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Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

UPTAKE ARTICLE

ESPON Roundtable: reception of migrants in Europe – towards better practices in main landing and transit points

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Introduction

On the 23rd of October 2020, the European Commission announced its new Pact on Migration¹:

“[This pact is] covering all of the different elements needed for a comprehensive European approach to migration. It sets out **improved and faster procedures** throughout the asylum and migration system. And it sets in balance the principles of fair sharing of **responsibility and solidarity**. This is crucial for **rebuilding trust** between Member States and confidence in the capacity of the European Union to manage migration.”²

One day later, on the 24th of October, the ESPON roundtable, organised by the Maltese Planning authority, dealt with the topic of migrant flows in main landing areas, highlighting the results from the ESPON MIGRATUP targeted analysis. Researchers, Maltese and Italian stakeholders, and also an NGO representative participated in this virtual event and gave their opinion of the current situation.

The main goal of this roundtable was to take stock of the current situation in terms of the reception of migrants, by confronting different territorial experiences and points of view so that the audience can get food for thought either in terms of political recommendations or research needs. MIGRATUP³ results were presented to provide an academic understanding of the crisis and to disseminate the results of this ESPON targeted analysis.

The three parts of the roundtable gave an overview of the common challenges among European “first line” regions and underlined agreements and disagreements among the numerous actors involved in responsibility, legal definitions, and rescue in the Mediterranean Sea, for instance. The speakers rather carefully welcomed the New Pact on Migration and were looking forward to seeing what would be concretely implemented. They stressed the importance of acting on the reason why people are migrating, as well as on policies to help the economic development of their home countries in a sustainable way. The exchanges showed how complex the interplay is among those actors and how much European solidarity and strong cooperation are needed to reach better practices in the reception of these migrants. There is a need for both long-term and short-term solutions.

Last but not least, the concept of ‘crisis’ was deeply questioned as the phenomenon is expected to last some time and because such a narrative puts policymakers in a protective mindset rather than a constructive mindset towards a process that is inherent to human society.

Conclusions and recommendations for future

There was a common agreement among the speakers on the need for both increasing help from the EU and for a stronger European solidarity. As the issue will be of a higher magnitude in the future, local Mediterranean stakeholders will not have the necessary means to deal with it. This stronger role of the EU should imply both financial help and legal action to support Mediterranean and Adriatic-Ionian regions and islands. Participants agreed on the fact that the current wave of migrants has to be considered as a long-term issue that requires long-term answers.

Saviour Formosa, Professor at the University of Malta underlined the importance of understanding “why migration occurs”. One should also take into account the specific territorial context of receiving regions in order to give the appropriate answer to said question. According to him, the current wave of migrants is just an “initial part of the flow” and “the next wave of migration is based on ecological change”. Joseph St John from the Maltese Ministry for Home Affairs, National Security and Law Enforcement asked for a “more permanent solidarity mechanism”, stating that European countries should work together to find durable solutions. However, this solidarity is not enough and therefore, “part of the solution must involve” migrants’ home countries.

Stefano Bianchini and Marco Zoppi from the University of Bologna stated that further exchange of information and collaboration among European countries is crucial. Data has to be of the same format to allow for

¹https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/migration-and-asylum-package-new-pact-migration-and-asylum-documents-adopted-23-september-2020_en

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1706

³ Link to the MIGRATUP project <https://www.espon.eu/migration>

comparative analysis. However, those efforts and policies are not easy to implement as they can trigger legal issues related to the protection of personal information. They also emphasised the need for more local information and for a more important role to be given to local authorities such as regions, cities or municipalities. According to them, this information should focus on the needs of regions in terms of the labour market and on the profiles of newcomers. Indeed, Stefano Bianchini explained that we should change our perspective on migration from a “security threat” to an “opportunity” for European shrinking areas for instance.

Lodovico Gherardi, from the Emilia-Romagna region (MIGRATUP stakeholder) explained that macro regional strategies do not have a specific migration approach but that having “an idea in the medium and long-term of the [migration] phenomena helps localities to take decisions” and can increase their capacities in dealing with other challenges. According to him, it is important that ESPON and other European programmes keep conducting macro-regional studies to approach those challenges. For instance, some countries such as Albania, Serbia or Montenegro are facing emigration of their populations to other European countries, but those countries are also a route of migration for people coming from outside Europe. We have no choice but to consider those two phenomena together to find efficient development solutions.

Finally, Amina Damerджи, from the NGO S.O.S Méditerranée, asked to stop criminalising the rescue boats and to “establish a faster and predictable protocol of disembarkation” in case of emergency docking in Mediterranean ports. According to the NGO, there is a need for “building up a European rescue team” and the European Union should provide more resources for rescuing people.

Feedback on the event

Around 40 participants attended the event from the 107 registered (36 academics, 30 institutional, 2 NGO's and 22 others). The speakers involved came mainly from MIGRATUP (researches and stakeholders), Maltese authorities (1 institutional and 1 researcher), and from NGO's (one volunteer). The event was planned to be divided in 3 parts: the Maltese situation, the MIGRATUP project viewed from researchers and stakeholders and finally outside views. At the end of each block, 15 minutes were dedicated to the questions. The three parts had to be reshaped during the event due to unforeseen unavailabilities. It appeared that the audience had a lot of questions, therefore more time for questions and discussion could have been beneficial.



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