

Europe is undergoing an existential crisis. Whatever the eurozone hasn't already managed to break is well on the way to being destroyed by the refugee crisis.

The [Schengen agreement](#) of open borders has more or less vanished, at least for now. The [Dublin regulation](#), aimed at supporting asylum seekers, is hardly being upheld. The [burden-sharing schemes](#) that were agreed last year to distribute refugees more evenly over Europe are failing to come to fruition.

Donald Tusk, president of the European Council, warned earlier this year that the EU has two months to get the refugee crisis under control, or the whole EU project will be in question.

The sideshow

Meanwhile, UK prime minister David Cameron is trying to renegotiate Britain's EU membership. He now appears to have come a step closer to a deal that would restrict state support for EU migrants working in the UK. The idea is to invoke an ["emergency brake"](#) to justify a change in policy, based on the claim that the UK welfare system can't cope with demand.

Now, most countries are not against welfare restrictions. Some central European states do see it as discriminating against their citizens, but it is not unfeasible that Cameron will be able to get a deal. In fact, a timely [focus group study](#) revealed that Poles and Bulgarians themselves are not against welfare restrictions in the UK.

But the main point is this: no one really cares.

Europe's migration crisis simply isn't about in-work benefits for EU migrants. Everyone understands that the issue of benefits is symbolic. It is about an idea of fairness based on a mixture of a contributory model of the welfare state and welfare chauvinism.

EU migrants do not [claim more in-work benefits](#) than the British, and since they also pay taxes it is hard to make the argument that it means negative business for Britain. Of course, it will affect a small number of migrants on very low wages and their children, but they will still benefit from working in the UK. There is [little evidence](#) that welfare is the main attraction of the UK.

In short, benefit doesn't matter much to migrants themselves, to the British economy or to the inflow of migrants to the UK. The fact that so much of the prime minister's time is being spent on this highly symbolic issue when Europe is about to collapse in front of us suggests that Britain resides over a very insular position in European politics.

Living in a different world

Britain's geographical location, in combination with not being part of Schengen, has left the country in a completely different place with regards to the refugee crisis. While the situation in Calais is very disturbing, its roughly 6,000 migrants and refugees pale in comparison to the [2,000 refugees](#) arriving in Greece on a daily basis or the [39,000 asylum seekers](#) who came to Sweden in the peak month of October last year.

The question to ask is not whether Cameron can negotiate a deal with the EU, but whether there will still be an EU to negotiate with. In any case, the EU is undergoing a refugee crisis that will transform it. Whether or not EU citizens will be able to claim in-work benefits in another EU state is a non-issue.

Cameron will probably succeed and maybe he can prevent a Brexit. But while Britain has been obsessing about an economically insignificant symbolic game of defining the insiders and outsiders of the welfare state, Europe will have undergone its largest crisis to date and a fundamental makeover. If Britain wants to be a part of the EU then it needs to get involved in the migration crisis. That's the issue that actually matters.

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Britain can block migrant benefits – no one in Europe actually cares

Written by The Conversation USA

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