

European interview

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“The policy of the free movement of European citizens must not be questioned”

Interview with Jacques BARROT, Former Vice-President of the European Commission

1. On 3rd October last a vessel carrying around 500 migrants shipwrecked off the coast of Lampedusa, an Italian island in the Mediterranean. Although this was not the first accident of this kind to occur in the Mediterranean, the media and public opinion seized the opportunity to criticize the European immigration policy. What in your opinion does this catastrophe mean for Europe? In what way is it a “European catastrophe” as stressed by the Italian President of the Council Enrico Letta?

The catastrophe off Lampedusa is one of a Europe which does not support its peripheral members adequately. Every Member State tries to sort its own illegal immigration issues out, likewise their problems with asylum seekers unfortunately. It is not so much the European Union which is to blame but the Member States which have been unable to guarantee the effective monitoring of their borders, leaving it up to the Member States on the edge of Union to monitor the coastline. Worse still the Dublin Rule [1] means that illegal migrants are systematically returned to the first Member State whose borders they crossed to enter Europe. This forces a heavy burden onto the peripheral countries.

2. From the point of view of values how is Europe, more than the rest of the West, affected by this issue? When Enrico Letta and José Manuel Barroso arrived in Lampedusa on 9th October they were booed by its inhabitants. European leaders are accused of making empty speeches about the issue and not embracing it to the full. Why is Europe to blame more than its Member States?

Europe suffered the totalitarian Nazi and Stalinian regimes. It is obliged to give shelter to the persecuted. I should say that neither the President of the Italian Council nor the President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso, nor the European Commissioner for Internal Affairs, Cecilia Malmström, deserved such criticism. At least Ms Malmström succeeded in getting the European Parliament, and especially the Council of Ministers to accept the harmonisation of asylum rights, assessment procedures and also the various types of protection that can be granted to asylum seekers. In this way Europe is showing its vocation to the world and its generosity regarding all of those being persecuted.

3. Do you prefer the option of an open policy (improved migrant reception) or one of closed-doors (an increase in the number of patrols in the Mediterranean and the dispatch of migrants back home)? Should we not be tackling the people who are organizing the smuggling?

We have to make a clear distinction between illegal migrants and asylum seekers. I regret that the European agency responsible for the external borders, FRONTEX, only received 80€ million for the period 2014-2020, whilst previously it received over 120€ million. Not only should FRONTEX be able to monitor the coastlines but it should also be able to escort illegal immigrants back to their countries. As far as asylum seekers are concerned it would be better to open reception offices in the States of the Southern Mediterranean which would then be able to check on requests for asylum. Of course Europe must not hesitate in striking back at unscrupulous smugglers as soon as they are identified.

1. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2003:050:0001:0010:EN:PDF>

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4. In your opinion how effective are the present instruments in the European migratory policy (Frontex, Schengen, etc.)? Although the Lisbon Treaty stipulates that the “Union “should develop a joint policy regarding asylum, immigration and external border control” (art. 67 TFEU), this is nevertheless still a shared competence. What are the present competences of the European institutions in terms of monitoring the borders and what are the limits of this?

The Schengen Area will now have a particularly sophisticated information service at its disposal: the Schengen Information System. This should enable the identification of illegal migrants and also all of those committing crimes in this area of freedom. In regard to the agency FRONTEX it is dependent on the means the Member States are prepared to provide it with: ships, helicopters, etc. Undoubtedly we shall require a corps of European border guards. The European Union has a certain number of measures available but their financing has to be accepted.

5. What do you think of EUROSUR, the border monitoring system the creation of which was approved on 10th October by the European Parliament and which will allow the States to share images and information almost in real time concerning the EU’s external borders? The network is due to function as of 2nd December between 18 Member States – why not 28? And what is the difference between this system and FRONTEX?

EUROSUR will allow the use of drones and especially the exchange of precious information between the Member States. Of course the 18 Member States which have an external border to monitor are the first to be members of EUROSUR. This technological step forwards will enable true cooperation between national border guards and will provide information in real time.

6. Several leaders have called for a reform of

Schengen: what shape should it take in your opinion?

The freedom movement policy of European citizens must not be questioned. This can only be done for a short time in exceptional circumstances. The Schengen Information System will in addition to offering freedom, also provide Europeans with security. In this, a time for populism, it is tempting to question free movement and leave it in the hands of each Member State. The Commission and the European Parliament must check on whether a border can be closed temporarily or not.

7. What about the possible use of the temporary protection directive (2001/55/CE) of 20th July 2001. Do you think this a good idea? Why hasn’t it been used before?

The temporary protection directive is indeed a good idea. It was not implemented a great deal between 2000 and 2010 due to the Yugoslavian conflict. But at present the consequences of the Arab Spring may call for the use of this directive again and the temporary protection it implies.

8. Most media call for European solidarity regarding migrant reception countries (Italy and Malta). What shape should this solidarity take in your opinion: financial aid (2 million additional € have been granted to Italy – is this enough? Should we not rather target real aid such as the provision of staff to increase patrols in strategic areas of the Mediterranean?

The real means to relieve the countries receiving the asylum seekers is to enable the resettlement of these protected people. Sweden has shown the way for example. Of course we can provide additional funding to peripheral Member States as far as illegal migration is concerned, which we have to monitor carefully. But the European Union has to commit to action earlier on in the process, in Africa – as in relations between Morocco and Spain, which opened training centres in emigration regions. We know which African states and regions

lend themselves to emigration. Hence we have to target these States more specifically and help towards their development. It is vital for Europeans to distinguish between illegal migrants and those who cannot return to their country of origin under any

circumstance – for the time being at least. Europe must open its arms to them in line with its values. The Syrian conflict has exiled 2 million people who have fled the civil war and persecution. How can Europeans remain insensitive to this?



Jacques Barrot

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