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Rape and Murder among Refugees: A Crisis Point for Europe's Immigration Policy?

By Paul Hedges

Synopsis

Recent criminal incidents involving rape or murder allegedly by new immigrants is creating dissatisfaction with the welcome given to refugees and stoking right-wing populism and Islamophobia. Europe's politicians need to carefully balance law and order and immigration, but not give way to anti-immigrant and Islamophobic sentiments.

Commentary

IMAGES OF crowds of people welcoming immigrants and seemingly widespread sympathy for the plight of refugees has changed over the last year across Europe to dissatisfaction and even hostility. In particular, some recent news events have been portrayed by some to suggest that, rather than being refugees deserving sympathy, the immigrants are barbaric and not in tune with Western values.

From the mass sexual assaults in places like Cologne to the murder of a young female worker in a home for orphaned refugees in Sweden, these stories create fear and a sense of a "clash of civilisations". The attitude towards women, as well as concerns about criminal elements amongst immigrants, is highlighted in some media reporting.

Growing Intolerance

Certainly the themes are not new. I have referenced Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilisations" thesis above, which suggests that the West and its Enlightenment legacy will be in conflict with other worldviews. Meanwhile populist anti-immigration

parties and politicians like UKIP and Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom and Geert Wilders and the PVV (“Party for Freedom”) have had considerable electoral success.

Again, Islamophobic attitudes which see Islam as somehow uniquely dangerous, anti-Western, or violent have long had currency and have resurfaced in the popular so-called New Atheist writers like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins as well as amongst many right-wing politicians and media spokespersons. In similar vein, recently, the UK’s former chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission has said it must be accepted that Muslims are different and cannot be integrated as they stand opposed to democratic and other Western values.

Increasingly the scale of counter protest, and attacks by far right groups on refugees, along with measures like the partial Schengen suspension, as well as Denmark’s recent parliamentary vote to take valuables from refugees to pay for the costs incurred, are indicative of a new atmosphere.

Certainly even politicians and countries who have led the pro-migrant camp have had to take measures to show that they are not taking recent events casually. Chancellor Angela Merkel has spoken about new laws to remove refugees who break German laws, and Sweden has increased its border checks and controls.

Balancing Act in a Changing Landscape

What does all of this mean? Is Europe no longer willing to accept the refugees fleeing warzones on its borders? Is it turning its back on the Human Rights and humanitarian standards it has often championed? Certainly, political reality means that offering an open door to refugees is not electorally viable.

Moreover, it is likely that many economic migrants have taken advantage of the recent influx of refugees to come to Europe. Undoubtedly with over a million people arriving in a year many will not be angels, and criminal gangs have no doubt taken advantage of those willing to engage in acts that are not acceptable.

Negotiating the current situation will need careful handling. On the one hand a clear message has to be sent out that certain forms of behaviour, especially the molestation of women, will not be tolerated. A strong state and police hand is needed to enforce this. On the other hand, this cannot be done in a way which will lend credence or support to the right-wing xenophobic and Islamophobic elements.

For instance, clearly the dozens or hundreds of people involved in the sexual assaults in places like Cologne, even if involving new immigrants, do not represent the majority attitudes or behaviours of the hundreds of thousands of those who have newly arrived. While it must be recognised that very different worldviews are coming into contact, no essential incompatibility need exist. Indeed, the violent thuggery of right-wing responses shows that criminality is not something being brought into Europe by refugees.

The unprecedented influx of refugees will certainly change Europe’s demographics and culture and test the strength of its commitments to Human Rights and multiculturalism. Powerful populist voices opposed to both multiculturalism and

Human Rights are gaining currency across Europe (ironically often claiming to defend its liberal, Christian, and democratic values). This often espouses a discourse that pits Islam against a Christian-Western worldview.

Europe's politicians will need to be strong in defending the need to accept refugees, speaking of the way that Islam has a home in Europe (which is the case culturally and historically), and making a successful multicultural space that respects the Human Rights of all. This will involve helping new immigrants understand the values and expectations of Europe, but a Europe that is and must inevitably change in a globalising world.

Global Implications

The current crisis facing Europe is not Europe's alone. The displaced refugees from the war zones and failed states (often ones with Europe's fingerprints clearly marked) need to go somewhere. The political changes in Europe may also mark its relationships with other nations as well as having economic implications – Europe's populist right-wing parties may not make good partners in foreign affairs. Further the right-wing and Islamophobic populism can be seen elsewhere in the world, such as the United State's presidential race, and is at danger perhaps of being exported elsewhere.

The way that Europe makes sense of a growing Muslim population, manages new immigrants, and finds a way to maintain multicultural harmony will have important implications not only internally, or in its own backyard, but also internationally. If it can prove the naysayers wrong and show that it can harmoniously integrate a huge new Muslim influx into its system it will provide an excellent role model. If it fails, the fallout will further shake the global stage.

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