The Limits of Liberal Humanitarianism in Europe: The ‘Responsibility to Protect’ and Forced Migration

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Abstract: This article explores the response of Europe to the refugee ‘crisis’ since 2015 and considers if this is a reasonable test of the region’s commitment to international humanitarianism and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ principle (R2P). This response is explored both in terms of policy decisions and the political discourse used to frame the nature of the challenge, which weighs humanitarian obligations against the needs of ‘security’, ‘societal cohesion’ and ‘burden sharing’. The article argues that the European response to the refugee crisis exposes internal contradictions and limitations in liberal humanitarianism more broadly, as well as fundamental problems with R2P even amongst those countries which champion the principle. Theoretically, the paper draws upon debates about securitisation, humanitarian norms, and liberal politics. Empirically, the paper analyses elite discourse and policy decisions within Europe, as well as UN statistical data on forced migration.

Keywords: Forced migration; ‘Responsibility to Protect’; securitisation; Europe

Introduction*

Does a commitment to the international ‘Responsibility to Protect’ principle (R2P) entail a commitment to protect individuals fleeing persecution, including atrocities? What limits to the grant of asylum by liberal states are morally consistent with their humanitarian commitments? For some years following the establishment of the R2P principle in 2005, forced migration – and obligations towards those seeking asylum – has been approached essentially separately to R2P in policy and academic circles. However, the refugee ‘crisis’ of 2014–15 brought two related themes to the top of the R2P debate in Europe – with global implications – and these will be explored in this paper. Firstly, the paper will consider if a credible commitment to R2P implies a responsibility to assist and protect civilians fleeing situations of war crimes,

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genocide, crimes against humanity or ethnic cleansing. Secondly, it will explore if the response of West European states to forced migration from war-torn societies exposes a limitation in – or conditions upon – their commitment to international protection and the R2P. The paper does not seek to establish whether the European response has been objectively ‘wrong’, but rather – in the tradition of internal critique – it assesses this response in light of Europe’s own moral logic.

The paper argues that the European responses to the refugee crisis in 2014–15 are a reasonable test of the credibility of European states as champions of R2P and humanitarianism more broadly. From this perspective the response exposed the limitations and internal inconsistencies of liberal humanitarianism, both in terms of policy decisions and in terms of the political discourse which framed the nature of the issue. By prioritising constructions of ‘security’, ‘societal cohesion’ and ‘burden sharing’ over humanitarian obligations, most European states are therefore arguably failing to live up to their own demanding cosmopolitan commitments. In turn, this demonstrates that R2P has limitations even amongst those countries which most rigorously champion the principle. These limitations are particularly acute when extending protection to vulnerable people brings political costs ‘at home’ and when the public debate about whether to accept refugees – and how many – is ‘securitised’. The crisis thus demonstrated that the liberal vision of R2P is – despite the cosmopolitan rhetoric that often accompanies it – in practice largely confined to addressing humanitarian challenges externally, at a distance. This suggests that the traction of R2P will continue to have severe limitations when it is most needed.

The empirical basis of this argument will demonstrate how the liberal response to the refugee ‘crisis’ reflects a process of securitisation, a seemingly prevalent phenomenon in contemporary liberal societies. According to this logic, refugee movements are framed and treated as a security challenge, rather than as a humanitarian issue. This is underpinned by a discourse of existential threat, risk, emergency, zero-sum politics, and governance through fear and exclusion. The “politics of security” is reflected most conspicuously in the association between refugees and terrorism but it also points to societal anxieties around values and identities which have been amplified in recent years. In this way, the political climate of liberal ‘security societies’ demonstrates how the ethics of security are contested since different – and sometimes equally legitimate – claims to security are framed as being incompatible. The paper builds upon existing work on the securitisation of migration by considering its implications for the humanitarian responsibilities of liberal states globally. In turn, it goes beyond this existing work by drawing out links between securitisation debates and political theory, underpinned by empirical evidence drawn from elite discourse and practice.

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