

The challenge of the migration crisis - Can the EU find solutions?

Policy Briefing - 15 July 2015

Summary

Europe's neighbourhood is currently experiencing unprecedented instability. Millions of people are on the road to exile as the direct result of wars, conflicts, dictatorships and failed states. Increasing numbers – many of whom are fleeing for their lives – are, not surprisingly, trying to seek protection in Europe, a phenomenon that is placing severe strain on the EU's external borders and national protection systems. Faced with the worse humanitarian crisis since World War II, the EU and its member states must address an extremely complex situation: avoiding deaths at sea, delivering protection to those in need within and beyond the EU, managing migration and coping with security issues, not least the growing terrorist threat.

However, finding suitable solutions to these challenges is not always easy and has already led to tensions between the European Commission and member states. What should be done to overcome these challenges? What should be the priorities? What about solidarity between member states and towards third countries? In this Policy Briefing, **Peter Sutherland, United Nations Special Representative for International Migration and Development and Honorary President of the European Policy Centre (EPC)**, outlined the challenges of the current situation and discussed what can be done to ensure that Europe's migration policy is fit for purpose.

Full Report

Chair **Janis A. Emmanouilidis, the EPC's Director of Studies**, opened the briefing by saying that although attention has been focused on the travails of Greece in recent weeks, this should not stop the examination of other crucial issues, and that migration is one of the most important subject the EU needs to deal with. At the last ordinary European Summit for example, German Chancellor Angela Merkel suggested that migration was the biggest challenge facing Europe. Coming from her, said Emmanouilidis, this tells us a story. This summit was also characterised by significant conflict over the Commission's proposal for an obligatory relocation mechanism, which was not accepted by many member states who instead opted for a voluntary scheme.

This summit, said Emmanouilidis, helped to underline the negative sentiments that exist in many member states, along with a general overreaction to the issue of migration. Inaccurate perceptions surrounding migration, he said, have also been exploited by right wing populists, a position that conflicts with Europe's demographic change and our economic need for migrants. Emmanouilidis also suggested that when it comes to migration, many issues tend to be put into the same box, such as terrorism, free movement and development policy, and he therefore welcomed the presence of Peter Sutherland as someone well-positioned to provide more clarity on the situation and on what the EU needs to do.

Sutherland began by echoing Merkel's recognition that migration is the key issue for Europe's future. Merkel actually went further, he said, by describing Europe's asylum and migration policy as "broken". Sutherland agreed with this assessment, saying that in the context of the greatest humanitarian disaster facing Europe in decades, the incoherent responses to the loss of life in the Mediterranean and the absence of solidarity very evident at the last European Council demonstrate that this is the case.

He then went on to assess how this situation has come about, singling out the absence of political leadership at the national level as the key factor. Sutherland argued that politicians are afraid to say that

migrants bring benefits, as this goes against the current flow of public opinion. By ducking their responsibility, national leaders have ceded ground to the extremists, who have gone on to exaggerate the problems and challenges posed by migration. This is despite the fact that in the vast majority of cases migration is positive. Migrants contribute more than they take, said Sutherland; they have a lower unemployment rate than indigenous populations and create employment rather than take jobs. But while the evidence is indisputable, these facts are never expressed, and the end result is a dangerous situation where 67% of French people, 53% of Germans and 57% of Italians want to reintroduce border controls, according to a recent poll.

Sutherland next turned to where Europe is going in this debate. A key problem, he said, has been the fact that the distinction between asylum seekers and economic migrants has been blurred, and this is something that needs to be addressed. Sutherland asked whether this generation of Europeans really wants to offer no positive response to the issue of refugees. Many asylum seekers who come to Europe spend far more obtaining transport in leaky boats than they would if they flew first class from Delhi to Europe, he pointed out. This is how desperate they are. Sutherland asked why it was that these people cannot be assessed before they get into a leaky boat, in Cairo say, or Khartoum. The reason this cannot happen, he argued, was because our system is broken.

Sutherland also criticised countries for not taking their fair share of refugees, instead expecting countries like Italy and Turkey to carry the burden simply because of geographic proximity. Turkey he said was doing a lot more to help Syrian refugees than the EU. He also pointed out that while Europe resettled 100.000 Hungarians following the USSR invasion of 1956, Hungary is today building a wall to keep migrants out.

Sutherland questioned why Europe was unable to openly discuss the demographic challenges it faces. We need migrants far more than we appear to accept, he said, and he called for full and equal partnerships across the Mediterranean and Africa. More mobility within Africa was needed along with better governance, while a new EU Mediterranean policy was required. Collapsing societies on our borders, he said, are contributing to the huge flow of refugees. Sutherland also said that while we often proclaim our values and look across the Atlantic with an air of superiority, it should be borne in mind that the US has a much more effective and generous system in place in terms of taking in asylum seekers.

Ultimately, Europe needs to innovate to better protect refugees and forced migrants, especially those that perhaps do not fit neatly into the 1951 Refugee Convention definitions. Arguments need to be rearticulated, and we need to face up to the fact that we cannot hide from this issue, said Sutherland. Turkey, with a population of some 74 million, has accepted 2 million Syrians since 2011, while Europe with its population of over 500 million has accepted little more than 150.000 refugees. There needs to be a more equitable sharing of responsibilities, he said, and this needs to happen fast. We need an EU policy that fits into the global policy framework. We have to deal with people, said Sutherland, as this is what globalisation is about.

Discussion

Emmanouilidis thanked Sutherland for putting forward pertinent questions and issues, and suggested that the migration issue was a good example of the process of disintegration visible within Europe. We may have come to the point where pressure applied by issues such as migration has caused cracks to appear between member states, he said. This lack of solidarity and leadership at the national level, said Emmanouilidis, has opened the door to extremists. The fact that member states are not ready to take their share of responsibility over refugees is also another example of the blame game that is happening across the EU. In the absence of leadership, asked Emmanouilidis, which actors at the European level might be able to provide support?

Sutherland responded by saying that he felt the Commission has been effective in this field, and that Commission President Jean Claude Juncker displayed commitment at the recent European Council meeting. While there is concern at the global level, said Sutherland – the UN Secretary General, the Pope and European Council President Donald Tusk have all been involved in the debate – it is at Member State level where decisions on the ground must be taken. This is where leadership has been absent, for fear of extremists on both the left and right.

Emmanouilidis then opened the floor up to questions. The first touched on whether clearer explanations about migration were needed given that EU citizens remain unconvinced about the issue of migration and whether emotional arguments of

solidarity are effective. **Sutherland** responded by saying that there is no magic wand for convincing public opinion; arguments must be won incrementally. At the end of the day, it is national institutes that must implement change, he said. He added that the economic argument for migration was unambiguous and that it was the likes of UKIP (UK Independence Party) that sought an emotional response. Naked nationalism, said Sutherland, was an expression of the belief that you are better than somebody else, and represents a failure to reconcile ones' own history with a future that cannot be avoided.

A second question touched on the possibility of solving this issue through the advancement of a more European nationality. While sympathetic to this objective, Sutherland accepted that the creation of a European demos was not going to happen in the near future. During difficult times, he said, people cleave to national borders, to the extent that they want to reintroduce border controls. All we can do is chip away at the issues, he said.

A final round of questions touched on the need to make border controls on arrival more efficient, the difficulty of selling the issue of migration to a sceptical electorate and how partnerships with African countries can best be achieved. With respect to forging new partnerships, **Sutherland** called for an elevation of the dialogues begun through the Khartoum and Rabat Processes. Mechanisms should be in place to allow for the return of migrants, as well as to deal with increased levels of migration. Sutherland appreciated that discussing the issue of migration can be difficult domestically, but pointed out that positive attitudes towards migrants can be fostered. In Germany for example, there is perhaps a growing acceptance and recognition of the need to deal with the country's demographic problem. He added that leaving one or two countries to carry the can for Europe when it comes to taking on migrants was a disgrace.

Emmanouilidis concluded the briefing by thanking Sutherland, and highlighted his point about the growth of nationalism as the manifestation of fear of the other. Selling the benefits of migration, he said, remains a key challenge, and suggested that moving away from the concept of solidarity towards the idea of enlightened self-interest might prove more effective.