

*Faced with historical migrant flows, which peaked in 2015, the European Union implemented an array of political and legal measures to manage this increase.*

*Luca Lixi, a doctoral researcher at the University of Sheffield, is working on European external migration governance. He recently published a [paper](#) titled *Beyond Transactional Deals: Building Lasting Migration Partnerships in the Mediterranean* on Migration Policy Institute.*

*Mehmet Enes Beşer made an interview with Lixi on his paper, including externalization of the EU's migration management, readmission, and bilateral agreements between the EU Member States and the North African countries (NAC).*

**Welcome Luca, Thanks for accepting our request. Could you please introduce yourself?**

I am a doctoral researcher for the [MIGPROSP](#) project, that is now based at the Migration Policy Centre at the EUI, Florence. The project looks at the drivers of international migration governance in four world regions- North America, Latin America, Europe and the Asia Pacific region- and my research focuses in particular on the European External Migration Governance in the Mediterranean region. I am specifically looking at how actors of governance - in Europe and in Northern Africa- understand migration in the Mediterranean, what divergences are present and how this plays out in developing a joint governance of migration in the region. I have also been working and consulting in the European Commission, particularly as regards legal migration in the frame of cooperation with Third Countries.

**Do you think that the bilateral agreements are effective for the goal of curbing the migrant flows? Are there really addressing the root causes of migration which lead people to risk their lives on the Mediterranean?**

Agreements between countries or regions of origin and destination are an essential component of a sustainable migration governance system. Their effectiveness, of course, largely depends on the objectives that are set out. Many agreements to date have had the goal of curbing migrant flows, a political interest only of destination countries, ensuring the cooperation of a country of origin mainly through aid and funding. If this is the objective, there is no doubt it will fail. On the medium and long-term, this is because fundamentally origin countries have no interest whatsoever in curbing migration, and destination countries cannot mobilize adequate tools to change this, despite lip service paid in this direction. This would, in fact, require either a very substantial increases of work permits for their citizens, relieving social and economic pressures in-house through emigration, thus ensuring also

increased remittances or a mobilization of funds that is far from status quo. As remittances account for 5 to 10% of most origin countries' GDP, to change the origin countries' reliance on emigration for their own development would need an investment of \$2-6 billion, depending on the country. This is a very simplified picture I am building here, but it is just to stress how absurd such deals are, as the EU tries to develop relations where it can rely on its comparative advantage, money, without considering how insignificant the figures mobilized are. This is why such 'transactional deals' are so misplaced, as they are actually not even equipped to solve the issue with a transaction!

Finally, coming to your second question, this way of doing is likely to fail also in the shorter term. Decades of research and policy work have clearly shown how complex migration is, and how it relates to many different systems, economic, social, political, environmental and demographic. Such deals do not include an adequate reflection on the relation of these with migration governance and therefore are not equipped to foresee and cater for sudden changes that can arise in economic, social and political systems of a fragile region. This is what I say in the paper, with the example of the Arab Spring, showing how sudden shocks will impact such modus operandi. The same regards more recent changes in Tunisia and Morocco that determined a sudden increase in fluxes from the two countries.

**In the paper, you argue that the NAC is “gradually developing an interest in offers of financial support.” So, is there a risk that EU’s tendency for outsourcing migration management would be used as a bargaining chip by the African counterparts?**

What I report in the paper is that this is not a new modus operandi in migration relations. Taking the example of Italy and Tunisia prior to 2011, Ben Ali knew perfectly well how to use migration for its own internal and external policy goals. Fluxes have increased or decreased on the basis of Italian aid. However, despite evident failings, this has continued in time. Lately, this was most evident in the eastern Mediterranean and the relations with Turkey. Currently, in North Africa, we are seeing an increase in departures both from Morocco and Tunisia. Also given the shortcomings I mentioned before, it is not a surprise that a migration pressure is present in those countries, and departures depend on how levels of control can match this pressure. It is also certain that such countries will use this to ask for more support and aid from the EU, and so the links between more migrants and more aid are evident. However, at present, I wouldn't say that this is caused necessarily by a careful strategy of those countries to create a problem to the EU in order to ask for more money, but it rather relates to changing internal conditions that at no point have been stabilized. Whether social uprisings in regions of Morocco or youth unemployment in Tunisia, these dimensions are largely not considered when the EU cooperates on migration with those countries. This is an example of what I mentioned before, with short-term and sudden failures.

In Libya, the picture is much different. Within a situation of total chaos, that is grounded in clear power struggles, actors emerge that have a much clearer interest in developing such kind of relations. It is not a secret that migrants are already part of a disputed market, with

which Italy and the EU more, in general, are mingling with. If this type of 'solutions' are still devised as such, this is a clear example of how much we are lacking leadership in Europe to approach the topic in a different way. And although in the Italian case elections are still upcoming, various other elections have occurred across Europe and alleviate of some political pressures; yet there are no indications of a vision being developed to overcome such short-term tampons in migration management.

**Considering the bilateral agreements, a disagreement on the financial aid would make the deal fragile. Remember Turkish President Erdogan's statement "don't think that the planes and the buses are there nothing" which threatening the EU with the cancellation of the deal. Are there similar statements coming from NAC counterparts?**

It depends. Various officials, I interviewed in Tunisia said that it would be crazy for Tunisia to have the same approach Erdogan had when dealing with the EU, increasing the numbers to increase the stake. This is because opening its borders and coasts to the networks of smugglers and criminal organizations is the last thing that is needed in their already precarious democratic transition. For sure, however, the fact that controls are not increased as pressure increases reflects a frustration Tunisians have against Europe, that ultimately shies out when it comes to offering legal work permits for their many unemployed youths. Moreover, such countries are not willing to pay themselves for stepping up control, and any further effort needed due to an increase of departure will be left for the EU to be covered. Within the status quo, with the EU that is cashing out the money on border control across the region, this is not a surprise.

**When we think of Italy, would an interest-driven approach, overlooking the European mission on promoting democracy and rule of law, be harmful to "the special relations" with Libya?**

First of all, as regards Libya, let me first stress that I don't agree with the way the country's name is now being used in the policy, also mirrored in some research circles, similarly to eg. Tunisia or Morocco. I think it is important, in discourse as well, to make very clear that when we talk about a political 'Libya' we only mean a tiny fraction of a much more complex and incoherent picture. This can ensure basing discussions on realistic understandings of what can be achieved when relating to 'Libya', beyond political demagoguery.

Because of this, it is clear that Minniti renounced to the priority of stabilizing the country when it chose to go beyond the Government of National Accord and deal with Haftar, opposed to the GNA, as well as Libyan tribes and militias. The chaos in Sabratha, with the fight between different militias that had different agenda as regards the smuggling of migrants and relations with Europe, is a clear example of this. To be honest, at the moment I am more worried of the fate of those stranded in places like Sabratha, more than of the

‘special relations’ between Italy and Libya, that at present don’t seem to mean much. Also, let’s not forget that it was at the apex of the ‘special relations’ with Gheddafi that the detention centers where migrants are suffering today were built.

**Do you think that the recent bilateral agreements, sometimes criticized by the human rights groups, can call the EU’s human rights leadership into question?**

With much regret, I think that the 'human rights leaders of the EU' have sunk in the Mediterranean sea together with the boats of the 33.000 persons that lost their lives in the past two decades. A quick tour in the Greek islands, especially in the winter months to come, would give a further indication of this, not to mention the treatment migrants are given in Libya and the EU's responsibilities in this. Yes, we are the largest donor of Development Aid worldwide, and it is true that despite shortcomings we are amongst the leaders in the global north for granting protection to asylum seekers, but this needs to be measured against our wealth and against what is going on in the world. Of course, I realize that such principled and rational issues escape from the reach of political debates currently held in Europe, I acknowledge the fact that it is against this background that we have to work. But in light of this, I think that it is equally important that we drop the mask, and we acknowledge that we can't really take the moral high ground, for instance, when Donald Trump says he is going to build a wall. This could probably help in getting to terms with reality, and to grasp how dire the need is for a political vision, to steer the EU towards that normative position that it has now lost, without being in denial about it.

**I know, it may be a little hard to summarize in a few sentences, but let me ask. How can the EU Member States strike a balance between norms and interests in this context?**

The first thing that should be done is rethink how interests are defined. Currently, interests are defined treating migration policy as a silo, a policy dimension that deals with moving and 'managing' people across borders. I have already mentioned how far this is from reality, and it is because of this gap that actions are taken fall short in finding a solution to problems, and often worsen those of migrants as we see now in Libya. As well as better defining its interests against a broader understanding of what migration governance is, the EU should also realize that these are not the only one that matter. It is essential that partnerships are redeveloped keeping in mind that without the support of countries of origin, beyond the incentive of a handful of Euros, nothing will be achieved. Short term interests that could be bought out through such money are with all odds not worth investing in!

By re-evaluating the way priorities are developed, a greater attention to norms and values will be placed, through the understanding that achievements on priorities are dependent also on origin countries' interests. These interests for partner countries are largely framed by internal political pressures which are based on the protection of migrants and their rights. For this

reason, in developing true partnerships, norms and values may be better combined, even at times when attitudes in Europe doesn't seem to be conducive to this. Of course, there are cases, like in Libya, where this double scrutiny is not possible. In these cases, EU States is alone in finding this balance, and while there is no magic bullet, I think things like slavery and torture are good indicators of how far 'interests' can go, and where the line has to be drawn.



## ABOUT US

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*Bosphorus Migration Studies* is an independent “think-together tank” focuses on migration. Founded in July 2015 by a group of independent researchers studying in Boğaziçi University. Headquartered in Ankara.

- Our mission is to promote inclusive and sustainable migration policies and generate alternatives for policy-makers.
- We support junior researchers seeking to deepen their knowledge and networks.
- We engaged NGOs and researchers to develop innovative frameworks.

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\*We have another portal in Turkish: [bmshaber.com](http://bmshaber.com)