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FALSE ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLIE TRUMP'S EXECUTIVE ORDERS ON IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

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In his first week in office, U.S. President Donald Trump followed through on campaign promises by issuing three significant executive orders regarding immigrants and refugees. The first two, issued on January 25, concerned border security (the wall with Mexico) and interior enforcement (including a threat to cut funding to "sanctuary cities"). The third, relating to refugees and signed on January 27, prompted the greatest controversy. That order included a 120-day freeze on all refugee resettlement, a 90-day suspension on entries from seven Muslim-majority countries, and an indefinite suspension of entries from Syria. At the time of writing, implementation of the refugee ban has been temporarily blocked by a federal court order, but President Trump has signaled his intention to promulgate a revised refugee ban that might better withstand legal objections.

The refugee ban led to an international outcry, and was met with stiff domestic opposition from immigrant and refugee advocates, civil rights activists, universities, tech business leaders, and Members of Congress (including several Republicans). Immediately after its promulgation, the refugee ban generated large protests in the United States, and more than one thousand U.S. State Department employees signed a "Dissent Channel Memo" criticizing the executive order as ineffective and counterproductive to U.S. national interests.

Much commentary has centered on the politics of the executive orders (which Trump supporters overwhelmingly favor), the internal processes through which they were generated, and their consequences – both in terms of immediate human costs and likely longer-term impacts on trade, diplomacy, and U.S. national security.

The discriminatory intent and impact of the executive actions are evident, and they are readily understood as part and parcel of Trump's "America First" ideology. But it is also worth repeating, in this time of post-truth and "alternative facts," that Trump's recent measures targeting immigrants and refugees rest on a set of explicit and implicit assumptions that are dubious at best – and in many cases, demonstrably false.

At least three false assumptions underlie the case for a wall with Mexico – that Mexicans are "pouring into" the United States, that these migránts are dispropor-

tionately responsible for crime, and that they are a drain on the economy. Taking these on one at a time, it is important to note that, first, since the recession of 2007-2009, net migration from Mexico to the United States has been negative; more Mexicans have left the United States (through voluntary return and deportation) than have entered. It should also be noted that Mexico is the largest country of origin for legal migration (immigrants and temporary visa holders) to the United States, although China has begun to overtake Mexico in recent years.

The reversal of the trend line regarding Mexican migration is slightly offset by an increase in 2016. But, given demographic shifts and economic development in Mexico – and in the absence of some extreme events – the United States is unlikely to experience a repeat of the large net inflows of Mexicans that took place in the 1990s and early 2000s. The real story is that Mexico has become increasingly a country of transit – mostly for Central Americans, but also for Haitians and Cubans, among others – and the numbers of those attempting to enter the United States through Mexico has increased in recent years. With U.S. encouragement, Mexico has increasingly been turning back Central Americans at its own southern border, a trend which keeps many thousands of asylum seekers from gaining access to international protection.

As for the presumed linkage between migration and crime, most studies show that, in the United States, immigrants are significantly less likely than native-born individuals to be charged with crimes, and much less likely to be incarcerated. As concerns the economic impact of immigrants, a recent large-scale study by the National Academy of Sciences found the net economic and fiscal impacts of immigration to the United States to be, on the whole, fairly positive. There are slight negative effects of immigration on the wages of the native-born population with less than secondary education, and on the wages of immigrants who arrived earlier. There are also some negative fiscal effects of immigration on the state and local level. But overall, immigration contributes strongly to economic growth and innovation, and leads to fiscal benefits at the national level. And by the second generation, immigrants also have a net positive fiscal impact on states and localities.

Another large misplaced assumption underlies Trump's policy toward refugees – the notion that those entering the United States under the country's longstanding refugee resettlement program are somehow not adequately vetted. This assertion strains credulity. Refugees selected for resettlement have undergone a far more stringent vetting process than any other population category entering the United States – a multi-stage process that lasts up to two years. Most Members of Congress have been thoroughly briefed on the vetting procedures, and thus know that one key claim underlying the executive order is false.

And as for the security risk which Trump ascribes to refugees, a recent study by the libertarian CATO Institute finds that exactly zero refugees have killed anyone in a terror attack in the United States since 1980. Taking into account three such deaths that occurred in the 1970s (before the current vetting process was in place), the CATO study finds the risk of someone in the United States to be killed in a terrorist act committed by a refugee to be one in 3.64 billion.

These false assumptions have been unmasked many times in the U.S. media. So what accounts for the prevalence of "alternative facts" in this arena? Surely any explanation must point to the country's extreme partisan polarization, the division of both traditional and social media into separate political spheres that reinforce preexisting beliefs, and powerful cognitive processes that override nuance by mapping the world into two categories – "dangerous" and "not dangerous." Too often, the media – in the United States as in Europe – reinforces negative stereotypes by repeating and amplifying false reports of crimes attributed to immigrants and refugees.

Other hints are provided by cross-national public perception surveys. These show, in the case of the United States, that respondents falsely believe that the percentage of foreign-born among country's population is twice as large as it really is (the actual figure is 14 percent), and that estimates regarding the proportion of Muslims in the population exceed the actual figure (of about 1 percent) by more than ten times. In most European countries, public perceptions of immigrant and Muslim demographics are similarly inaccurate.

Other aspects of the migration and refugee policy field – which can be a confusing maze to all but highly qualified specialists – also help account for the strong hold of false assumptions on the population. One typical confusion is between migrant stocks (the number present in a country at any given time) and flows (net border-crossings over a given timeframe). Although the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. has plateaued and declined slightly in recent years, the fact that these still number more than 11 million could lead people to assume that immigrants are still entering illegally in massive numbers. Another key distinction is between resettled refugees (those brought into the country after thorough vetting) and asylum-seekers (those who gain access to a country's territory to submit a claim for refugee status). For the average U.S. voter, it may be difficult to appreciate the distinction between the large numbers of asylum-seekers entering Europe in recent years and the much smaller number of refugees resettled into the United States.

In this era of Trump and Twitter, there is a real danger that policy toward immigrants and refugees will be based on false assumptions and fueled by a potent mix of misperception, partisanship, prejudice, and fear. Whatever responses are marshalled in opposition to such deleterious policies must themselves be based not only on values but also on solid empirical analysis.