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IT'S BROKE, LET'S FIX IT

RETHINKING MIGRATION MANAGEMENT

EVENT REPORT



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MIGRATION MANAGEMENT: EU SHOULD SWITCH FROM FRONTIER CONTROLS TO INTEGRATION

A change in the tone and content of the European Union's never-ending migration debate is much-needed to tackle 21st century realities. Rather than simply trying to keep people away from Europe through tougher border controls and sharper Frontex missions, the EU should focus on ensuring safe and legal ways for people to enter and providing support for those who wish to settle down.

At the 29 January Friends of Europe debate "It's broke, let's fix it: rethinking migration management", held under the Chatham House Rule, participants discussed the fact that the bloc's asylum overhaul has been a failure, largely because European politicians and policymakers continue to 'misdiagnose' the problem. EU agencies such as Frontex and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) should be strengthened, some argued, but this should go hand in hand with more modern and effective migration management policies.

One participant noted, "This toxic, hysterical discussion about immigration is casting a shadow over the entire discourse in Europe." To move forward, most people at the debate agreed, the EU needs to refocus its approach to migration by taking a multi-dimensional approach centred on solidarity, inclusion and more positive communication.

A CRISIS OF SOLIDARITY, NOT NUMBERS

Migrant arrivals to Europe have fallen from around 1.3 million in 2015 to just over 140,000 in 2018 (so says the International Organization for Migration). And although third country migrants represented just 7% of the EU population as of January 2017, the bloc has found that citizens often significantly over-estimate that figure.

Far Right parties, in particular, have seized on the issue and now, rightly or wrongly, immigration is seen as the number one problem facing the EU (according to 40% of people in the latest Eurobarometer poll) – though it is considered the number two challenge facing national governments, after unemployment.

Perhaps reflective of these sentiments, the EU has spent the last three years scrambling to overhaul its migration and asylum policies, turning

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Frontex into a fully-fledged border and coast guard agency, beefing up the Valletta-based EASO and setting up migration ‘hotspots’ to take the pressure off Greece and Italy.

However, efforts to relocate refugees from those hotspots have been less successful and Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini has hit back by refusing rescue boats permission to dock on Italian shores, leaving it up to neighbouring countries, such as Spain and Malta, to deal with the pressure of new arrivals. Reflecting on the situation, one participant noted, “It’s very unfortunate that we had to wait for somebody like Salvini in Italy to really put this [solidarity] at the core of the agenda. I rarely agree with him, but when he says a boat arriving in Italy is a boat arriving in Europe, he is, of course, totally right.”

A similar crisis of solidarity befell the UN’s Global Compact for Migration last year, with many EU countries, including Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and others voting against its ratification or abstaining (along with the US and Israel). In Belgium, public and political opposition to the pact brought down the governing coalition. Although some estimate that fully implementing the pact could add 2% to global GDP and bring in an extra €70-90bn in remittances, the message is crystal clear: you can’t force solidarity.

TOP 5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RETHINKING MIGRATION MANAGEMENT

With these divisions in mind, this report attempts to gather some practical recommendations for European migration policy, based on observations and suggestions made by participants. The recommendations build upon those made in Friends of Europe’s Autumn 2018 discussion paper, “Real people, true stories: refugees for more inclusive societies”.

1. Think local

Regional authorities and city administrations deal with the day-to-day realities of managing migration and integration. National governments and European institutions should consult them to see where they lack support (e.g., in housing, schooling, healthcare, employment, etc.) and identify ways to work together to solve these issues. At the same time, civil society organisations, communities and newcomers themselves should also be included in the conversation as they are the ones with the practical experience of what integration really means.

Citing the Canadian example, one participant recalled, “It wasn’t smart bureaucrats in a room who designed migration policy, it was local communities who took charge and said, ‘We’ve got to get on with this’, and eventually asked for help. Policy is what we called it a generation later, after it was working in practice.”

2. Take a whole-person, whole-society approach to inclusion

More resources should be allocated to integration efforts, which should take a comprehensive approach to welcoming newcomers. Such policies must ensure that new arrivals receive a full spectrum of support, including in early childhood education, job and skills training, psycho-social integration, community engagement, gender issues and more.

Just as importantly, such programmes must not target newcomer needs alone, but rather those of the whole society. Leaving long-established citizens to fend for themselves deepens cultural divides and fuels exclusion and extremism. Policymakers designing and implementing integration programmes must remember that inclusion is the key to success. As one participant put it, “It’s not the presence of migrants that’s the risk factor but the absence of integration.”

3. Be honest about what migration means, particularly ahead of the 2019 elections

“It’s time that politicians actually listen to the concerns of the people, and they are concerned about migration”, warned one participant. “Mainstream parties have avoided it, and therefore we shouldn’t be surprised that people have turned to more extreme parties in order to try and get something done.”

In order to counter this, another participant suggested giving the voters what they want instead of skirting the subject: “Voters want a more balanced migration policy. Many European citizens are shocked when they realise that you can be called a trafficker just because you are offering someone a ride or a room or a bed. It doesn’t make sense to ordinary citizens when you tell them that it’s not possible to sponsor someone as a refugee.”

Achieving this starts with honesty. As with globalisation and automation, migration will produce both winners and losers. Policymakers, politicians and practitioners should go beyond the macro-level benefits, acknowledge the downsides of migration and offer support to the most vulnerable – be they newcomers or locals.

4. Share the good news

At the same time, the media has a role to play by sharing more positive stories of integration. Facts and figures are important, but people also need to hear the success stories of those who have made it through the system.

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5. Strengthen legal pathways

Move away from policies focused on building barriers and creating migration alternatives. Those who wish to migrate – as well as those who are fleeing conflict and persecution – will continue to come whether safe and legal migration routes exist or not. Leaving people to sit hopelessly in detention centres, adrift on boats or at border fences is not only inhumane, but fuels division and extremism.

A number of European states already offer safe and legal options for people to settle down – though they may not advertise it. These efforts should be supported.

6. Take the long view

At the same time, a long-term vision of integration should facilitate legal ways for newcomers to settle down, including by introducing pathways to citizenship from the start. Reflecting on Europe’s ageing population, one participant said, “There are so many engineers, so many doctors, so many nurses. Europe needs them.” Success will require investment, foresight and a recognition that migration is not going anywhere.

7. Don’t force relocation

Trying to force states to accept new arrivals has fuelled Europe’s divisions over migration. Instead of wasting energy attempting to mandate relocation schemes, Europe should form a ‘coalition of the willing’. States which are not ‘willing’ should expect to make additional financial contributions to support those countries which have accepted the new arrivals.

8. Stand in solidarity

Such financial solidarity should be increased, and frontline states like Greece, Italy and Spain should receive additional resources. Those which find themselves particularly struggling with high numbers of new arrivals could additionally consider transferring some elements of their border control to Frontex whose capacity has already been significantly increased in the last years.

9. Remember that reality is complex

While resettlement may apply only to those in need of protection, today’s realities leave refugee and other migrant movements inextricably linked – until the moment they arrive on Europe’s doorstep and new rules apply. To deal with one will demand dealing with the other.

LET'S GET ON WITH IT

There will always be prejudices against migrants, some participants argued, pointing out a “tribal instinct to create an ‘us vs them’”. But solidarity is also an instinct, and there are ways to change the conversation. One participant warned, “The greatest risk is a legal and political environment that prevents civil society, cities and others from acting, if policymakers put in place measures to criminalise solidarity or restrict civil society.”

Migration is not going away, given the effects of climate change, ongoing wars in Syria and Yemen, and economic and political oppression in countries such as Eritrea. And even if those drivers were to disappear, young, educated people around the world would continue to seek out opportunities “to fulfil their potential”, participants pointed out.

The key to successful migration policy is not to come up with ‘grandiose solutions’ but to focus on what is achievable, participants at the debate agreed. There is already a huge body of evidence on what works, they said. “Let us get on with it.”

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Ildiko Voller-Szenci, Antall József Knowledge Centre, Brussels



Shada Islam, Friends of Europe



Neva Sadikoglu-Novaky, Committee of the Regions



Anila Noor, Amsterdam City Council & European Migrant Advisory Board



Catherine Woollard, European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)



Giampaolo Silvestri, AVSI Foundation



Elisa Diaz Gras, Mission of Mexico to the EU;
Geoffrey Van Orden, Member of European Parliament



Thomas Huddleston, Migration Policy Group (MPG)



Gerry Salole, European Foundation Centre



Kazuo Kodama, Ambassador of Japan to the EU



Philippe De Bruycker, Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB)



Dan Costello, Ambassador of Canada to the EU



Dilek Aydin, Turkish Industry & Business Association (TÜSIAD)



Ana Gomes, Member of European Parliament and Trustee at Friends of Europe



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+32 2 893 98 11

info@friendsofeurope.org

friendsofeurope.org

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