

Prof. Dr. Leo Lucassen, University of Leiden

Position: Professor of Global Labour and Migration History and
Director of the International Institute of Social History (IISH)

Research interests: global migration history, integration, migration systems, migration controls, Gypsies and the state, state Formation and modernity, and urban history



The refugee crisis in historical perspective

This paper asks a simple question: why did Western and other European politicians become so alarmed and in some cases downright apocalyptic at the rise of asylum seekers in 2014-2016, especially compared to the previous refugee crisis in the 1990s? I will demonstrate that easy answers (unprecedented high numbers, shift to Islamic countries and huge integration problems among previous refugees) do not suffice here. In the 1990s, numbers of asylum seekers were higher in most countries. Moreover, most came from the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. Finally, research shows that considering the bureaucratic obstacles, most refugees and their children have integrated well.

What has changed? This paper argues that in 2014/2015 a ‘perfect storm’ developed, bringing together factors that in the past had been largely unrelated and converged with new ones. For a full-scale moral panic concerning the arrival and alleged impact of refugees to develop I focus on five necessary and sufficient conditions. The first two factors originated in the late 1970s, starting with the large-scale immigration from former colonies and family reunification of former guest workers from North Africa and Turkey. This made for general discomfort with immigration and integration (1). This anxiety was long isolated from the discussion on refugees and was only recently activated as an argument that Europe cannot cope with refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Eritrea. The second factor concerns the growing inequality and increasing social risks, leading in the long run to a widespread pessimism about the effects of globalization (2). This development is also rooted in the late 1970s/early 1980s, following the global neo-liberal shift. Again, it took a few decades for this trend to influence the refugee debate and became a dominant focus in political discussions only after the global financial crisis of 2008. This turning point was caused not only by rising awareness among unskilled Europeans and Americans that they were losing out to globalization but was also the outcome of political mobilization by left and far-right wing populist parties alike. These two factors were then joined in the 1990s, especially after the Rushdie affair, by a growing discomfort with Islam. Triggered by

the support of migrants from North Africa, Turkey and Pakistan for Khomeini's fatwa and the institutionalization (and hence greater visibility) of Islam in Western Europe, the problematization of Islam (3) started to dominate the public sphere. Especially after 9/11 this led to Islamophobic ideas about 'Eurabia' and the alleged Islamization of European societies. Although this conspiracy thinking has no empirical base, the simultaneous growth of orthodox Salafist interpretations of Islam among part of the Islamic migrants and their children, and the radicalization and terrorism by a very small minority, bolstered the persuasiveness of the 'Islamization' rhetoric. This Islamist terrorism (4), starting with 9/11, was a crucial game changer which linked immigration from Islamist countries to possible security threats and associated Muslim migrants in general with terrorism and an alleged refusal to integrate. Initially, refugees remained in the shadow, as numbers dropped dramatically after 2000. By the time numbers started to rise again, after 2011, the association with terrorism was immediately activated, however. These four factors largely explain the rise of radical right populist parties (5) in Western Europe, which can be considered both a dependent and independent factor. These parties have offered a simple analysis to their voters: rising numbers of asylum seekers and immigration in general endanger the societal position and culture of the native population, which is neglected by a cosmopolitan (left-wing) elite. The far right was therefore especially inclined to use immigration as a scapegoat for feelings of insecurity and erosion of the welfare state. This depiction was closely linked to the alleged loss of national sovereignty as a result of the increasing power of the European Union. Finally, I argue that the moral panic surrounding refugees in 2014-2015 was amplified by long term effects of the EU visa regime (6), which already was put in place in the early 1990s, but whose effects only became visible with the soaring numbers of asylum seekers after 2011. This sudden rise in the use of smugglers and boats in the Mediterranean, with a strong media appeal, strengthened the idea that one was witnessing an uncontrollable and never ending flood of people from the Third World, desperately seeking a better life in (Western) Europe. As I have shown, this change in border crossing practices (i.e. from over land to via the sea) derived from the 1993 EU decision to harmonize external visa policies. The visa requirement for almost all travelers from countries in Asia and Africa before boarding a plane, train or ferry to any EU member states brought about a system of remote control that, combined with stricter border controls of the Eastern land border, created a huge market for smugglers specialized in taking people from the Eastern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean to Greece, Italy and Spain. By the second 'refugee crisis' these effects became visible.