

Walling Yourself Off is No Alternative

Problems of transnational migration in Europe

By Ralf Fücks

Despite the irenic age ushered in by the European Union and the end of the conflict between East and West, Europe has not become a paradise of peace. Transnational migration has created a potential for violence “on the inside” which is interlaced with threats “from the outside.” But shutting the door to further migration is not the solution.



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The fact that “transnationalism and conflict” is the feature topic for an issue of a reputed journal on international politics gives pause for thought. Did not transnationalism, the conscious effort to overcome a strictly national order for the sake of integrating markets and policies across borders, seem the ideal way to move beyond wars and conflicts in the world of nations? Is not the European Union the shining example of the beneficial impact of transnational integration—and that on a continent once shaken by nationalist excesses like no other? The European Union has indeed ushered in a new age of peace, security, and cooperation in Europe, an irenic effect greatly enhanced by the end of the conflict between East and West and by the eastward expansion of the European Union. War between nations within Europe has been exorcised for the foreseeable future.

But Europe has not become a paradise of eternal peace, either. Spain, Britain, and Turkey have fallen prey to terrorist attacks, and sociocultural tensions and conflicts are mounting in the western European countries of immigration. The potential for violence “on the inside” is interlaced with threats “from the outside.” This meld is especially true of militant Islamism, which is organized as a transnational network whose offshoots reach as far as Scandinavia, the Balkans, and the Caucasus. The 9/11 terrorists lived largely in Europe (primarily in Germany), as did the terrorists of the London and Madrid attacks. But their loyalties lay with the nation of Islam, the transnational community of radical Muslims. They did not belong to the socially degraded populations from the suburbs but rather to the new elite of migrants with university degrees and language proficiency. Some of these migrants are citizens of the countries in which they live, yet they despise the liberal political order of the western life style. They have no earthly homeland—any more than the professional communist revolutionaries of the early twentieth century did. Their intellectual and emotional home is radical Islamism, the revolutionary International of our times.

Islamism versus secular democracy

In that sense, radical Islamism is a highly modern phenomenon. It stands as a global answer to the globalization of the western model of society, which is proceeding as an antagonistic process that produces winners and losers, adherents and opponents, with the opponents not necessarily also being losers in globalization. The ideologues of the communist world movement did not generally belong to the “damned of the earth.” Decisions about values are what lead someone to side with or against open society and the liberal model. Islam is merely the medium, not the cause, of the opposition to the secular, individualist, consumer societies of the West.

The decision to opt for an identity as a warrior of God may be triggered by personal experiences of discrimination, dashed professional ambitions, or outrage at the West's "neocolonialism" and may be fostered by fundamentalist imams, but it is not rooted in religion. The fact that the epicenter of militant Islamism lies in the Arab world is not part of Islamic tradition but of that region's impeded social and political modernization and the wounded nationalism of a former world power. The conflict, which is being fought in the Arab world as well, is not between Islam and democracy but between *Islam as politics* (i.e., the endeavor to erect a theocratic state and an Islamic social order) and secular democracy.

The emergence of a radical Islamic opposition in Europe is an expression of a crisis gripping European societies of immigration. More precisely, it is the manifestation of the only partial success at naturalizing migrants from the Islamic world. Naturalization is not meant here only in the political and legal sense. It is about equal opportunity in the educational system, on the labor market, and in political life as well as equal religious freedom for Muslims and Christians. It is also about a process of immigrants and their children identifying with the country of their choice. In other words, I am talking about an enduring process of "nation-building" that turns migrants into citizens of a body politic. It seems as though this process sees more success in the United States than in Europe (or at least used to).

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Whereas the United States (like Canada and Australia) developed as an immigration country from the outset, the concept of nations consisting of an ethnically more or less homogenous culture tended to prevail in Europe. This understanding of the ethnic-cultural nation was most pronounced in Germany, which did not modernize its citizenship laws until the coalition of Social Democrats and Greens did so in 1998. Only at that point did *jus soli* acquire status equal to *jus sanguinis*. Nevertheless, German society still finds it difficult to naturalize migrants from other cultural areas. Islamism offers something to identify with for young migrants who do not, or do not yet, define themselves as "German" and who do not, or no longer, define themselves as citizens of their country of origin. It gives them meaning and self-assurance that they do not find in civil society.

New citizens or national minorities?

There is also a second phenomenon that makes it difficult for migrants to identify with the country to which they have immigrated. It is the emergence of "national minorities" that identify more strongly with their country of origin than with the country that is their new home. Granted, migrants have always formed ethnic communities, which have helped them hold their own in the new society. The various waves of immigrants to the United States, whether Irish, Germans, Italians, or Chinese, were no exception. But it makes a difference whether these ethnic communities build a bridge to the new society or whether they remain national minorities. In the first case, identification with the country of origin becomes a kind of cultural nuance, sometimes no more than mere folklore. In the second case, it remains dominant and hampers the process of naturalization.

In Germany, this problem is experienced by the people arriving from Turkey, who constitute the largest group of immigrants (along with Russians of German descent). Turkish nationalism is pervasive among them and is fanned by Turkish media and Turkish nationalist associations that single-mindedly push Turkish culture and civilization. They cultivate a hyperpatriotism that has as little to do with real life in Turkey as does the real perspective of returning there. In many respects, globalization helps the migrants preserve this identification with their origins. Television programs from the “mother country” are easily received by satellite, newspapers from Turkey are available

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at every train station newsstand, cheap airfares greatly facilitate travel between the two countries; abiding family ties with Turkey’s provinces make for marriages to Anatolian brides utterly unprepared for life in Germany.

Even the imams of the Turkish Muslims in Germany come from home—sent by the Turkish ministry of religion. The diaspora’s nationalism is a greater obstacle to the integration of migrants from Turkey than Islamic fundamentalism is, though public debate is fixated almost exclusively on Islam. Actually, German cultural conservatism, which refuses to see potential German citizens in Turkish immigrants, and Turkish nationalism play right into each other’s hands. They intersect in the slogan “Once a Turk, always a Turk!” Therein lies the danger that social and cultural conflicts of an immigration society will be dealt with as conflicts between national groups instead of being negotiated as problems *within* the nation.

Warding off labor migration

A third level of conflict relating to transnational migration is the social competition associated with the immigration of cheap, willing labor, especially as far as the low-skilled strata of the indigenous population is concerned. In the eyes of many workers and employees, the migrant laborer appears to be competition for scarce jobs and income, and the unions fear an erosion of wages and working conditions as a consequence of porous borders. The fact that the “Polish plumber” became the bogeyman for the French rejection of the European constitution says everything about the prevailing mood in western Europe. Sentiment is no different in the Federal Republic of Germany, which was a driving force behind the effort to suspend the free movement of labor from the new member states of the European Union. Moreover, refugees taken in under the Geneva Convention on Refugees were denied access to the labor market. Preferring to pay them social assistance rather than permit them to work legally, the government stokes social jealousy of the “foreigners who live at the expense of the German taxpayer,” according to common prejudice.

The fact that better job prospects for migrants improve economic dynamics, propel economic growth, and ultimately boost employment is an exotic thought to continental Europe, which relies instead on strengthening the European Union’s external borders and escalating the effort to segregate domestic labor markets from outside competition. At best, exceptions are made for highly qualified experts. Europe’s metamorphosis into a fortress against the migration of poverty from the east and south is not a caricature; it is a real trend.

All these conflicts clearly illustrate that national borders have two sides, both literally and figuratively. They separate and exclude. They distinguish between “us” and “them.” They simultaneously lend security and constitute the nation as a political and social agent or actor. Transnational processes such as global migration are fraught with risks and uncertainty. Cosmopolitanism is a promise mostly for the educated, the prosperous, and the multilingual. For the lower classes it appears in many cases to be more a threat than a gain. It is therefore crucial for the acceptance of transnational processes that they be socially embedded and politically regulated. In this respect, the nation state still has much to offer as a political entity. Even in the European Union it is the basis of democratic participation and political consensus-building. At the same time, the necessity of effective supranational cooperation is growing apace with the political and economic interdependence of states. That is as true for transatlantic cooperation on security as it is for a harmonized European migration policy that opens avenues for legal immigration and improves opportunities for migrants to participate in the educational system, the labor market, and political life. For all the problems associated with transnational migration, one thing is clear: Europe needs immigrants, for economic and demographic reasons. Walling yourself off is no alternative.