

Patrick Kingsley:
The New Odyssey: The Story Of Europe's Refugee Crisis

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The issue of mass migration is extremely topical in Europe at present. Although migration has been a problematic question for many years, especially in Western Europe, it has reached such an intensity since the end of World War. Hundreds or even thousands of migrants from all over Africa and the Middle East set off on their journey to Europe for economic, safety, political or climatic reasons every day. The situation arising in Europe in relation to this phenomenon has polarised the professional community as well as the general public, creating disagreement amongst the countries of the European Union, raising countless questions, and bringing about fear and uncertainty in relation to everything new and unknown. An information vacuum, particularly in the environment of Central Europe, has come into

existence, resulting in the establishment of a distorted and often negatively toned image of migrants as modern occupants of Europe, terrorists who have come to destroy Western civilization. In order to preserve traditional liberal democratic values, there is a need, however, to understand what drives these people to risk their own lives, and what they undergo when searching for dignified living conditions.

The New Odyssey by Patrick Kingsley, a foreign correspondent for *The Guardian*, is focused on monitoring the migration crisis, providing detailed, comprehensive insight into the issue. This book, partly popularising in style, aims to map as faithfully as possible the odyssey every individual migrant must undertake to achieve their goal. The author focuses on each phase of the journey. He defines

the causes of migration with an emphasis on the nationality aspect and the country of origin and reflects on their specific features. Based on these factors, he subsequently clarifies the distorted perception of the concept of a migrant/a refugee. He describes various aspects of the pitfalls of the individual migration routes across the continents, specifically taking into account natural conditions, the political structure of the individual transit countries, the role of smugglers and human traffickers, the behaviour of public authorities, the attitudes of the EU member states, national and international organizations, but also the mental and personal circumstances of migrants. He guides the reader to the apparent end of the journey in the target country, where the quest continues with asylum proceedings.

The introduction is followed by the central part of the book divided into ten chapters and a conclusion. All the chapters are based on the author's years of field work. They include direct quotations drawn from dozens of interviews with migrants, smugglers, politicians, scholars and professionals. The golden thread running through the book is the story of Hashem, a Syrian refugee from Damascus, who is used repeatedly by the author to illustrate all the phases of the Mediterranean migration route.

The reader initially encounters Hashem in the initial chapter devoted to Syria in the first years of civil war. It describes the expressions of civil resistance and the outburst of demonstrations against the Assad Regime following the

gradually deteriorating safety situation, arrests and torture. The chapter clarifies why escape from Syria became the only possible solution for common people, mostly not politically engaged, so as to save their own lives. An important fact mentioned in this chapter is that in the years 2011–2013, when this chapter was written, the majority of Syrians still believed that they could find refuge in the neighbouring countries: Lebanon, Jordan or Egypt. Migration to Europe only became the goal for many of them after restrictive policies were introduced in Egypt and the neighbouring countries.

While the first chapter is devoted to the causes of migration of refugees escaping war and religious extremism (p. 37), the second chapter focuses on migration of people from Africa, who are often labelled by Western media as so-called “economic migrants.” The author traces in detail their journey beginning on the eastern or western coast of the African continent. In comparison with refugees from the Middle East, most Africans have a clear target for their quest established already at the beginning of the journey: the EU countries. The author emphasizes, however, that their journey does not begin in Libya on the coast of the Mediterranean. He describes the journey from the state of origin across the entire African continent. When using the western route, they first have to find their way to Agadez, the last city of the West African Union and the starting point for crossing the Sahara Desert. A similar journey awaits migrants travelling from eastern countries across Sudan

to Khartoum in the North. Both routes thus require crossing the Sahara under inhumane conditions. As quoted by the author: "Think of Libya as having two seas" (p. 38). Among other things in this chapter, of particular value is the information on the prices of the individual parts of the journey, as well as interviews with the corrupt police and army, and an introduction to the political games of transit countries. In my opinion, however, the main idea is the statement that it is impossible to label people, willing to sacrifice their lives on a quest for a dignified life, as only economic migrants in search of a generous social system. Notwithstanding the fact that, in accordance with the 1951 Geneva Convention these people are frequently not entitled to any international protection, they face human tragedy, oppression and death in their home countries.

The third chapter is focused on human trafficking and smuggling networks on the North African coast, an inseparable part of the migration crisis. Libya has always been infamous for human trafficking. The author explains the various increases in smuggling on the Libyan coast, from the historical perspective up to the present day. He describes the Italian government's efforts for a constructive migration agreement with Gaddafi, as well as the increase in migration prior to the dictator's overthrow. The author continues with a discussion of how the smuggling was easier during the time of civil war, the influence of an ISIS' offshoot, the breakdown of the central government, and the financing of mi-

litia through the inflow of money from human trafficking. He highlights the fact that smuggling is advantageous for all groups of Libyan inhabitants, from smugglers and the armed forces to the political representatives of the country. A similar situation is occurring in neighbouring Egypt. The chapter is presented in a comprehensible manner even for a reader without a wider knowledge of the politics in these two countries.

The fourth and the fifth chapter deal with the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. In these chapters, the reader is provided with information about the problems migrants encounter before boarding the boats, the undignified conditions in confined fishing boats, the fear that the signal might be traced prematurely by the wrong member state, the fear of drowning, and the hierarchy amongst passengers on-board. The author draws attention to the inner mental state of the migrants themselves and also describes the activities of organizations providing rescue of these people. He aptly describes the inefficiency and the fragmented behaviour of the EU, as well as the desperate deficiency in human and material resources on the part of the rescuers.

The sixth chapter is devoted exclusively to Hashem, the Syrian, and his journey across Europe. It focuses in particular on his efforts to get from Germany to France and explains especially the technical problems on this part of the journey.

In the seventh chapter, the focus of the book shifts from the environment of the Mediterranean migration route to

the Balkan migration route in the East. The author provides the reader with the opportunity to compare the individual routes. The Balkan route is used mostly by refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The initial part of the chapter describes the two-edged role of Turkey as the last country on the way across the Aegean Sea into Europe, the paradoxical behaviour of the inhabitants of Izmir and their flourishing "migration business," the ambivalence in behaviour of the local governments of the Greek islands and their inhabitants, the role of modern media as "*tour guides of the refugee era*" (p. 185), the crossing to Gevgelija in Macedonia, and the continuation of the journey mostly towards Serbia, which they cross and join other refugees in inhospitable Hungary, an EU member state.¹ Many refugees undertake the journey across the Hungarian border several times due to arrests and deportations conducted by the local police.

The eighth chapter provides the readers with several pages dealing again with Hashem and his journey from Germany to Sweden.

The ninth chapter returns to the Balkan migration route several months later, in autumn 2015, when the positions of the individual states changed as a consequence of the geometrically increasing number of migrants. It describes the shift on the part of Balkan

countries towards a pragmatic attitude, a redirection of the route from Hungary to Croatia, the enormous boom in media interest and the German open-door policy. It also illustrates the statement that "*people will keep coming, whether we like it or not.*" (p. 276)

The narrative thread ends in the last chapter with the story of Hashem, who has been living in Sweden for half a year. It deals with what comes next when a person reaches the target country. The chapter describes Hashem's life in a reception camp for asylum seekers, the personal frustration from the long struggle with the Swedish authorities and, in his case, the happy ending symbolized by a permanent residence permit.

I am personally of the opinion that there is little to criticise when it comes to *The New Odyssey*, it being an extremely well written popularisation book. Certain passages involving the author's unnecessary personal memories unrelated to the topic could be seen as weak points: for instance, a description of what deserted the author ordered when meeting a smuggler from Izmir (p. 192) or the topic of his Bachelor's thesis (p. 231).

A more serious issue is the confusion of the Council of Europe with the European Council (p. 84, the same mistake occurs in the index). In this context, the author mentions a statement by the chair of the Council of Europe² Donald Tusk,

¹ The book was written when there was no fence on the Serbian-Hungarian border.

² The Council of Europe is a body independent from the EU and even contains countries that are not EU members.

when in fact he is the chair of the European Council. It is unclear whether the mistake should be attributed to the author, or to the translator from the English original.

I would like to emphasize, however, the strong points of this publication including the author's extensive knowledge of the issue based concretely on his long-term field research and his "*hands-on experience*." Having encountered personally most of the phases of both migration routes, the author manages to describe with deep humanity the life stories of modern migrants and raise moral questions which the world has to deal with at present. He does not, however, merely perceive the facts unilaterally, but is able to critically reflect on the safety and cultural risks related to migration.

Kingsley successfully combines a variety of techniques used in qualitative research. He is also aware of the limitations of these methods, such as subjective

perception and withholding information on the part of smugglers and members of the armed forces.

I greatly appreciate, with regards to clarity, the numerous maps in the book illustrating the most important geographical points (for instance p. 36 – African migration routes; p. 64 – Libyan ports from which migrants sail across the Mediterranean Sea; p. 201 – a detailed map of the Greek-Macedonian border).

The final part of the book contains an index of primary resources used in the book.

The multidisciplinary *The New Odyssey* is undoubtedly a publication beneficial to professionals in the field as well as to the interested public. Although it is not a scholarly publication in the strict sense of the word, it offers the reader the advantages of a case study, as it "captures the complexity of the case and describes relationships in their entirety." (Hendl 2008: 102)³.

³ Hendl, Jan (2008): *Kvalitativní výzkum: Základní teorie, metody a aplikace* [Qualitative Research: Basic Theories, Methods and Applications]. Praha: Portál