

Europe is suffering from a psychological blind spot over migration in the Mediterranean

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The death of migrants in the Mediterranean remains a significant problem for EU migration policy. [Ruben Zaiotti](#) argues that Europe's approach to the issue can effectively be termed a type of 'externalisation', in which the responsibility for migration has been off loaded to origin and transit countries. He writes that the best explanation for why Europe has adopted this model may be a psychological one, related to the internal dynamics within EU states.



News outlets around the world are plastered with images of Southern European countries' coastguard vessels intercepting rickety dinghies trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. This practice is one of the most notable instances of what [Aristide Zolberg](#) calls 'remote control', or the array of policies and practices aimed at managing migratory flows before they reach a country's territory.

The externalisation of migration management is not a new phenomenon, and not unique to Europe. The United States, after all, 'invented' the concept of interdiction in the high seas as a way to stem the flow of Haitians, Cubans and other undesired migrants heading North. Yet there is something new about recent developments, both in terms of breadth and scope. More problematically, these policies remain highly controversial, raising various ethical and legal issues for the governments introducing them.

This state of affairs raises the question of why these policies are so popular. The typical answer offered – the one favoured by politicians – is that they are a highly efficient way of addressing the challenge of unwanted migration. If migrants cannot be managed after they reach their destination, why not contain them before they get there? These policies also have the great advantage of taking place outside the legal boundaries constraining liberal democracies, thus relieving receiving countries from potential liabilities. They also allow for the burden to shift to countries of origin and transit, which are invested with the responsibility (with only limited financial and logistical support) of dealing with unwanted migrants.

It is a very simple and appealing logic. It also seems very rational. In this sense it echoes what economists would call 'externalisation', the idea that in order to maximise profits a business may off load indirect costs to a third party. Whether this strategy is really effective when applied to the migration realm is, however, debatable. The cost of setting up remote control operations and supporting them with the latest technological gizmos is extremely high. There is also no easy way to measure success. Should we, for instance, regard more detections on the high sea as a positive development? Or should fewer detections be seen as a better sign of progress?

Certainly, it raises serious issues of fairness. While they do receive some (meagre) compensation, sending and transit countries often do not have a choice when confronted with their powerful counterparts' requests. And opposition from various quarters (not just the usual



Migrants arriving at Lampedusa, Credit: Noborder Network (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

suspects, such as the NGOs community, but also a growing number of European citizens) is mounting as well. I therefore wonder if the answer to the question of why these policies are so popular among policy-makers has less to do with rational calculations and more to do with something less visible and 'logical'.

After all, economists are not the only ones talking about externalisation. This concept has famously been explored by the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. From a Freudian perspective, externalisation is an unconscious copying mechanism aimed at soothing the anxieties that engulf our daily lives. This process occurs when we find a target – be it a person or an object – in which we project our own characteristics, often negative ones.

This mechanism has an important 'positive' function. Without the relief that it offers, we would soon reach a state of chronic neurosis. Its sides effects are equally unpleasant, however, since it can have deleterious consequences on the subjects of our projections, on our relations with them and, more generally, on our public image. The silver lining in this phenomenon is that it is typically temporary and that it can be reversed when the level of anxiety gets under control.

Whether this is possible when dealing with cases of collective externalisation (that is, when it is not just an individual involved but an entire community) is another story. Envisioning Europe's remote control saga through a psychoanalytic lens, however, points to the fact that politicians' fascination with these highly toxic policies has its roots more in 'internal' factors than external ones. If Europe really wants to confront its uncomfortable relationship with migration, it might have to start by looking at itself in the mirror.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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