

Speech at the Informal Meeting of Heads of State and Government

Brussels - 23-09-2015



Ladies and gentlemen,

In 1951, after war-torn Europe had seen millions of people displaced - a convention was drawn up in Geneva which stated that if a person in their country had a "well-founded fear of being persecuted" they were to be granted protection as a refugee. Now, we are called upon to make good that pledge. For too long, we have turned a blind eye to the suffering of the Syrian people. For too long, we have turned our backs to the refugees embarking on a very dangerous journey to reach our shores. Compassion compels us to lend them a helping hand. But moral duty and international law do too.

With migration flows unseen in recent history, Europe is faced with an epochal challenge. After the financial crisis we are now confronted again with a challenge where the first step towards its solution is accepting that global problems cannot be solved by nation-states acting on their own. Worse, the centrifugal forces of national egotism threaten to tear our union apart. Beggar thy neighbour policies will destroy our European project. Europe is built on de facto solidarity - out of necessity, not romanticism. Finding solutions through dialogue and compromise, between small and big, rich and modest, South and North, East and West; solutions which are in the common interest - that is in the best interest of everyone. In a globalized world some challenges are just too big for any of our Member States to cope with on their own. European challenges need European responses.

President Tusk, let me thank you for the text of your invitation letter, which clearly illustrates the dramatic situation we are in. You have also warned us recently at the Ambassador's Conference in the European Parliament about a "divide between the East and West of the EU". We must avoid such a split at all costs. Because divided we are weak. But united we are strong. We

learned this lesson the hard way during the financial crisis. And this time, the stakes are even higher. While the financial crisis was about money and the stability of our banking system, this time it is about saving lives and our vision of society and humanity.

The challenge is big, the numbers are impressive. Some of our citizens are worried by them, others are even afraid. This is understandable if you look at the sheer magnitude of the crisis. But fear is not a good basis for politics.

So let us overcome fear, stop the blame-game, stop this day-by-day reactive politics and instead anticipate solutions.

The internal and external dimensions of our asylum and migration policy are inextricably linked and must be tackled together and head-on. We will solve this crisis if we show *de facto* solidarity within Europe and *de facto* solidarity beyond Europe:

By working for a ceasefire in Syria.

By supporting Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey in their task of hosting refugees.

By fairly sharing the refugees within Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Last Thursday, the European Parliament gave in record time and with an overwhelming majority the go-ahead to re-locate 120.000 persons in clear need of international protection from Greece, Italy and Hungary to other Member States of the EU, on top of the 40.000 to be relocated according to a scheme approved only a few days earlier. This second emergency scheme was adopted in the Home Affairs Council yesterday thanks to the tireless efforts of the Luxembourg Presidency and the Commissioner for Home Affairs and that is an important step forward – which by the way must now be put into practice without delay. Now the European Parliament insists, and has already started work on, the Commission's proposed binding permanent relocation mechanism for all Member States, which is based on objective and verifiable distribution criteria and which takes into account asylum seekers' needs, family situation and skills, but also the situation of each member state including its different circumstances in terms of population, GDP, unemployment rate and number of refugees already in the country.

Why does Parliament insist so much on this binding solidarity mechanism?

For two main reasons.

Firstly, the challenge is huge. Some claim that too many people are coming to Europe. That it is no longer manageable. However, Parliament is convinced that by sharing the task, it becomes manageable. Some communities and regions are indeed faced with an over-proportionate duty putting a strain on them. To distribute a few hundred thousand among 507 million in 28 countries should not pose a problem. This is neither a "German problem", nor a "Greek problem" nor a "Hungarian problem" - it is our common task. Until everyone around this table gains awareness of this reality, we will not reach satisfactory solutions.

Secondly, we have created a single area without internal borders, the Schengen area, but we left the management and the policing of the external borders in the hands of the individual Member States. This imbalance is now causing problems, problems which are putting one of our most striking achievements – freedom of movement - in danger.

Those who close borders permanently in a common market destroy that common market. Because the free movement of goods and services entail the free movement of persons. A Schengen Area where citizens are stopped at the borders while thousands of lorries carrying goods for the "just-in-time economy" pass without a check would not survive more than a day.

Please allow me to be very open and clear on this issue: closing internal borders is permissible as a very short term measure in certain circumstances. But it does not solve anything. People running for their lives from the violence of Assad or the so-called Islamic State will not be deterred by fences or walls. It is not a crime to cross a border to seek asylum. This is why the refugee crisis needs to be properly managed.

One essential measure to help manage this crisis and express European solidarity with countries on the frontline is the concept of “hotspots” to bring together all actors on the ground to better register new arrivals. I consider four points to be key to make these hotspots a success.

- implementation should take place urgently starting with those “hotspots” and EU Regional Task Forces in Italy and Greece where preparations are already underway.
- hotspots must have a strong Union identity under the coordination of EU Agencies whilst benefiting from the broadest possible range of support.
- information must be shared at all appropriate levels to avoid a duplication of tasks.
- staffing and operational means of these Agencies must be sufficient, using all available flexibility contained in the Multi-annual Financial Framework Regulation.

It is welcome that the Commission has adopted further operational measures today, including infringement procedures where 19 out of 28 Member States have not applied agreed standards on time. There is no point in agreeing laws if these are not applied on the ground.

The European Parliament will now engage as a matter of priority with the Council on the whole range of proposals presented by President Juncker on 9 September, and indeed present its own further proposals, including all short and long-term aspects of asylum and migration policy.

Now we need a comprehensive debate with citizens, with both the academic and political sphere, on what kind of Europe based on what kind of values and principles we want for the future. The migration crisis and the highly diverging reactions to it - and we find prominent representatives of these antipodal reactions around this very table - compel us to find an answer the question what kind of Europe do we want and what role do we want Europe to play in the world?

Ladies and gentlemen,

Arrivals are spiking this summer as violence again explodes in Syria. With the eruption of the so-called Islamic State, Syrians are losing hope. More than 200.000 have lost their lives. Almost eight million have been displaced internally. Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey are hosting more than four million registered refugees.

During my visits to refugee camps in the region over the past years, I was impressed by the generosity displayed by the hosting countries, but I also noticed that the situation is growing ever more desperate. This impression was confirmed to me in a phone call by H.M. the King of Jordan, Abdullah II bin al-Hussein last week, who very openly told me that his country is reaching its limits. On top of that, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Guterres informed the European Parliament that the UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies are running out of money - they are at a breaking point. If their funding is not soon increased they will have to reduce services drastically in basic need services. The World Food Programme already saw itself forced to halve the assistance to almost 1.3 million vulnerable Syrian refugees in the region. Most of them now live off 50 cents a day.

Underfunding is affecting assistance to refugees, testing the resilience of refugees to its limits and driving more people towards Europe. Faced with such harsh conditions who can blame people for seeking a safe haven in Europe?

Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, the European Union and its Member States are collectively leading the international response. But more efforts are urgently needed. The UN appeals for the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 are covered only up to 40% and this gap is one of the main reasons for the increasing migration flows we are facing today. I urge you to increase your contributions to humanitarian and development assistance. Pledges must be fulfilled in the coming days. The EU has already set up a Trust Fund for the refugees and host countries; this Trust Fund has the advantage of flexibility and speedy delivery. The EU and its Member States, the USA and the Gulf countries must immediately make more funds available - and act. As far as the EU side is concerned, you must decide here and now.

European solidarity must be backed by EU budget resources. In December 2013 we agreed on the Multiannual Financial Framework Regulation which provides for flexibility in order to face challenges such as the current refugee crisis. The European Parliament is willing and ready to use this flexibility and make funds from the EU budget available.

It is of utmost importance to tackle the root causes of the crisis. As long as the war in Syria continues, people will continue to flee and won't be able to return home. A ceasefire must be brokered urgently. And we can build on a recent success of our EU diplomacy: building an international deal on the Iranian nuclear programme. This deal opens new opportunities to stop the bloodshed together with other big powers and influential regional players.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We should be proud that Europe has become a beacon of hope for men, women, children, old and young fleeing from wars. They are seeking shelter in Europe hoping to find solace in our European values of freedom, justice and respect for human rights. European values which are put into practice every day by our citizens, who in train stations, market places and at border-crossings are handing out water and food to the refugees, clothes and toys. Not fear, but compassion and human decency demonstrated by our citizens must motivate our political decisions. Because today the whole world is looking at us and one day we will have to answer our grandchildren, when they ask us: "And what did you do when the Syrian people were running for their life from war?"

Thank you for your attention.

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