



# Only together. The EU and the global governance of migration

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On 19 September 2016 Heads of State and leaders from Governments all over the world will gather in New York on the occasion of the UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants “to come up with a blueprint for a better international response” to the ever increasing movements of people across the globe. As migration is by definition a transnational phenomenon, international governance should be strengthened in order to better tackle the issue. Yet, the prospects of a groundbreaking meeting are rather faint, as national and regional interests once more seem to prevail over the need to offer protection to people in need or in search for a better life. The European Union, torn between the values of respect of human rights and dignity, on which it was established sixty years ago, and its fears makes no exception.

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In 1989 Michel Rocard, at the time Socialist French Prime Minister under President François Mitterrand, who sadly passed away at the beginning of July 2016, delivered a well-known speech before the National Assembly that raised a lively debate in his country and is still cited today, sometimes improperly. He said *“La France ne peut pas accueillir toute la misère du monde; mais elle doit en prendre fidèlement sa part”*.<sup>1</sup>

Those words, pronounced in another time, in other circumstances, sum up the dilemma that troubles Europe today. Faced with the largest humanitarian crisis in decades, the European Union is torn between the respect of the values on which it was built sixty years ago, the moral and legal obligations to offer shelter to people in need, and the temptation to erect walls (the so-called “Great Wall of Calais” being only the last example of yielding to such temptation) along its borders in order to keep the misery of the world at bay, purportedly preserve its identity and appease those populist and extremist parties – whose voice is growing louder and louder – which foretell the worse catastrophes if refugees and migrants will be let in.

The [numbers are very well known](#), as they are being rightly repeated over and over again by the media. More than 65 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide; 21.3 million refugees; 10 million stateless people. 4.8 million Syrians who have left their country since the beginning of the conflict five years ago, while other 4 million have abandoned Iraq. Not to speak about the South Sudanese refugees, the Nigerians, the Afghanis and so on.

According to Save the Children, about half of the registered refugees are children, whose constantly growing number is *“creating the highest level of refugee children since World War II”*, and might trigger a crisis within the crisis. First, unaccompanied young refugees are more vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers, who might force them into slave labour or prostitution (according to [Oxfam Italia](#), every day 28 unaccompanied young migrants disappear). Second, children that spend their childhood in such distress and neglect, and are deprived of their youth, with little or no access to education systems, will face serious issues in their cultural and social integration in the future, therefore creating the risk of alienation and conflict with the host countries.

1.5 million is the approximate number of asylum applications that the European Union Member States have received since the beginning of 2015, from people who, fleeing from violence, conflict, persecutions and after a hazardous journey through the Aegean Sea, through the Balkans, in the dangerous waters between Libya and Sicily, or – to a much smaller extent – through Morocco and Spain, reached the European shores and borders in the hope of receiving protection, of being granted a future.

It seems to be a huge number, but it needs to be considered in perspective. In fact, if compared with the figures concerning refugees in smaller and more troubled countries, its weight can be scaled down. Let’s just only think of Lebanon, a tiny Middle Eastern country with a population of less than 6 million people, which hosts –by itself, in a territory slightly larger than Cyprus – 1.5 million refugees (Syrians and Palestinians).

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<sup>1</sup> *“France cannot bring to her shores all the misery in the world, but she must faithfully take in her share”.*

That the burden of this increasing number of refugees is not equally shared among countries and that it is mainly poor ones, whose precarious stability is often jeopardised by the refugees' long-term presence (in average, a refugee spends 17 years far from home), that offer shelter to people escaping conflicts, is probably a fact taken less into consideration, if not fully overlooked. [Oxfam](#) has recently denounced this stark disproportion: the six wealthiest nation of the world (US, China, Japan, Germany, UK and France) host less than 9% of the world refugees.

The European Union has more than 500 million inhabitants. Notwithstanding the recent economic crisis and the slow recovery, it is still one of the richest regions of the world and its share of the global GDP is 23%. **The perception of being invaded by “hordes of migrants” is therefore not corroborated by the data**, but the European Union is struggling to face the pressure of 1.5 million refugees and asylum seekers. And its response to the crisis, so far, has been inadequate and feeble. Last year decision to provide for the relocation of 160,000 asylum seekers, for example, has resulted in the relocation of just over 3,500 of them, due to Member States (mainly Central and Eastern European ones) tenaciously dragging their feet over the European Commission's proposal.

In March 2016, **the EU has signed a controversial deal with the Turkish government**, which if, on the one hand, has so far contributed to significantly slow down the flow of refugees that reach EU borders through Greece and the Balkan route, on the other hand has raised doubts and concerns about both its compliance with international and European law and its long-term success. In fact, the definition of Turkey (which hosts more than 2,7 million Syrian refugees) as a “safe country”<sup>2</sup> is, according to many observers, questionable and, as for its long-term feasibility, it will depend on the one hand on the European Union's compliance with its obligations and, on the other, on Turkey's domestic stability. The current uncertain political situation might induce refugees to leave Turkey and try to reach Europe through even more dangerous paths. According to some sources, migration flows from Turkey to Greece slightly [intensified](#) after last July's coup attempt in Ankara. It is not clear instead whether the escalation of migrants' arrivals in Italy during the summer is to be ascribed to the deal, as their number is indeed in line with last year's arrivals and the national composition of migrants landing on Italian shores (mainly Nigerians and Eritreans) is different from those seeking to reach Europe through the Eastern route.

Beyond the question of its effectiveness, the EU-Turkey deal raised in many observers and critics the impression that the European Union, incapable and unwilling to find an agreement among its Member States (clung to their wish to maintain their sovereignty in this field) on the management of the flow of refugees, decided to “outsource” to Ankara the problem. This in exchange for the commitment to visa-free travel for Turks, 6 billion euro refugee aid and the promise to revitalise talks on accession to the European Union.

Last June, another step was made when the European Commission presented its [New Migration Partnership Framework](#), aimed at reinforcing cooperation with third countries to better manage migration. According to the new plan *“the EU will seek tailor made partnerships with key third countries of origin and transit using all policies and instruments at the EU's disposal to achieve concrete results”*.

The way the plan tackles the migration issue shows that two important dimensions of the phenomenon have been acknowledged: the fact that the refugee crisis is not a temporary

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<sup>2</sup> The terms of the agreement provide for Greece to return to Turkey all new irregular immigrants. At the same time the EU member states will resettle Syrian refugees residing in Turkey. However, according to EU legislation, returns are allowed only in two circumstances: in the case of irregular immigrants who do not qualify for asylum, and in the case of individuals coming from a so-called “safe countries”.

occurrence, rather it will last long and it is part of a larger movement of migrants across the world that can hardly be stopped and, as such, needs to be dealt with on a long-lasting base; and the fact that migration is not only a domestic issue, but that it has an external dimension that only transnational cooperation can “govern”.

Yet, the Commission’s proposal, adopted by European Council in June 2016, reinforces the approach already shown in the deal with Turkey and introduces a dangerous pattern of behaviour in the relations with third countries. In fact, the Partnership Framework aims at developing stronger cooperation with countries of origins and of transit and at rewarding, by means of developing and trade policies, those states that show better capabilities to manage migration flows.

At least three flaws have been highlighted in this approach. First of all, as far as funding are concerned, the plan proposes the diversion of existing funds and aids towards the goal of managing migration, therefore linking the broader question of countries’ development to their performance in border control. Second, as for the Turkish deal, the Partnership Framework tends to delegate the question of migration to third countries (in exchange of rewards), confirming the impression that the European Union wishes to externalise the management of immigrants’ flow. Third, the list of sixteen countries<sup>3</sup> with which the Partnership Framework will launch the project include states, whose respect of human rights and freedom is more than dubious. Last June, for example, United Nations human rights investigators accused Eritrean leaders (Eritrea is one of the sixteen countries mentioned in the Commission’s communication) of [\*“crimes against humanity including torture, rape, murder and enslaving hundreds of thousands of people and called for the case to be referred to the International Criminal Court”\*](#). The risk the European Union is running is trading its values and principles in exchange for control of migration flows, thus betraying its own identity.

After the mild commitment by G20 countries in Hangzhou to continue addressing the migration issue in 2017, a very important step towards a global government of migration could have been the **UN Summit for Refugee and Migrants** that will be held on September 19<sup>th</sup> 2016 and that was convened in recognition of the fact that movements of people around the world are a global issue, that providing them with protection and assistance is a global responsibility and that only a global approach can effectively tackle them. However, the document that will be presented on that occasion and that has been approved by the UN members at the end of July falls short of providing viable instruments to manage migration and movements of refugees. Actually, the process of negotiations that led to the document has exposed once more how reluctant governments (including European ones) are to give in and to commit. Not only is the document vague and lacking real commitments (any decision has been postponed to 2018!),<sup>4</sup> but [\*according to the Center for Migration Studies\*](#), it actually preserves the status quo.

The pattern of behaviour followed in this case confirms that it is national and regional interests that eventually prevail. The European Union is not an exception. Pressed between the persuasive force of the anti-immigration rhetoric that is dominating discourse on the refugee crisis and on migration policies across Europe, and short-sighted national interests, the European Union Member States have failed so far to tackle the refugee crisis on the base of the principle of solidarity. If it will keep along this path, it will lose credibility, as it will not abide by those values it has always stood for in the

<sup>3</sup> Ethiopia, Eritrea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

<sup>4</sup> One of the summit’s results should have been the agreement on a Global Compact on Responsibility-Sharing for Refugees, establishing a road-map for implementing countries’ commitments to address the crisis and its roots, to respect human rights, fight xenophobia, etc.

face of other countries and by its legal obligations vis-à-vis refugees. The management of migration flows and of refugees is a long-term challenge that only a common approach can tackle. Closing doors, re-establishing frontiers, building walls are not response to movements of people, whose reasons for living their countries are stronger than their fears of being rejected.