

Book Review: Europe's Migrant Policies: Illusions of Integration

by Blog Admin

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Recent years have seen an increasing polarization of views on the EU, with many now debating its relevance in contemporary European politics. **Europe's Migrant Policies: Illusions of Integration** examines the role and effectiveness of the EU in developing common migrant integration policies across Europe since the 1990s. **Ruben Zaiotti** welcomes the book's contribution to debate about the EU's role through rich empirical case studies. Its findings are also a cautionary tale for those who believe in the inevitability of European integration.



Europe's Migrant Policies: Illusion of Integration. Suzanne Mulcahy. Palgrave MacMillan. October 2011.

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The question of the role and impact of the European Union and its institutions on European politics has been at the core of major political and academic debates since the project of regional integration was launched more than 60 years ago. It may be a sign of the (troubled) times that the discussion now seems to be turning to the more ominous issue of whether the EU is relevant at all, or, in the most apocalyptic scenarios, whether it can survive its current state of economic and political turmoil. Until recently, few commentators would have explicitly pondered the 'relevance question' in such pessimistic terms.

Of late, however, EU-bashing is no longer the extremist activity it used to be in the (not so distant) past, with a few mainstream voices joining the chorus. As a result, 'Brussels' is being blamed for all kinds of ills affecting the continent. The response to the EU's recent Nobel Prize award is revealing. For some, it was well-deserved, given its important contribution in rendering the Old Continent a less belligerent place, although even the most ardent Europeanists would admit that the timing of the award was a bit awkward. For others – arguably the majority of commentators – this award bordered the blasphemous, given the Union's current economic and political predicament.

Without doubt, opinions of the European Union are strong and polarized. These reactions, whether they are polemical or hagiographic, often share a lack of sound argumentation and solid empirical evidence to back up their claims. It is for these reasons that Mulcahy's *Europe's Migrant Policies* is a particularly welcome addition to the debate about the Union's relevance in contemporary European politics. The book assesses the role that the EU is playing in the development of common migrant integration policies across the continent. The author focuses on three of the key components of this policy area (immigrant integration, civil integration, and migrant enfranchisement) and examines how their main principles have been elaborated, negotiated and implemented by EU institutions and member states. Since the 1990s the EU has been particularly active in fostering a common approach in this policy area. As Mulcahy argues, however, not only has actual convergence has been limited, but the EU has also not played a major role in this process – even when convergence around EU norms has indeed occurred. On one hand, member states have chosen different paths (some following EU standards, others their own 'national' approach). On the other, the convergence (or lack thereof) around common European principles and



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practices (such as the [Common Basic Principles](#) agreed in 2004) has had more to do with internal factors, such political culture and the containment of extreme right-wing parties, than EU institutions and their actions. Hence the claim that integration in this policy field is an illusion.

These findings are a cautionary tale for those who believe in the power and inevitability of European integration. They also challenge some of the Europeanization literature's central claims, especially those of the so-called 'downloading' model (according to which policy convergence is mainly a EU-driven phenomenon), but also the more nuanced 'Interactive Europeanization' model in which policy convergence is the result of a sort of virtuous cycle involving both member states and EU institutions. The author does not find evidence of either of these dynamics affecting migrant policy in Europe. Mulcahy concludes that unless the EU backs up its 'soft law' approach with more legally binding instruments (as it has been the case for other policy areas such as discrimination) then the prospects of convergence in this policy realm will remain grim. The same dynamics affecting migration policies may also hold true in other areas of European integration, and thus a more sophisticated reading of their evolution which takes seriously the domestic politics dimension is required.

The argument presented in *Europe's Migrant Policies* is nuanced, theoretically sophisticated and based on empirically rich material from a variety of country case studies. The bleak picture Mulcahy paints of Europe's allegedly 'Europeanized' migrant policies is thus persuasive and consistent with the current generalized disillusionment with the European integration project. Yet, while understandable, the pessimism that transpires in the book may be overstated. By using the claims of the interactive Europeanization literature as a point of reference, the author has implicitly set the standards high. Indeed, compared to other policy fields, EU-led integration in migration matters has been disappointing. A different picture emerges, however, if we consider the specificities of the migration field in Europe and the political dynamics that underlie it. After all, migration has been, and to a large extent still is, the domain of member states. Despite the recent expansion of EU competences in Justice and Home Affairs (under which migration mostly falls), national capitals are still reluctant to delegate responsibilities in this policy area because of the sensitivity of the subject matters it deals with. As a result, the EU still lacks effective legal and political instruments to compel member states to establish and implement common European norms. Given this, it is surprising that any EU-led convergence – or, for that matter, convergence in general – is occurring at all.

While migrant policy in Europe may indeed be suffering from an 'illusion of integration', this state of affairs does not need to have the negative connotations typically associated with this term, namely that of distortion or misinterpretation of facts. Most European policy-makers (and pro-integrationist commentators) are well aware that greater integration is a not a straightforward, effortless endeavour, and that in order to overcome practical and political obstacles, pragmatism needs to be matched with a degree of long term visionary thinking. Migrant policy is not an exception to this rule. Despite its current foes, a degree of illusion is what this policy field might need after all.

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