The state of unpreparedness

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Abstract

Events have often taken mankind by surprise through their force and their consequences. Starting with the ancient times, answers to major challenges and threats were sometimes, if not always, late, incomplete and biased. The current migration tide across the Mediterranean questioned Europe's ability to face an unprecedented process and proved its same unpreparedness in front of major events. Preceding similar situations like the "boat people" fleeing Vietnam three years after the fall of Saigon and the communist takeover of the entire country, the drama in the two Spanish enclaves from North Africa and the first waves of refugees arriving on the shores of the Italian island of Lampedusa taught EU decision makers nothing, and they were caught empty-handed once more as illegal migrants reached the Greek Islands and the new EU member states, Romania included. Chances of getting over the current pattern are not completely wasted if the Europeans' common effort is focused on the origins of illegal migration, residing in the Middle East countries torn by civil wars and unrest and in African countries under brutal dictatorships.

Key words: boat people, illegal migration, refugees, local conflicts, Spanish enclaves, Lampedusa Island.

Sophisticated and unforeseeable social and political events faced the international community with the task of producing quick and balanced answers to crises and conflicts threatening the very world

order, biased as it were. Ever since the ancient times down to our days, such urgent occurrences challenged resolutions and reactions partly or even completely irrational, which produced more confusion than ways out of the deadlock. Multiple and diverse reasons smokescreened a very improper approach starting with effects instead of the causes.

More often than not, humankind seemed to neglect the obvious and, consequently, was caught unaware of developments at a global scale. A scrutiny throughout history can, most certainly, make the point. A most convincing example was the decolonization process. It started in 1956 with Sudan, followed by Ghana in 1957. From that point on, things started to move very quickly and the 1960's saw an avalanche of new states coming onto the geopolitical map of the world. The former colonial powers – Great Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, Italy, Germany and Spain – were eager to settle the matter of power succession and mediated to several local leaders who seemed able to take over the reins of leadership once the former masters were gone back home. Their haste in leaving was motivated by a threat of massive migration from the colonies into the ruling countries where, the rumours had it among the natives, that life was a lot better. Negotiated settlements brought into power promising rulers like Mobutu, Kaunda, Kenyatta, Mugabe and the like, who turned into "presidents for life", "fathers of the nation", "true keepers of the faith". They were all dictators surrounded by their cronies and defended by their secret services and the political police. When the preliminaries of state independence did not go well, or simply went completely wrong, civil wars lasting decades, would sweep out of life an entire generation, as was the case of Angola. Even the much praised and applauded conciliation process in South Africa did not produce a long term compromise to settle disputes between the African National Congress and the Inkhata (Zulu) Party or between the African majority and the white minority. In all these cases and other similar ones, something did not go according to plan and the planners and schemers were caught unprepared.

It was not only the former colonies that experienced such a state of unpreparedness. Europe had its own share of unexpected, unplanned developments, some of them at the junction of big events for the continent and for the world. The fate of the countries at war, of their alliances and their enemies were negotiated among the three major powers – The United States, Soviet Russia and Britain – two years before the defeat of Nazi Germany. As soon as the allied troops entered the burnt out Berlin various plans started to be implemented. Soon, the Marshall plan to rebuild the defeated nations began to yield results and the new common defence strategy conceived by NATO kept the Soviet Union at a safe distance. The two superpowers respected each other's right to control its own sphere of interest and turn a blind eye on whatever happened across the neighbour's fence, be it The Prague Spring or the students' revolt in Paris (both in the same eventful year of 1968). With the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe, détente seemed to be the order of the day and coexistence could pretend its overall value for the two superpowers. Behind the scenes both the US and the USSR acted to gain the upper hand in the European affairs spent enormous money, time and effort to outrun competitors. The Russians refused to go public with their expenditures during the Cold War. The Americans were more relaxed and concluded that the total amount, except the costs of undercover, subversive and sabotage operations, reached eight trillion dollars. All that money was spent to eliminate communism. In 1989 that finally happened with the fall of the Berlin wall. What followed was a wobbling course where neither the masters of the game and the newcomers did not know exactly how to play their cards. Finally, a pattern was coined with the term of transition. Eastern and Central Europe was in transition, from former communist regimes to the market economy, the rule of law, and the respect of human rights! Beautiful! How, at what costs, to what ends? Where would the common taxpayer be during the period of transition, which was going to ensure his/her social protection? Again, vague answers and total surprise, although the West had a major objective for more than four decades: to bring down

communism. And when that really happened that state of unpreparedness paraded in front of everyone in its full splendour. It is quite understandable, up to a certain point to accept that a lack of forward planning and preparedness, considering the shattering dimensions of the communist collapse. Especially when the strategy and the attitude of the largest military alliance, NATO, shifted its focus from the common defence to common security! But that process, too, was guided not by a pre-emptive vision, but by the international turmoil which required a forceful reaction to events like the first Iraqi war, or the access to power of the Taliban. The threat posed by such developments forced the Alliance to act outside its theatre of operations, Europe, and to become a major player wherever long distance threats emerged as initial outbursts with global consequences. The truth of the matter is that even with such political and military cosmetics, member states did not react proactively and in full consonance, because they had not been prepared. Troubles never stop and they come when least expected.

The current migration tide from across the Mediterranean was a very convincing example of the unpreparedness of the most democratic nations, unable to leave their bureaucratic comfort and to answer promptly and rationally the charade they have produced when they started their march of triumph against the lands, which became their colonies and possessions from overseas. The countless people who started on a risky and even life-threatening trip did not decide overnight to gatecrash Europe. Their movements were heralded by a sort of restlessness, noticeable at the time of the European communism collapse.

Unlike the events, that Europe and the world are witnessing without a clear mind of what to do in order to deter the track along the South-North axis, the movement from the East towards the West during the Cold War stretched along for a little over four decades while more than thirteen million people found refuge and asylum in the free world (Böcker, 1998). In terms of numbers, immigrants from the communist countries were, by far, more than the million plus migrants that Europe is trying to accommodate at present.

The defectors' escape during the bipolar world was not a casual walk in the park for those who dared totalitarian regimes in search of a new life. They all risked their own lives. Murderous border guards along the very slim line between oppression and freedom killed tens of thousands of those who attempted to leave stealthily the communist camp. Their number is unaccounted for, but what is certain is the fact that more than two million and a half people crossed illegally into the West between 1980 and 1990 (Böcker, 1998).

A second big difference between those who are crowding at the gates of Europe and the illegal communist immigrants is that the latter were coming from a part of the world, which traditionally had been sharing similar values and morals based on Christian faith. Such a basic feature made the new comers more adaptable to the standards of their new home countries. Henceforth, local communities assimilated them quite easily.

A third fundamental difference between past and current migrators is that of professional skills and abilities. People who defected from communist countries belonged to the intellectual elites; their input was valuable, resting on higher education and versatility in employment. They were eager to integrate in society, to become trustful members of professional and social congregations and to face the hardships of a competitive and liberal society. These three basic features of the immigrants from the East explain the reasons, which convinced the West and Northern America to welcome them with open arms and to offer them chances to build new destinies for them and their children. There was no charity in assimilating them, only the reasonable recognition that medical doctors, researchers, renowned cultural personalities added their own professional value to that of the receiving country. Their bold decision to abandon their native country and their place of birth, to leave behind much of their family, experiences and human connections represented an ideological triumph for the West in its quest to convince the world that theirs were the most liberal and prosperous regimes, and a much better alternative to totalitarian regimes under the Soviet whip. For those who succeeded to defect to the West, the euphoria of their

accomplishments could not wipe out the agony that haunted them, caused by the uncertainty whether they might ever see again those left behind, tortured and tormented by the communist political police.

Migration caused by real political reasons was not specific of Europe alone, during the Cold War. It happened all over the world in areas where communist and free countries had been neighbouring each other. In some cases not even that sort of proximity was required to push people over the border in search of a better life and freedom. It always was a one-way street leading people from the communist, state-run world to societies respecting human rights and individual freedoms. Every man, woman and child reaching the other side proved that there was hope and that people could not be contained even by the major threat of death on barbed wire fences. Whenever the two superpowers fought openly or by proxies, migration recorded an upsurge marked by human tragedies and trauma.

One of the most dramatic episodes started in 1978, reached its climax in 1979 and continued at a slower pace until the early 1990s. Everything started with the campaign of "re-education", implemented by the Vietnamese communists three years after the fall of Saigon and their total control of the former South Vietnam. Uncertain of the loyalty of the new citizens from the other half of the country, which had been under the control and the administration of General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu* until March 1975, the new rulers sent all those showing the slightest nostalgia for the former pro-American regime into the jungle to learn through the power of rough work the true moral values of fighting patriots. Under the shadow of General Võ Nguyên Giáp's tanks** (Macdonald, 1993), thousands of people,

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* Nguyễn Văn Thiệu (1923 – 2001), General and the last President of South Vietnam (1965 – 1975).

**Võ Nguyên Giáp (1911 – 2003), North Vietnamese General, Minister of Defence and commander of the communist army in the First Indochina War (1946–54), in the war against South Vietnam and the United States (1960 - 1975). He was a strategist and fought in huge historic battles of Lạng Sơn (1950), Hòa Bình (1951–52), Điện Biên Phủ(1954), the Tết

mainly teachers, public officers, military commanders, private businessmen were humiliated and threatened by communist commissars with internment into the labour camps from the jungle where the longest life expectancy did not go beyond three months. Such bleak perspectives were more sinister than death itself for thousands of people. Eight hundred thousand men and women, some accompanied by their siblings, threatened with the internment into the camps of death reached the inhospitable shores of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, after days of drifting aimlessly, of pirate attacks, starving, unwanted and abandoned on deserted islands (Courtland).

Quite interestingly, what the international media termed as „the boat people" (Clinton, 2010) faced contrasting reactions from local authorities of the lands they had been cast to. Human traffickers abandoned fifteen hundred refugees on an uninhabited Indonesian island. They were collected and sent back to the international waters. Initially, Malaysia did not want even to accept that there was a boat people problem and declined to be any part of the solution. When the refugees' number reached more than several thousands a camp was set up on the Bidong Island to shelter four thousand people. In less than half a year the number of refugees climbed to 45 thousand and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), had to intervene on behalf of the refugees to make sure that they received decent food, clean water and a safe shelter before being directed temporarily to a land of hope. However, more than one hundred twenty thousand of the overall number of Vietnamese refugees, including women, teenagers and elderly people were repatriated voluntarily or by force to face the communist courts and to be tried and sentenced severely for their defection.

The Geneva Conference on Boat People, of July 1979 decided to set up centres of refugees' temporary detention until their repatriation or their relocation (Kamm, 1979). The Orderly Departure Programme, orchestrated by the conference organizers, had different

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Offensive (1968), the Easter Offensive (1972), and the final campaign Ho Chi Minh in 1975.

meanings for each of them. France regarded it as a framework to save mostly the political refugees. Canada, Australia and New Zeeland looked upon it as a means to reunite families split by the war. The United States took advantage of the plan to extract from Vietnam former local employees who had worked for the American interests before the fall of Saigon in April 1975 (Kumin, 2008). Such contrasting perspectives of a plan basically meant to provide the guidelines for the solution of the crisis was another instance of unpreparedness. The lack of a quick and effective response to the boat people crisis was not incidental. The Vietnamese refugees plunged into the unknown, risked their lives and faced tremendous threats just to get away from a regime who disregarded completely the individual value of each and every citizen. There are similarities between the boat people of the late '70s of last century and the current migration tide heading towards the rich centre of Europe.

One common feature is the natural attempt to get out of the harm's way, to be as far as possible from terror, oppression and insecurity. Migrants from Northern Africa and the Middle East claimed quite convincingly that they were fleeing from the inner fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, from dictatorships of Eritrea and Sudan, from the fundamentalist warlords of Libya, Nigeria, Ghana or Mali. Out of the eight to ten thousand people who come to the European shores every day, only one individual in five can be identified as a refugee from political and confrontational pressure. The rest are people who made the best of the situation to improve their wellbeing and to live a better life, even without too much effort, if possible, relying on the social benefits given out by societies who care for the poor and tend to their basic needs. Decently dressed, brandishing expensive smart phones they become very vocal and even attack police forces at the border when they were not allowed to travel through. Besides, they had paid thousands of dollars, Euros or pounds to traffickers who took them across the Mediterranean. Therefore, they are economic migrants and not asylum seekers or refugees. The British prime minister initiated a European debate on

the fate of such people. "David Cameron said Europe must send failed asylum claimants back to their own countries, while European Council president Donald Tusk has warned that millions more migrants are on their way and 'the policy of open doors and windows' must be scrapped" (Europe gets 8,000 refugees daily - UN, 2015).

Migration from Northern Africa across the Mediterranean did not start unexpectedly, and its first ominous movements should have generated a state of readiness, but it did not. For years, the Spanish border guards in the two African enclaves, Ceuta and Melilla tried to fend off Africans coming from the entire western coast, from as far south as Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Mauritania. "The territories are surrounded by fences, intended to deter illegal immigrants. But Ceuta and Melilla are nonetheless used by many Africans as stepping-stones to Iberia. Many migrants are caught and some drown while attempting to make the sea crossing. People-trafficking is common. After a series of increasingly desperate attempts by would-be immigrants to surmount the barriers in 2005, Spain and Morocco agreed to deploy extra troops to try to secure the borders" (Ceuta, Melilla profile, 2015).

Twenty feet tall, fences and razor blades wires did not keep out migrants and traffickers. Jumping them with ladders and all sorts of contraptions became a sort o continental pastime. What became more and more alarming was the rapidly growing numbers of those who risked their lives in an attempt to get over the fence. Dripping of migrants turned into a continuous flow and the Spanish authorities warned the other Europeans and asked for assistance. But the events in the two enclaves were overlooked by the Europeans more concerned with the financial crisis imported from the US in 2008, rather than concern themselves with what was termed at that time as an internal matter. When the Spanish King Juan Carlos visited the two enclaves on the 5th of November 2007, the first such event in the past 80 years, the migrants' siege was definitely placed in the hands of the local authorities. What was neglected at that time and later on, as well, was the fact that many of those Africans who crossed the

fences went on in their search for a better life and travelled further north to the heart of the European Union, to Germany and even to the Scandinavian countries, well known for their generous social assistance programmes for foreigners. Not even that trend did summon a particular interest in the events.

After the year 2000, the Isle of Lamapedusa and its tiny neighbour, Isola dei Conigli (the Rabbit Island) turned into a spring board for Africans and Middle Easterners on their way to Europe. Alarmed by the massive influx of newcomers, the tiny population could not support it anymore, and so the Italians started to warn their fellow Europeans about the growing challenge. Their concern was quite reasonable because the 7.8 sq.ml. territory with a local population of not more than four thousand and a half people could not support the incoming migrants who were posing a survival question to the 75 hotels which employed most of the locals and provided 80% of the local income from tourism. Only seventy miles separate it from the Tunisian shores and the stretch of water was rapidly crossed by overcrowded boats, some of them sinking along the way. Yet people dared all threats and kept on coming. Italians could not retaliate, but could not go on without taking a stand. When the European Union was caught again unprepared, local authorities tried to send back illegal migrants, protecting thus the other member state which did not take the trouble to actually look into the matter. "Since the early 2000s, Lampedusa, the European territory closest to Libya, became a prime transit point for immigrants from Africa, the Middle East and Asia wanting to enter Europe. In 2004, the Libyan and Italian governments reached a secret agreement that obliged Libya to accept African immigrants deported from Italian territories. This resulted in the mass repatriation of many people from Lampedusa to Libya between 2004 and 2005, a move criticised by the European Parliament" (European Parliament resolution on Lampedusa, 2005). The fall of the Khadafy regime and the turmoil of North Africa during the so-called "Arab spring", lifted the barriers and the tiny Italian island hosted ten times more migrants than its inhabitants, the former reaching the level of 48 thousand people.

The state of unpreparedness reached its climax once more. The inhabitants of the island who, initially fed and sheltered the migrants, could no longer face the situation. On the other hand, organized crime gangs speculated the plight of those who wanted to escape poverty and insecurity from their native lands, and turned illegal human trafficking into a very productive underground industry. The leaders of the networks were never discouraged or impressed by the growing number of people drowned during the passage across the Mediterranean (BBC News, 2013). The Western media reported that three hundred, eight hundred and even thirteen hundred people died in shipwrecks. Nonetheless, people never stopped and when the island and even the shores of continental Italy provided no longer a safe landing, migrants moved eastwards to the Greek archipelagos.

The typical reluctance of the Greeks in front of major challenges (fully illustrated by the financial crisis) pushed the state of non-preparedness to new heights. The European reaction was appalling when the number of migrants reached the level of tens of thousands people and the reaction was late and asymmetrical to two major challenges. First came the fall of the brutal regimes from Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen at the end of December 2010 and the devastating civil war in Syria. The outpour of refuges no longer stumbled over the barricades set up by the former dictators. The second challenge hinged on the postponement of the Turkey's EU membership. The Ankara government focused on its own internal matters caused by the influx of Syrian refugees and the fight of the Kurdish paramilitary against Daesh militants. Refugees from Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan and even the Central African Republic could get a free passage since the Turkish authorities had no interest to keep them in the country or send them back only to have even more people at their southern borders. Soon, the unprepared Europe concluded that migrants had their sights on the rich countries like Germany, France, Britain and Greece, Italy, the new EU member states, Romania included, were mere stop-overs. Then, and only then, a cry for assistance and human solidarity was heard only to quell the media stunts generated by wise the PR industry. A call to solve

together the migrants' crisis was an attempt to smokescreen the appalling state of unpreparedness, of the Europeans' blindness which made them witness carelessly the early signs of the crisis in their conceited hope that the transition from the poor and tormented regions of Africa and the Middle East would die out by itself when some scraps of humanitarian aid was spread migrants' way. "The long-term solution, of course, is peace.

We need new diplomatic efforts to ensure the enforcement of U.N. resolutions calling not only for a peaceful, political solution to the conflict in Syria, and, also, protection of civilians and access for humanitarian assistance… The problem is that resources in bordering countries are overstretched, meaning other nations must start shouldering some of the responsibility through increased resettlement opportunities to migrants" (Nunn, 2015). A passage of the matter in the hands of the UN bureaucrats would be the utmost test of ineptitude and unpreparedness. The Rwanda genocide of 1994 proved how difficult and slow the UN decision-making machine worked. When the Canadian general Roméo Dallaire, Commander of the UN troops in Rwanda warned Kofi Annan, chief of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, at that time, about an imminent danger of mass killings the answer was "stick to your mandate" which actually meant to watch how Tutsi were butchered by the Hutu majority (Dallaire, 2003). Years later, Annan confessed: "I could and should have done more to sound the alarm and rally support" (Annan, 2012). A rather late and inefficient confession could not motivate the slaughtering of more than eight hundred thousand innocent people.

Consequently, the fate of the migrants and the solution of the problem cannot be placed efficiently in the hands of the slow motion diplomats from the UN. Because there are two categories of victims: First, those leaving their homes in search of a better and safer life; Second, the inhabitants of the countries of destination who feel mobbed and overwhelmed by the fast-growing number of newcomers of different customs and beliefs. Solutions could come from a different approach, from tackling the causes of the migration

process exactly where they stem from. All the money drafted to support those arrived in Europe should be wisely spent to defeat the Daesh anti-Christian offensive, to stabilize the political and the economic situation in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, to abolish dictatorships in Africa and set up partnerships with governments dedicated to reconstruct and to rehabilitate their countries after decades of plunder, corruption and internal turmoil. Once countries, which now spill their underprivileged citizens into Western Europe, leave the status of failed or failing states and adjust to the standards of internationally valid stakeholders, a domestic environment can be tempting enough for most of the current refuges to retrieve their former life style in their own homeland. It happened in Ireland in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, when the government offered tempting facilities and subsidies for those willing to resettle in their ancient native places and implemented an economic reform, tax cuts, a welfare reform, an increase in competition, and a ban on borrowing to fund current spending.

The way out of the migrants tide is a shakeup of the unpreparedness, and the readiness to act at the first signs heralding conflicts of interests and developments that might burst into major crises and conflicts. Such an attitude could be achieved through a thorough analysis of events and the ability to detect threatening trends in most of the realities of the world. To pre-empt challenging occurrences, governments should blend their approach of domestic matters to those coming from the international environment. An accurate evaluation of foreign data, partnerships and alliances with countries sharing similar interests could lead to avoiding major disruptions both internally and externally and may dilute the effects of those incidents, which could not have been avoided. One basic request is that governments should abolish, once and for all, unpreparedness and a mood of expectation, hinged on the hope that hardships could die out by themselves, or they are going to be solved by somebody else.

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