugees are now living in Europe.



**Misconception #5: “Europe treats migrants humanely and has an open migration policy.”**

**Fact: Europe has been implementing restrictive, inhumane migration policies for more than a decade.**

For more than a decade, Europe has opened its internal borders (Schengen Area) but closed its external borders. It has implemented restrictive migration policies with the very aim to keep non-Europeans out and to deport as many people as possible.

Aspect #1: Restrictive visa policy

Short-term visas have been harmonized at the European level (Schengen visas), so they follow common European rules and are difficult to obtain (endless requirements). It’s also important to understand that they don’t guarantee entry into the EU (it’s still possible to be denied entry upon arrival even with a visa).

Long-term visas continue to follow national rules and are just as difficult to obtain. Without a visa, it is not possible to enter Europe legally.

Aspect #2: Externalized border controls

Because Europe has managed to externalize border controls, it is becoming increasingly difficult to leave countries of origin and transit for Europe without a valid passport and visa.

There are at least three ways in which Europe has managed to externalize border controls:

- Europe has outsourced border controls to countries of origin and transit. National authorities of those countries are controlling passengers upon departure for Europe. There are international laws and agreements which force countries of origin and transit to take back individuals who do not fulfill the requirements to enter a European country. This has incited countries of origin and transit to police European borders.
- Europe sends liaison officers to perform border checks in so-called third countries.
- Europe imposes financial sanctions on airline companies which fail to control passengers upon departure for Europe.

### Aspect #3: Restrictive asylum policy

Two ways:

- Preventing access to Europe to nationals of certain countries, who they know will be asking for asylum. Example: a number of European countries are implementing airport transit visas for Syrians.
- Strict application of asylum law to give refugee status to a limited number of people.

Strict interpretation of international law, assumption that asylum seekers are lying, authorities are asking for more and more proof.

Example: all around the world, there are countries criminalizing same-sex sexual relations. Gay asylum seekers are asked to prove their sexual orientation. This led to shocking practices in 2009 in the Czech Republic: phallometric testing (watch pornographic material + measure physiological reaction to 'verify' sexuality).

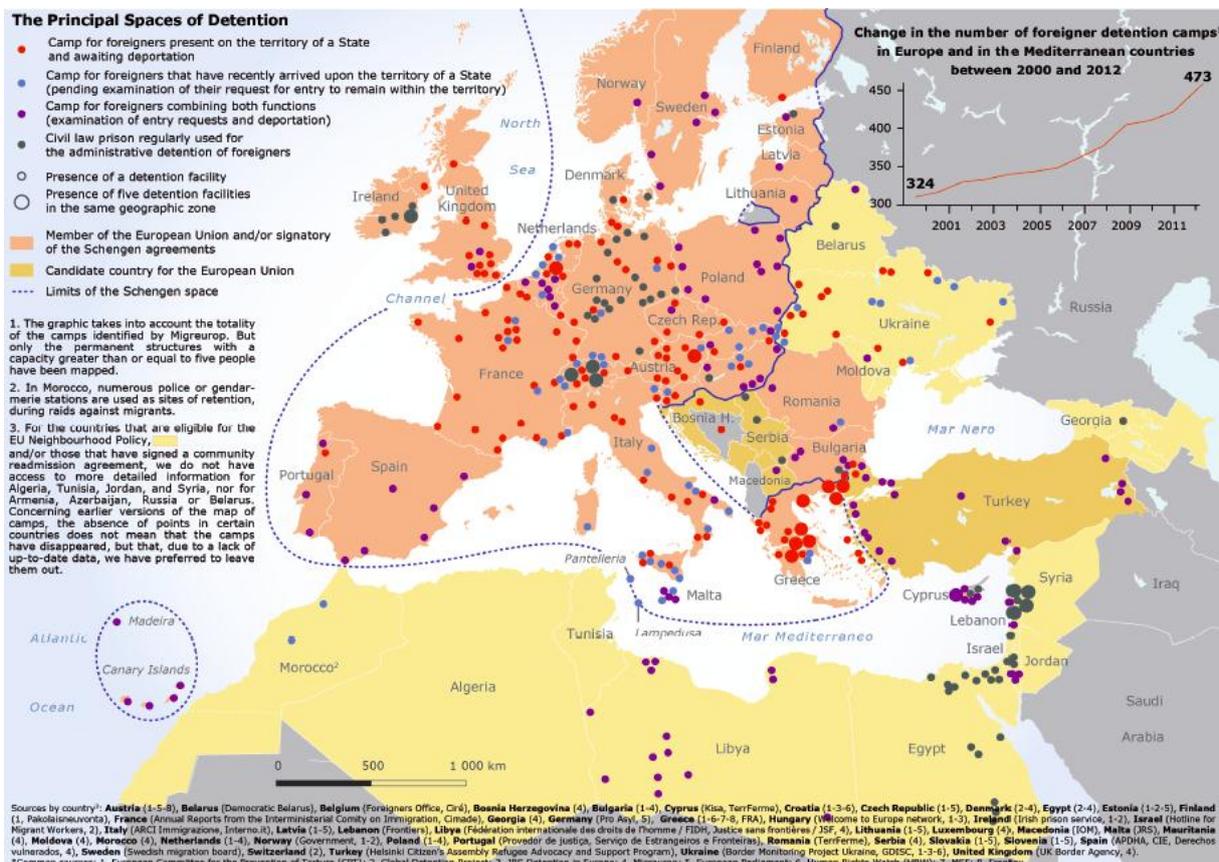
### Aspect #4: 'Fight against irregular migration' at any cost

First, Europe created so-called 'irregular migration' by cutting down drastically the possibilities to enter Europe legally. Quite naturally, a number of people who could have come legally suddenly became so-called 'irregular immigrants'.

Then, Europe has been trying to eradicate so-called 'irregular migration' at any cost. I will give you three examples:

- In 2004, Europe set up Frontex, an EU agency in charge of coordinating the surveillance of external borders. This agency has seen its budget soar and it has acquired more and more autonomy and prerogatives. This is despite the fact that non-governmental organizations have repeatedly criticized the agency for violating the human rights of migrants during surveillance operations. Up to now, there has been no complaint mechanism for migrants whose rights are violated in the course of Frontex-led surveillance operations.

- Europe has sought the cooperation of countries of origin and transit to police European borders. Europe has built partnerships with all of its neighboring countries. It has also signed 17 readmission agreements with so-called third countries (amongst them Turkey). Those readmission agreements facilitate the deportation of nationals of these countries as well as the deportation of individuals who have transited through these countries. Europe is currently negotiating 20 such agreements in addition to the 17 it has already signed. Member states of the European Union have signed many more bilateral readmission agreements with non-European countries. Europe has been seeking cooperation from states with some of the worst human rights records in the world, such as Eritrea, Libya and Sudan. Europe has also been linking development aid to cooperation of receiving countries in the ‘fight against irregular migration’. A recent example of that is the Africa-EU Summit held in Valetta last November. In the 1.8 billion-euro Emergency Trust Fund, there is in fact money which will go invested in the so-called ‘fight against irregular migration’.
- Immigration detention. For many years, Europe has been authorizing and encouraging European countries to detain immigrants who are to be deported. A European law passed in 2008 and sometimes designated as the Directive of Shame authorizes member states to detain immigrants for up to 18 months. Immigration detention centers are places where many human rights violations occur, often with great impunity. The detention conditions are often appalling. Immigration detention criminalizes individuals for not carrying proper documentation and has devastating psychological effects on people.



As we can see, there is nothing humane or open about European migration policies. And while Europe has not succeeded in eradicating so-called ‘irregular migration’, the human and financial cost of European migration policies is constantly rising. People are still coming, but they are taking more dangerous routes. The result is that in 2015, more than 3700 people died in the Mediterranean Sea. In terms of the financial cost of European migration policies, the Migrants’ Files, a consortium of journalists from over 15 European countries, estimates that the cost of deportations in Europe is around one billion euros a year.

**Misconception #6: “Europe is more threatened by migrants than by xenophobia and the rise of far right parties.”**

**Fact: Europe is obviously not threatened by migrants but should be very worried about xenophobia and the far right, which are gaining ground everywhere in Europe. We need to address dangerous ideas, not feed them or ignore them.**

I’m not going to focus on this misconception but I really believe it is something we should be worrying about.

2 examples of open xenophobia and racism in the European press (see Prezi for images):

- Polish magazine cover (“The Islamic rape of Europe”)
- Daily Mail cartoon with refugees as rats

Far right parties have been on the rise in many countries of Europe, including France with the Front National, Greece with Golden Dawn, Austria with the FPÖ, the Freedom Party of Austria, Germany with Alternativ für Deutschland and the United Kingdom with UKIP, the UK Independence Party.

**3) Does the concept of ‘European migration crisis’ lead to better policy-making?**

**Observation #1: The ‘migration crisis’ denotes a sense of emergency which prevents long-term solutions from emerging.**

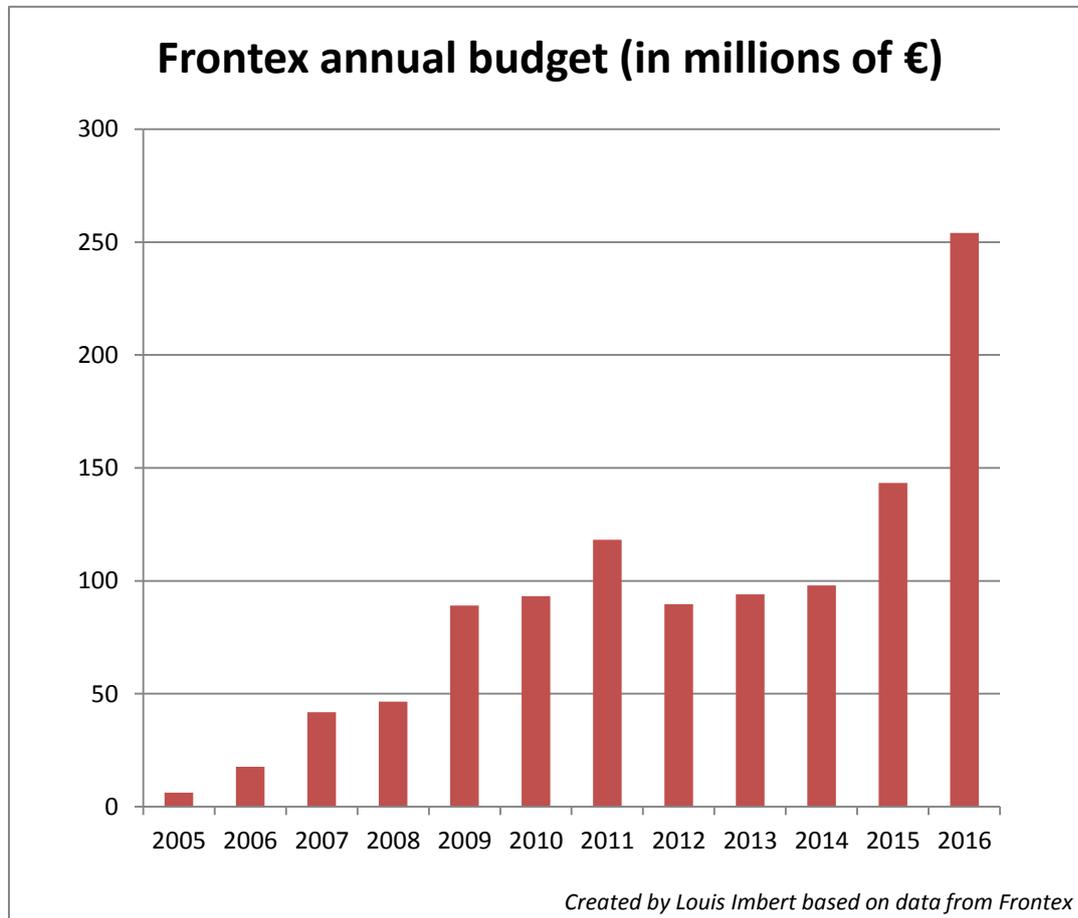
The current focus is on addressing the “massive influx”, with the illusion that it is possible to close European borders (which is proved wrong by more than a decade of failed policies).

Therefore, no sustainable policies are really being considered, no viable alternatives are being set forth. The notion that there is a ‘migration crisis’ has mostly fostered emergency programs which do not change anything on the long term.

**Observation #2: The ‘migration crisis’ has reinforced the focus on a security-based approach, guided by the pretended need to fight against ‘irregular migration’.**

Apart from a few countries such as Germany which initially reacted humanely to the surge in arrivals, most countries have implemented or reinforced repressive policies in reaction to the so-called ‘crisis’. Walls have been erected at several borders. Several countries have reinstated border controls inside the Schengen Area. Surveillance operations have been

launched or reinforced<sup>1</sup>. Borders have been further militarized, with NATO now patrolling the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece, and Frontex reaching an annual budget of a quarter billion euros. The exploding budget of Frontex comes to show that the EU is more interested in a security-based approach. In fact, the EU has launched an accelerated legislative procedure to create a more powerful and better funded equivalent of Frontex, which would be more free to intervene at external borders of Europe without depending upon member states.

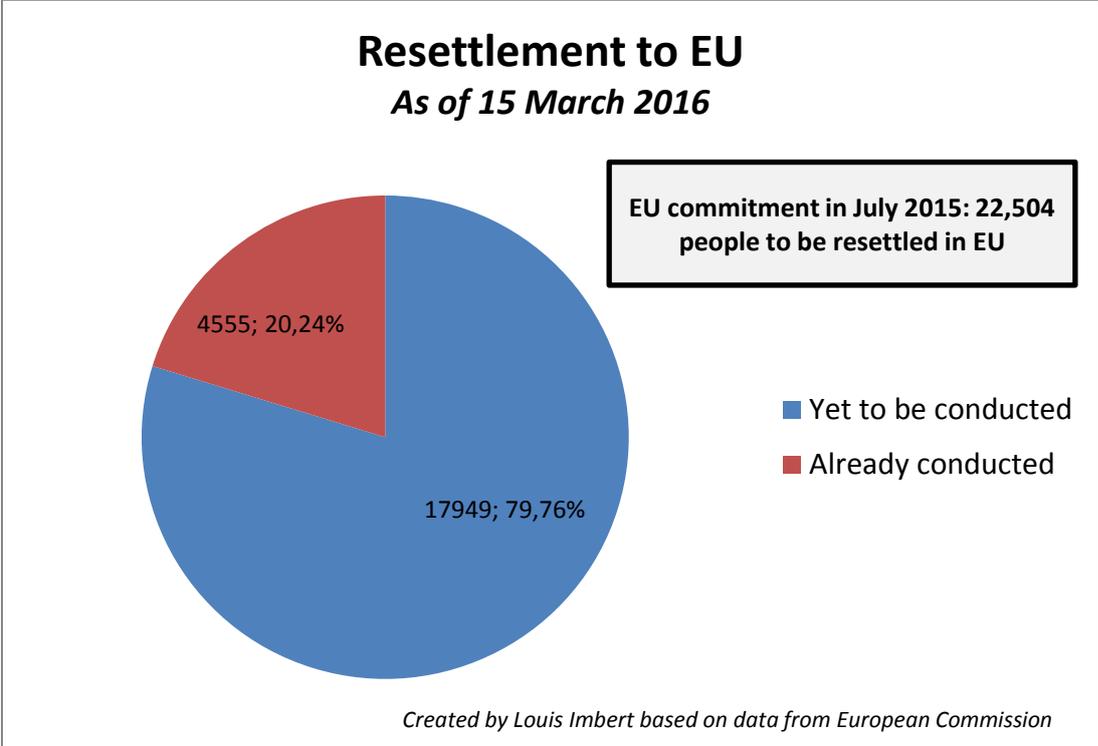
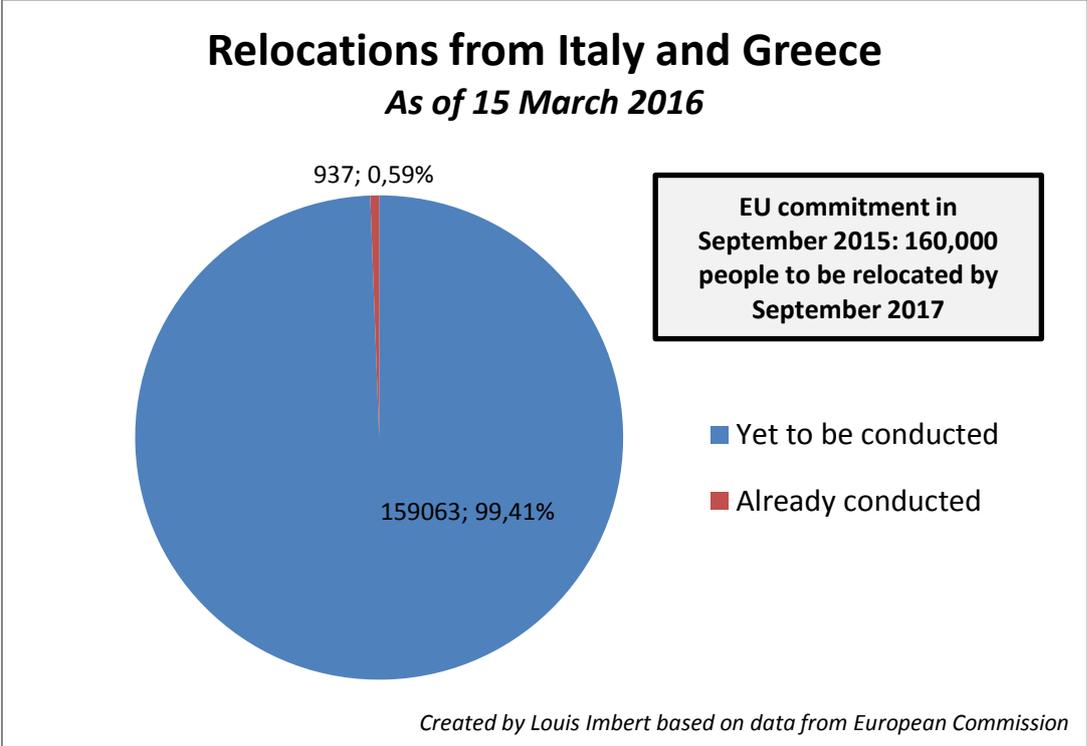


**Observation #3: The policies presented as solutions to the so-called ‘migration crisis’ have been dysfunctional.**

I lack both the time and the expertise to fully review the policies which have been presented as solutions to the so-called ‘migration crisis’. I will therefore focus on one example: relocation and resettlement. Those two technical terms designate legal channels which were opened for asylum seekers to either arrive legally in Europe directly from countries such as Turkey or Lebanon – that’s resettlement – or to be authorized upon arrival in Italy or Greece to go directly to another European country – that’s relocation. Last year, European countries agreed to relocate approximately 160,000 asylum seekers from Greece and Italy and to resettle around 20,000 asylum seekers from Syria’s neighboring countries. Overall, it’s significant to note that European countries only agreed to relocate and resettle the equivalent of 3.7% of the 4.8 millions of Syrian refugees. And this does not even include other nationalities.

<sup>1</sup> EUNavfor Med / Operation Sophia in Libya – supposedly to fight against smuggling/trafficking - [http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/10/09/la-lutte-contre-les-passeurs-cache-une-guerre-aux-migrants\\_4786389\\_3232.html#xtor=AL-32280270](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/10/09/la-lutte-contre-les-passeurs-cache-une-guerre-aux-migrants_4786389_3232.html#xtor=AL-32280270)

But what was hardly a solution in the first place, is a disaster today. As of 15 March 2016, 937 asylum seekers had been relocated and 4,555 had been resettled. In Spain, millions have been invested to host around 17,000 asylum seekers, but only 18 have arrived until now.



**Observation #4: Just as with terrorism and the economic crisis, the ‘migration crisis’ rhetoric has been used as a justification for unethical policies, such as the recent deal struck between the EU and Turkey on 18 March 2016.**

On 18 March 2016, Turkey and the EU signed an agreement which was earlier presented as having the potential to ‘end the migration crisis’. It provides for the unethical and illegal deportation to Turkey of all migrants – including asylum-seekers – who arrive on Greek islands. The deal also provides for the ridiculous ‘one for one’ approach, which consists in resettling one Syrian in Europe, for each Syrian deported to Turkey. In exchange for its collaboration, Turkey obtains 3 billion euros for refugee camps on its territory, the end of visas for Turkish nationals very soon and the opening of new chapters of negotiation for Turkey to join the European Union.

This deal raises serious concerns because it does not appear to respect basic principles of asylum law, such as the obligation to thoroughly examine asylum claims before deporting an asylum seeker. Also, Turkey is known to have recently sent hundreds if not thousands of Syrians back to Syria and has also repeatedly opened fire on migrants at its border with Syria.

Asked about the deal on 21 March, a Chief Spokesman of the European Commission responded the following: “The Commission cannot allow itself to become a commentator of reality. [...] We don’t have time for comments, we don’t have time for the sort of questions you are asking us.”

The reception centers on Greek islands have now been turned into detention centers and they are already overcrowded, with tensions naturally rising as Europe prepares the first massive deportations.

This Monday, Europe deported the first 200 migrants with the support of Frontex. While most were not asylum seekers, it appeared after the boats had already made it to Turkey that 13 asylum seekers were among them and had not been able to apply for asylum. This comes as very worrisome news: authorities appear to be improvising and seem unable to apply the most basic guarantees.

This kind of deal might otherwise have been deemed unacceptable, in terms of ethical values and legal obligations. But here, with the so-called ‘migration crisis’, emergency has apparently prevailed over respect for human rights and basic principles of humanity.

**Observation #5: Migrants are continuing to arrive in important numbers, and they are taking more dangerous routes and paying more to smugglers.**

#### **4) What do we do from here?**

I have a personal suggestion I want to make before we move on to the debate. Instead of calling the current situation a crisis, which prevents us from looking at it with a positive eye, let’s call it an opportunity.

It’s an opportunity to shift migration policies from a security-based approach to an integration-focused approach. This involves reinvesting in integration policies the billions of euros we spend today on border control.

It’s an opportunity to uphold European values of humanity, dignity, solidarity, democracy and human rights. We can do that by refusing any migration policy which does not respect those values.

It's an opportunity to start thinking about real alternatives to the current model. In relation to that, we need to stop thinking that anything slightly different from what exists today is a utopian project. We need to think about what kind of legacy we want to leave to our children and our grand-children.

Finally, it's an opportunity to change our discourse on migration. That includes challenging expressions such as the 'migration crisis'. It means changing ways of describing people who are migrating, for example restraining from using expressions such as 'illegal immigrants'. It also means conveying a positive image of immigrants, valuing cultural differences and uniting people instead of encouraging fear, discrimination and division.