

POLICY, PERCEPTION, REALITY: CURRENT DISCOURSE SURROUNDING MIGRATION IN FRANCE

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Abstract

Beginning in 2014, a large wave of migrants arrived in Europe. The number of arrivals peaked in 2015 creating what is still being referred to as a migrant crisis. This wave concerns multiple states of the European Union, including France, which will be the focus of this paper. In February 2018, Gérard Collomb, then French Minister of the Interior, submitted to parliament a new law project titled “For a Controlled Immigration and an Effective Right of Asylum” with the goal of tightening security and the procedures surrounding immigration and asylum. The proposed policy, mostly supported by the political right and center, comes with many drawbacks that will impact France as a state, particularly how it treats and receives migrants and refugees. In my project, I examine the policy itself, but contend that the policy is built on misconstrued perceptions. Using a variety of sources, with a high emphasis on governmental websites and media sources, I focus on the gap in the portrayal of those arriving and the reality. I use both neutral and sources with different political biases, in order to assess how different stories were proposed to the public. This included checking the media’s website daily during the duration of the program and analyzing visual data from French and European projects about the demographics of arrivals.

Key words: migrants, refugees, immigration, France, migrant crisis, Gérard Collomb

“My third year as an undergraduate at Saint Louis University was spent studying at the university of Lyon 2 in Lyon, France. Lyon’s biggest train station, Part Dieu, sits in front of the biggest commercial center in the city. The most convenient stop for the train to and from the airport is at Part Dieu. This part of town teems with life from both tourists and locals, and is more industrial than the rest of the city due to the type of businesses it hosts and its architecture. About two blocks away from this hub, was a tent city, inhabited by migrants. In October 2017, this tent city was destroyed by police. Since the migrants’ irregular situation, not having stable housing or income, worsened, students of Lyon 2 mobilized. They stormed and took one of the amphitheaters for the migrants to have a temporary roof. Due to the malaise of some students, the president of the university, Nathalie Dompnier, tried to maintain transparency about the situation. However, it was not a feasible solution for the migrants to continue staying in the amphitheater, and they were asked to leave before the end of December. Some migrants, having no other options, rebuilt the camp, only for it to be destroyed multiple times, the last one documented by Le Progrès in February 2018. I was not able to find a conclusive answer to what happened to these migrants. Of 149 that were evacuated at one point, only 55 found refuge in a gymnasium. Even then, it was not conclusive how long they could, and did, stay there.”

Introduction

France has always been a destination for immigrants and refugees due to its geographical location; in the northern hemisphere and in the middle of Europe. It attracted people from Spain and Italy in the last century, to most recently people from Syria and Libya. Currently, France is experiencing mass migrations, which is also being called a migrant crisis. The severity of the “migrant crisis” is partly distorted by the media. Thus, many questions on how to best handle the flux of migrants and corresponding asylum policies have been raised.

The first step in untangling perceptions, policy, and reality is to define the terms used. The thin, blurred line between migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers must also be recognized. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) says that an international migrant is someone who changes his or her country of residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status, although there is no formal legal definition of an international migrant (Definitions | Refugees and Migrants). In simpler terms, a migrant is someone who leaves their country, no importance given to their status and they can be documented or undocumented. UN DESA distinguishes migrants in two ways: short-term or temporary migration, covering movements with a duration between 3 and 12 months, and long-term or permanent migration, referring to a change of country of residence for a duration of one year or more. A refugee, per the 1951 Geneva Convention and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is a person who is outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and, thus,

require international protection (Definitions | Refugees and Migrants). It is someone who whose government cannot, or will not protect them. The distinction between a refugee and an asylum seeker should also be noted. Where a refugee has the host country’s approval, an asylum seeker does not. For example, most migrants who cross the Mediterranean in rafts are asylum seekers; the migrants must ask for protection, or asylum, when they arrive to a country.

The “migrant crisis” raises demographic questions surrounding race and religion. The new wave of migrants and refugees is not predominantly white or Catholic, as previously experienced waves, such as the Spanish or the Italian migrants of the 20th century. Although France is a secular country, many of its religious citizens are Catholic (Statistiques). France treats its society as if it were post racial, as if racial discrimination were eradicated from its society, however, time and time again racial discriminations are brought to light. Multiple government campaigns have been promoted to combat racial discrimination in the last ten years, such as the High Commissioner for the Struggle against Discriminations and for Equality¹ (Vie Publique).

Finally, connected to the demographic questions concerning race and religion, is the role of the migrant crisis plays in France’s party politics. During the last presidential election in 2017, France came close to electing a far-right candidate, Marine Le Pen from the party then-called The National Front², whose platform centered on closing borders, which would maintain a pure French identity. These kinds

¹ Haute Autorité de Lutte Contre les Discriminations et pour l’Égalité

² Le Front National

of nationalistic sentiments can be dangerous, not only on the national, but also on the European level. Other countries in the European Union, such as Italy, are also experiencing waves of extreme conservatism.

The slippage of terminology, the constant questioning of who is a migrant and who is “French,” the presidential election and the current political tension between right and left, give a rich context for the push for immigration policy reform. There is a disconnection between the policy proposed in 2018 and the media perceptions, especially in regard to the reality of the migrant’s origins. The disconnections are the focus of my project. Here, I examine the policy itself, but contend that the policy is built on misconstrued perceptions.

Current Policy in France

The recent “migrant crisis” comes from the large waves of migrants that began arriving in 2014. These migrants are coming from Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, or the Middle East (Missing Migrant Project). Many of these migrants are asylum seekers who risk their lives and cross the Mediterranean Sea in dangerous rafts to reach Europe. They are leaving war-torn countries or persecution. Laws have been proposed and European Union summits have been held to try and solve the issue.

In February 2018, Gérard Collomb, at that time the French Minister of the Interior, submitted to parliament a new law project titled “For a Controlled Immigration and an Effective Right of Asylum”³ with the goal of tightening security and the procedures surrounding immigration and asylum in France. The bill passed in both the Senate

³ Projet de loi pour une immigration maîtrisée et un droit d’asile effectif

and the National Assembly⁴. It is worth noting that the bill passed with a significant amount of approval in both branches of Parliament. In the National Assembly, we see a centrist block, since at this point of the bill’s life, right wing parties did not think the bill was strict enough. On April 22, 2018, the National Assembly voted 228 in favor and 139 against, with 24 abstentions. The Republic Moving Forward⁵ (LREM), and the group Union Democratic Independents⁶ and Agir Independents, were those who voted for the law project. LREM is the current French president Emmanuel Macron’s centrist party. Right wing parties, such as the Republicans, along with left wing parties like the Insubordinates, the Socialists⁷, had the largest numbers of votes in contrary. The bill passed on to the Senate to be voted on June 22, 2018. In the Senate, we also see a similar centrist block of support, however, more right-wing delegates voted for its approval. The Senate amended and tightened the bill, thus gaining support from right wing party, the Republicans, who made up 140 of the 197 voting in favor. The bill kept support from LREM, and the Centrist Union while at the Senate. 139 delegates voted against the bill in the Senate. The majority of these delegates came from the Socialist party, the Eco Communists. Some Republicans voted against the bill because it was not strict enough, even with the amendments from the Senate. Since the Senate amended the bill, it needed to go back to the National Assembly for a reviewing session and then voted on again. This next vote was supposed to happen on

⁴ Parliament names, Sénat and Assemblée Nationale, have been, and will continue to be translated for the reader.

⁵ La République en Marche

⁶ UDI Agir-Indépendants

⁷ Les Républicains, Les Insoumis, Les Socialistes

July 25, 2018, however, it was postponed until August 1, 2018. 75% of the National Assembly- a clear majority- voted in favor of the bill (Rescan August 2 2018). The National Assembly's vote was its definitive vote, thus accepting the bill to be implemented. As of September 6, 2018, the Constitutional Counsel has accepted that the bill be added to the constitution. It will be applied to article 61, line 2 of the French constitution (Senat).

It is important to note the changes made to the proposed bill, standing regulations and why it has gained so much media traction. The goal of the bill, as the title suggests, is to "control immigration," and it plans to do this by on the one hand, facilitating the expulsion of rejected asylum seekers and on the other, facilitating the integration of the asylum seekers accepted.

These are the proposed changes⁸:

- Expedite the asylum application deadline from 120 days to 90
- Reduce the investigation of asylum seekers to 6 months
- Limit medical assistance to "sans papiers" (undocumented)
- Against reuniting families if only the minor was accepted
- Against right of work for those seeking asylum who have been waiting for 6 months
- Délit de Solidarité (solidarity crime): punish those who help migrants cross into other EU states.

Although some of these proposals seem to favor migrants' rights, the proposals come with a hidden potential to do harm. For example, reducing the times for applications and investigations limits a person's opportunity to appeal their case. The same

applies for "expediting" the application deadline. Seekers have less time to appeal and a bigger chance of being detained and deported. Limiting medical assistance to the undocumented is a reason why humanitarian organizations have condemned the bill. The last proposal, solidarity crime, includes a criminalization of borders. I found this to be in line Donald Trump's rhetoric, in the sense that border crossings will be criminalized, and those who help anyone migrate will also be affected, along with the unwillingness to reunite families (Florida).

Other changes in a broader European Union sense include a recent Migration Summit, on June 29, 2018. Overall, many of the details were not publicized. However, control and screening centers were something that were most agreed on and the important take-away. Control centers would be built in first arrival countries, which are countries where migrants first arrive, such as Italy or Greece. France has said that they will not build any control centers since they are not a first arrival country. The screening centers are meant to limit the power smugglers hold thus lowering death numbers. However, humanitarian organizations have condemned the centers, amongst them, Doctors without Borders (Erlanger). Humanitarian organizations have said that the centers would negatively affect the migrants since they would have a higher chance being trafficked by smugglers, especially in countries like Libya. Screening centers would be located in a third country, such as Libya, Nigeria, or Sudan. These centers were proposed in the EU Summit in June of 2018. To incentivize the construction of the centers, a deal much like the one the EU currently has with Turkey would be proposed. In this deal, Turkey is offered more aid, a sped-up process of their accession into the EU, and visa free travel for its citizens.

⁸ To the bill Projet de loi pour une immigration maîtrisée et un droit d'asile effectif

Other condemnations for the protection of human rights include those from the European Court of Human Rights. The European Court focuses in particular on the detention of minors in Case A.B. and Others v. France (n° 11593/12). This case concerned the administrative detention of a child, then aged four, for eighteen days, in the context of a deportation procedure against his parents, Armenian nationals. The proposed French law has also been condemned by NGOs, such as Amnesty International. This is, once again, relatable to Trump, since detention of minors is very topical in the United States.

Perception

The proposed law project and the Migration Summit were highly influenced by perceptions. These perceptions are fed by the media through words, headlines, or pictures. Simply Googling the word “migrant” brings up a certain image. We see masses of people, lines without end, chaos, fire, and mostly people from one demographic. Fig 1. This is what we see in the news, too. Words like *jungle* for the Jungle of Calais, one of the biggest migrant camps that formed in France-brings an image of wild chaos.

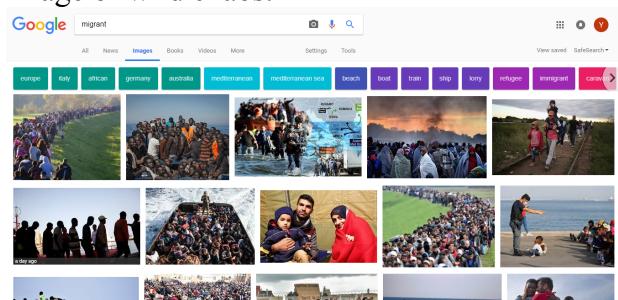


Figure 1

An image of the Part Dieu migrant camp in Lyon, shows an apparent need for police to be there to control this chaos.

Figure 2. There is trash everywhere in this picture, which is a result of the “chaos” migrants bring.



Figure 2

Headlines can be dangerous in feeding perceptions. Many of us are guilty of just reading the headline, and never reading the entire article. We misconstrue information when this happens. Take, for example, the following headlines: Evacuation of young migrants installed in an esplanade of Part Dieu in Lyon⁹, Illegal camp in Part Dieu: 149 evacuated¹⁰, Part Dieu station, the “plateforme of Africans” and their kids from the streets¹¹. The first and second headlines were published a couple days apart, November 11, 2017 and November 9, 2017 correspondingly. Although the headline calling the number of evacuated was published earlier in October, all the headlines refer specifically to dissolving the camp in Part Dieu, Lyon and the flux of migrants. One headline mentions “Africans.” However, only one article tells us that the majority of the people from the

⁹ Evacuation des jeunes migrants installés sur une esplanade de Lyon Part-Dieu (Henry)

¹⁰ Camp Illégal à la Part-Dieu : 149 personnes évacuées (Le Progrès)

¹¹ Gare Part-Dieu, la “plate-forme des Africains » et ses enfants de la rue (AFP)

camp were actually Albanians. The media helps misinform and these misconstrued perceptions have an impact on the policy, all while ignoring the importance of reality.

Reality

The way media portrayed the “migrant crisis” in France does not match the data found. Our study will focus on three areas: actual numbers of asylum seekers, ethnic origin, and the cost of the migration crisis.

France only accepts twenty-nine percent of the asylum-seeking applications, compared to Germany or Italy, that take upwards of fifty percent (Le Parisien)

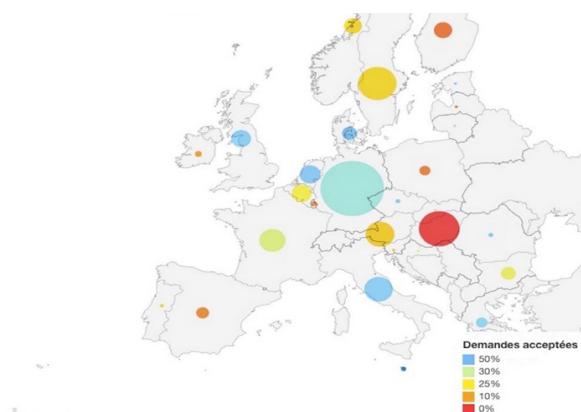


Figure 3

To better see the difference in those accepted from those who sought refuge we have *Figure 4*. Here we see how in 2015, over sixty thousand applications were submitted, but only less than twenty thousand were accepted by France (Le Parisien).

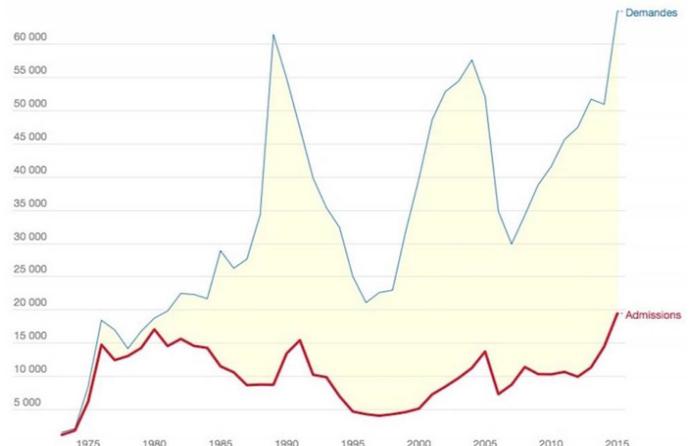


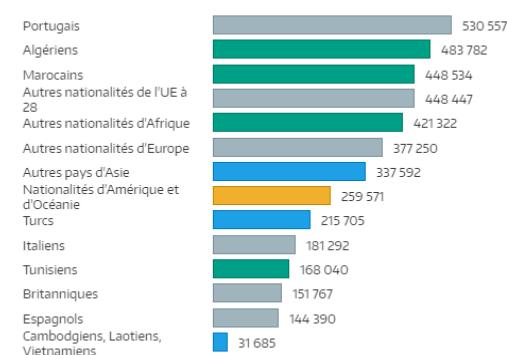
Figure 4

Race also plays a role in creating the perception that France is unable to control the flow of migrants. In all the images we have seen, the majority of the people in them were black migrants, or people with head covers, which triggers a division in foreignness in French society. According to a 2017 INSEE study, EU country citizens, specifically from Portugal, are still migrating to France, both of these are in the top five of those who arrive to France.

Figure 5.

Quelles sont les nationalités des étrangers vivant en France ?

Selon l'INSEE, 530 557 Portugais vivent en France.



Données 2014 valables au 1er janvier 2017.



Source: INSEE



Figure 5

A closer look at the image shows us that of the top five, two more of those are old French colonies, such as Morocco and Algeria.

Although Albanians rank fourth as the largest groups seeking asylum in France in 2016, OFPRA said that counting minors, they had the highest numbers. *Figure 6*.



Figure 3

In a 2017 OFPRA study, Albanians were also the group with the highest numbers, excluding minors. *Fig 7*. In short, we see the true migrant profile is very different from what the media shows.



Figure 4

A harsh reality is that the weekend of the Migration Summit, where Italy said they were no longer accepting boats of migrants, Missing Migrant Project saw a spike in deaths of those crossing the Mediterranean. Numbers rose from 972 to 1405. The French also need to realize that the number of arrivals is also decreasing; 2015 was the peak year of arrivals. Many of these perceptions come from people just now feeling any possible effects that the peak waves caused. French citizens are also more aware of the migrant situation. These problems include migrant camp dissolutions, which displaces migrants, which causes discomfort in some to see the reality of migrants in irregular situations. From 2014 to 2017 all the asylum seekers will only cause a 0.3% (OECD) increase in the European working age population by 2020, therefore the impacts from the so called migrant crisis is not as problematic as it is deemed to be

Conclusion

False perceptions can be very dangerous. Sixty-one percent of French people thought there are too many migrants in France, even if some of these people have ancestry in a country outside of France (AFP). These types of sentiments will cause a rise in ethnic tensions, xenophobia, and islamophobia. This combined with another wave of the rising far right could be regressive. BMI Country risk report warns that the far right is gaining inroads in France, and that France is seeing more populist waves, such as the one currently hitting Italy it warns against another far-right politician such as Marine Le Pen.

In France for example, the far-right leader Marine Le Pen, known for her heavy anti-immigration stance, has many followers. But the migration crisis has extended to other political parties, as we have seen in the

recent Collomb proposal. To keep the far-right followers happy, politicians like Macron and Collomb create laws that appeal to their ideologies.

It should be noted that migrants can cost the state up to 2.1 billion Euros a year (Cornudet). However, this too is misleading. The money does not go directly into the pockets of asylum seekers. Rather, companies who build migrant camps or host migrants are the ones who profit. La Cascina, a company in Italy, was quoted saying that “migrants are more profitable than drug trafficking¹². ” If the migrant crisis costs so much, and if migrants are not the ones who profit, some wonder why not expulse more, which is also in the proposed law project. Expulsions, or deportations, are expensive. According to the French museum of history of immigration, they can cost from 12,000 to 27,000 euros per person.

In this I have shown how the so-called “migrant crisis” is not so much a question of migrants and asylum seekers specifically, as it is often portrayed: that is, a question of Syrians or Africans making their way to Europe. It is more of a humanitarian crisis, where often politicians and the media forget that migrants are humans too, and as such deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

¹² Envoyé Special : Qui veut gagner des migrants

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