



PRESS STATEMENT

The Challenge of the Migration Issue

By Jean-Claude Juncker, European Commission President

Europe for me is and always has been a community of values. This is something we should be and yet are too seldom proud of. We have the highest asylum standards in the world. We will never turn people away when they come to us in need of protection. These principles are inscribed in our laws and our Treaties but I am worried that they are increasingly absent from our hearts.

When we talk about migration we are talking about people. People like you or I, except they are not like you or I because they did not have the good fortune to be born in one of the richest and most stable regions of the world. We are talking about people who have had to flee from war in Syria, the ISIS terror in Libya and dictatorship in Eritrea.

And what worries me is to see the resentment, the rejection, the fear directed against these people by some parts of the population. Setting fire to refugee camps, pushing back boats from piers, physical violence inflicted upon asylum seekers or turning a blind eye to poor and helpless people: that is not Europe.

What worries me is to hear politicians from left to right nourishing a populism that brings only anger and not solutions. Hate speech and rash statements that threaten one of our very greatest achievements – the Schengen area and the absence of internal borders: that is not Europe.

Europe is the pensioners in Calais who play music and charge the phones of migrants wanting to call home. Europe is the students in Siegen who open up their campus to accommodate asylum seekers who have no roof over their head. Europe is the baker in Kos who gives away his bread to hungry and weary souls. This is the Europe I want to live in.

Of course, there is no simple, nor single, answer to the challenges posed by migration. And it is no more realistic to think that we could simply open our borders to all our neighbours any more than it is to think we just cordon ourselves off all distress, fear and misery. But what is clear is that there are no national solutions. No EU Member State can effectively address migration alone. We need a strong, European approach. And we need it now.

That is why in May, the European Commission, under my leadership, presented detailed proposals for a common asylum and refugee policy. We have tripled our presence in the Mediterranean sea, helping to save lives and intercept smugglers. We are assisting Member States the most affected, sending teams from the EU border agency (Frontex), the EU asylum office (EASO) and the EU police network (Europol) to help the often overburdened national authorities identify, register and fingerprint incoming migrants, speed up the processing of asylum seekers and coordinate the return of irregular migrants. We are clamping down on smuggler networks and dismantling their cruel business models. We are showing solidarity with our neighbours like Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon by resettling 20,000 refugees from outside of Europe. We are working with third countries of origin and transit to open up legal channels of migration and to conclude readmission agreements to facilitate returns of people who do not have a right to stay in Europe. And we are putting a renewed focus on enforcing the recently adopted EU rules on asylum, from reception conditions, asylum procedures to the obligation to take fingerprints.

In May, we proposed to establish a relocation mechanism to assist Member States by relocating a small portion of the high numbers of people in genuine need of international protection arriving in Italy and Greece. The Commission proposed to relocate 40 000 to other EU Member States – national governments were prepared to accept just over 32 000. We want to go much further, establishing a permanent mechanism that could be automatically triggered in emergency situations – for whichever EU Member State needs it. When we have common external borders, we cannot leave frontline Member States alone. We have to show solidarity in our migration policy.

Some of the measures proposed by the Commission have already found support. All the others now urgently need to be taken up by the EU's 28 Member States – even those who have until now remained reluctant to do so. The dramatic events of the summer have shown that we urgently need to put this common European asylum and refugee policy into practice.

We do not need another extraordinary summit of heads of state and government. We have had many summits, and we will meet again in November in Malta. What we need is to ensure that all EU Member States adopt the European measures now and implement them on the ground. The Commission already proposed, nine years ago, to have a common EU list of 'safe countries of origin', making it possible to fast track asylum procedures for specific nationalities. At the time, Member States rejected the idea as interfering with national prerogatives. And yet it does not make sense that on the one hand, Member States have decided to make Western Balkan countries candidates for EU accession and, on the other, nationals of these countries are applying for asylum in the EU. In September, the Commission will thus submit a common list of safe countries of origin to the Member States.

What we need, and what we are sadly still lacking, is the collective courage to follow through on our commitments – even when they are not easy; even when they are not popular.

Instead what I see is finger pointing – a tired blame game which might win publicity, maybe even votes, but which is not actually solving any problems.

Europe fails when fear prevails. Europe fails when egos prevail.

Europe will succeed if we work together, pragmatically and efficiently.

I hope together we, Member States, Institutions, Agencies, International Organisations, Third Countries, can prove we are equal to the challenge before us. I am convinced we are able.

Europe's history if nothing else proves that we are a resilient continent, able to unite in face of that which seeks to divide us. This should give us courage for the weeks and months to come.

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