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KNOKING ON THE EU'S DOOR: THE ITALIAN PROPOSAL FOR A SHARED MIGRATION POLICY

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The arrival in Sicily on May 13 of 898 migrants, mainly from Egypt, Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia, marked an important new development in migration routes from North Africa to Italy. Instead of taking the sea from Libya, as is usually the case, the two fishing vessels rescued by the Italian navy in international waters started the crossing from Egypt. After few minor cases in the last two months, this massive arrival is clear evidence that the Egyptian route has officially reopened.

Longer and more dangerous, this route had been taken in 2013-2014 by a mixed flow of Syrian, Sudanese, Ethiopian, Eritrean and Egyptian citizens wishing to get to Europe. Over the last two years, Egyptian authorities have made major efforts to put an end to these journeys. Increased sea patrolling, the introduction of visa requirements for Syrians entering Egypt and the implementation of a deal with Italy to speed up the repatriation of Egyptian citizens resulted in a substantive drop in arrivals through this route.

What are the reasons behind its re-opening to-

day? Although it is probably too early to give a precise answer, there are speculations that a less stringent control by the Egyptian sea patrols could be linked to the diplomatic row between Cairo and Rome over the murder of Giulio Regeni, the 28 year old PhD student found dead in a ditch on the outskirts of Cairo on February 3. The lack of cooperation from the Egyptian authorities in the investigations prompted the Italian government to recall its ambassador and downgrade diplomatic relations. "Egypt is now probably retaliating by allowing people to leave or at least turning a blind eye", says a high officer at the Italian Ministry of Interior speaking on condition of anonymity.

With summer approaching, the increase in departures from Egypt is seen as a nightmare. Last year, 150,317 migrants arrived in Italy by sea, a figure lower than the record level of 170,100 reached in 2014. All of them came from Libya. No major decrease is expected on this route. The situation on the ground in Libya is far from stable: the UN-backed government of Fayed al-Sarraj does not control the territory and this makes any promise to stem the flow of migrants ineffective.

Given the context, the reopening of the Egyptian route could raise the number of arrivals even further.

The EU/Turkey agreement on migration, designed to return all irregular migrants arriving in Greece from Turkish shores, is a source of further concern to the Italian authorities. The deal resulted in a sharp drop of arrivals through the eastern Mediterranean route and revived the fear that migrants taking this route will shift to the central Mediterranean one. Though this has not occurred yet, Italy is closely monitoring smuggling routes from North Africa to check whether it will actually happen.

The increase in arrivals is not Italy's only concern. Compared to 2014, the migration challenge could prove even more difficult to handle: at the time, Italy had adopted a policy of *laissez-faire*, not complying with the European obligations to identify the newly arrived migrants and allowing them to travel further afield. Brussels protested against this method and threatened the Italian government with sanctions. Italy later put in place so-called "hotspots", closed centers where migrants are detained until they accept being fingerprinted. Once identified, they cannot go anywhere else, as they would be returned to the "first safe country" under the rules of the Dublin convention. The tradeoff for the hotspot approach was a so-called "relocation scheme", under which EU member states agreed to redistribute 160,000 Syrian, Iraqi and Eritrean asylum seekers from the frontline countries of Italy and Greece over the next two years. Officially launched in September 2015, the plan is not working properly: so far only 1500 migrants have been relocated, i.e. a mere 0.9 % of the agreed quota. Consequently, Italy has to find facilities to accommodate a growing number of people.

In the last few weeks the Italian government submitted

a draft plan called the "Migration Compact" setting out a new approach to the migration problem. It envisages a number of investment projects in many African countries designed to create partnerships to boost development and provide would-be migrants with job opportunities at home. Albeit interesting when it comes to economic partnership, the "Migration Compact" is questionable for a number of reasons. First of all, it considers migration from Africa to be driven only by economic factors, which is not always true - the dictatorship in Eritrea, the Boko-Haram conflict in northern Nigeria, the instability in northern Mali and around Lake Chad, as well as the repression of the Oromo people in Ethiopia are all causes for people to leave their country and seek asylum somewhere else. Secondly, some of the countries Italy views as possible partners - like Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea - are the very same places people are fleeing.

Details of the plan remain unclear: the draft is definitely requesting the targeted countries to implement a variety of means to stem migration flows. Impressed by the huge amount of money involved in the EU/Turkey deal (6 billion euros), African leaders are trying to sell their partnership at a high price: Niger, a key transit country on the West African route, recently asked the EU for 1 billion euros to stem migrant flows.

For its part, the EU seems mainly interested in replicating the approach of the EU/Turkey deal, i. e. externalizing the problem by providing transit countries with financial means. This policy has been pursued for 15 years and has proved ineffective: not only do migration routes change continuously, but any deal is subject to changes in political circumstances, as the new Egyptian development shows only too well.

The only way to address the issue consists of building viable and long-term economic and politi-

cal partnerships. This will take time and should include a transition period during which migration flows from sub-Saharan Africa are likely to retain the current pace. If the EU acted as a political entity and all its members accepted to share the burden, these transitional numbers would be perfectly manageable and could even be a resource for a continent with a demographic gap and a progressively ageing population.