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Fixing Europe's migrant predicament requires a new approach

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Tensions are rising in Europe on several fronts, with violent riots in major cities, angry words and deep public anxiety and discontent.

The proximate causes of this unrest are clear enough — including the deep frustration at continued COVID-19 restrictions as a fourth wave grips many European countries. But add to this unrest sharply rising prices (especially home energy costs and soaring petrol prices), puzzling shortages in the shops and dire prophecies of increasing climate chaos, coupled with all the disruption of livelihoods and businesses, and a perfect storm of popular protest, distrust and feelings of insecurity is building up.

But looming up from behind all these concerns comes an even deeper cause of fear and anger spilling onto the streets — a cause that is by no means new but may now be expanding to inflame politics afresh and raise protests to boiling point levels.

That cause is migration — in all its manifestations and with all its repercussions. Of these there are two most prominent and politically toxic features.

The first is the swelling waves of migrants at Europe's frontiers clamouring to get in. The second is in a sense the opposite face of the issue — the yawning gaps in skills and workforce that result from the immigrant "crackdowns," which most governments feel impelled to maintain and strengthen, as the streams of refugees and economic migrants build up from every side and social hostility to newcomers mounts.

It is the first of these two aspects that currently gets most of the visibility. The typical European daily scene shared on video has now become one of high barbed wire fencing, lines of both police and armed security forces confronting frightened refugees, migrants and other categories — including many women and children — massed together and begging at frontier barriers or scrambling from sinking boats and dinghies, including a whole host of other pitiful and tragic situations.

All this is rapidly intertwining with poisonous politics. Mediterranean crossings have created massive problems for Greece's islands and southern Italy, where a human disaster is unfolding as a steady stream of overloaded and badly equipped craft from North Africa regularly sink, drowning their passengers. Meanwhile, in Northern Europe, boatloads of migrants crossing the English Channel from the French coast have soured already

unpleasant relations between France and the U.K. to even further levels. A hideous recent tragedy, with 27 migrants bound for England drowning in icy seas off Calais may have focused minds. But when old allies and close neighbours France and the U.K. turn on each other, all Europe suffers.

Now a new pressure point has flared up at the eastern end of Europe. At the Belarusian-Polish border, angry would-be immigrants are tearing at the barriers there or are trying to find ways around them. The causes behind this sudden and ugly new migrant tableau are blurred, but one theory is that Belarus's autocratic leader, Alexander Lukashenko, may be actively inviting immigrants to come to his country and then urging them to push their way on into Poland and the European Union. What is his grubby motive? That if the EU will treat him better and reduce sanctions on his country, then he will stop encouraging this pitiful flow.

Turn to the other side of the migrant crisis — less visible but which also plays dangerously into domestic politics — is the shortage of skills provided by the immigrants. Modern economies need migrants to work efficiently. Cut down entries or simply block immigration generally and you immediately create large gaps in both the skilled and unskilled workforces. The U.K. faces this situation in acute form, present for many years past but sharply intensified by Brexit.

The result — too few doctors, not enough nurses, unfilled low-skilled jobs, restaurants and hotels short of staff, ruptured supply chains as truck drivers go back to their home countries and countless other disruptive repercussions.

To repeat, none of these problems are new, having in one form or another plagued once open countries like the U.K. for decades. Nor, of course, are they confined to Europe: The Mexican-American border has become a grim example where migrants are also desperate to climb barriers, swim rivers and even hide in sealed trucks to gain entry.

Asia, too, has its migration problems aplenty, driven by causes varying from outright oppression, civil war, terror, genocide, drought, famine or just plain despair. Fugitives from Hong Kong's current oppression and from the Afghanistan debacle are among those who swell that throng.

Japan also is feeling the other edge of the migrant issue, having long kept its borders tightly closed to foreign nationals. It is now facing severe labour and skilled worker shortages in many key sectors.

And there is every reason to believe that the problems and dilemmas confronting Europe on the issue may soon be felt across all continents, along with all the agonies of deciding which are the "right" immigrants to admit or keep out, how to treat genuine asylum seekers and how physically to prevent illegal entry on a massive scale.

It could well be that with the near universalization of the mobile phone and the internet, the incentive for whole communities, societies and populations to be on the move has become not just a passing pressure but a permanent phenomenon of the new human condition. A better life elsewhere, the chance to leave and live rather than suffer and die, becomes acutely visible as never before in history, often grossly exaggerated by unscrupulous operators, and nonetheless irresistible to those seeking some sort of relief.

If that is the prospect, then it becomes necessary not just to rush from one expedient to another, often in total disregard of human rights as well as against simple compassion, but to develop whole new strategies of management and assimilation in the face of ever larger migrant flows. These would need to go together with vastly stronger and creative disincentives to move in the first place based on international cooperation and coordination on a scale sadly missing hitherto.

The costs of failure on this front could be comparable with, and come even sooner than, the costs of uncurbed climate excesses. In the last century the noble hope was that massive aid to poorer and fragile parts of the world would keep people within national borders and obviate the need for exodus.

It has not worked that way. A new approach in a new world is overdue.
