

**Special European Summit 23 April 2015 in Brussels - Speech by Martin Schulz,
President of the European Parliament**



Brussels - 23-04-2015



Martin Schulz

Ladies and gentlemen,

Twenty years ago, I became a member of the European Parliament. For twenty years, the European Parliament has been calling for a truly European asylum and migration policy. Today, I could still deliver the same speech, I delivered twenty years ago. Sadly and tragically, not much has changed. We witness the same tragedy repeating itself over and over again as more people perish in the Mediterranean.

Yet another deadly shipwreck last Sunday with 800 refugees believed drowned has shocked us all deeply. These refugees left their homes because of war and persecution, famine and poverty. They came to Europe seeking protection. Hoping for a better life. But all they found was death.

Today, the Mediterranean is the world's deadliest border. For each person reaching our shores, we will never know with certainty how many have drowned in the sea. Every single life lost off our coasts is a stain on Europe.

Each time a refugee boat sinks, with people screaming, shouting and drowning, we swear "never again". We hold minutes of silence. We lay wreaths. We promise that this time must be the turning point. And then ...

Many people blame the deaths of these people on "the EU". But there is no such thing as an EU migration policy. We have a patchwork of 28 different national systems. It is not Brussels which decides about migration policy. It is London, Berlin, Paris, Rome, Riga, Lisbon who decide whether a specific country takes in refugees fleeing a war zone, whether asylum is granted, a return ordered or a rescue mission sent out. Because in the past twenty years the home affairs ministers of your countries have not been able or were unwilling to develop a European system. The lack of a truly European asylum and migration policy is now turning the Mediterranean into a graveyard.

Our immediate priority must be to save lives at sea. When people are dying right in front of our eyes, human decency demands that we hold out our hand to save them.

I urge you to quickly step up search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean. We must reinforce the joint operations in the Mediterranean coordinated by Frontex, Triton and Poseidon, by exponentially increasing the number of active vessels, assets and financial resources. Of course, this could have been done months ago, last October to be precise, when Triton was set up. I am sure that those of you around the table who were reluctant to contribute remember the discussion well.

We must also extend the reach of the operations so that they can intervene where people are drowning. Triton's operational reach must be increased to prevent, in some cases, a 48 hour delay before reaching those in distress. International humanitarian law obliges you to save people in distress at sea. I appeal to you: act now to save more people from drowning.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are meeting in Brussels today to prevent more people from dying. But our responsibility does not stop here. We also have a responsibility towards those who survive.

Together we have to find a way to manage migration that is humane and realistic. And our common European action has to take place in a spirit of solidarity with a fair sharing of responsibilities among all EU countries.

I believe that in our search for new asylum and migration policies we should start by being honest: There are no simple answers.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are all affected by migration in different ways. The level of pressure varies widely. And the responsibilities are not evenly divided.

Italy, Malta, Greece, Cyprus and Spain are directly affected by refugees arriving by sea. Because your countries happen to be the gateways to Europe. More than a hundred thousand people were rescued by Italy's search and rescue operation Mare Nostrum in 12 months. And I can only commend Italy for this humanitarian operation.

Malta, a country of 430.000 inhabitants is responsible for coordinating search and rescue operations in a zone of a quarter of a million square kilometres. These are hugely disproportionate duties.

Germany is faced with a very different challenge: It received more than 200,000 asylum applications last year, one third of all those made in the EU. Four Member States, Germany, Sweden, Italy and France fielded nearly two thirds of all asylum applications.

Clearly, we still have to find a fair division of responsibilities in a spirit of European solidarity. Because it is simply not fair to let the countries who border the Mediterranean deal with migration on their own. After all, the management of the EU's external borders is a common European responsibility, not a Maltese, Greek, Cypriot, Spanish or Italian issue. Nor is it fair to let a small number of countries host the majority of refugees. Clearly, we do need a system for fairly distributing refugees. I appeal to everyone around this table to step up to the challenge and accept their share of responsibility.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Last year an unprecedented 626 thousand asylum applications were received by EU member states. Some say this is too much. But less than half of these applications are granted. And if you compare this to 507 million Europeans, it becomes more manageable. And just take a look at what our neighbouring countries are doing: Only five per cent of Syrian refugees have found shelter in Europe whereas Lebanon, a country of five million, is hosting a million Syrians. Recently, I had the opportunity of meeting with Syrian refugees who have fled from conflict areas in search of shelter, in the Öncüpınar Refugee Camp. Under such tragic circumstances, it was heartwarming to see the smiling faces of children who are receiving the proper education they need. Thanks to the praiseworthy efforts by the Turkish Government to preserve the human dignity of these refugees.

Yes, we can do more. Especially, if we act together and shoulder our responsibilities together.

Clearly, we have to find a way to treat refugees fairly, decently and equally, no matter where they end up in Europe. But today, people fleeing for the same reasons are treated very differently in Europe - it is often a matter of pure chance. Some are granted asylum. Some are allowed to remain temporarily for humanitarian reasons. Others are sent back or remain irregularly. The Dublin System continues to perplex even our courts. We cannot leave the status and the rights of individuals to chance. That is absurd. That is not humane.

It is crucial to have the same procedural guarantees through the Union. I would like to call on you, ladies and gentlemen, to assist the member states bordering the Mediterranean in processing asylum applications swiftly via the EU Asylum Support Office, so that refugees are not held for a long time in overpopulated centres. Furthermore, we need an emergency relocation mechanism and we need it immediately.

But asylum is not the right tool to deal singlehandedly with the issue of migration - it was never meant to fulfil this role. For instance, in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons from conflict zones we need to urgently consider triggering special temporary protection, a binding mechanism for solidarity and increased use of humanitarian visas. The European Parliament has supported substantial resettlement from third countries for those fleeing current conflicts as a humanitarian measure. We should also examine ways of giving people the possibility to ask for asylum or protection from outside the EU.

And we have to create more avenues to enter the EU legally. Europe has always been and will continue to be a continent of immigration and emigration. We have to face up to this reality and recognize that we need an EU-wide system of legal migration for those who want to come and work. Some member states urgently need migrants for their ageing workforce, other member states don't. We have to take this reality into consideration. Of course, having a proper migration policy as a continent means having rules, and having fair rules means having some limitations and priorities. United States, Canada or New Zealand have a system of legal migration, too. A system with clear criteria on who can come and who not.

To sum up: Europe needs a coherent, predictable approach to asylum and migration. The Commission's Ten-Point-Plan, fully backed by your Foreign and Interior Ministers last Monday, is a positive starting point. The European Parliament now expects the Commission to submit an ambitious and comprehensive proposal on both asylum and legal migration policies next month. Jean-Claude Juncker, addressing the plenary some minutes before you were elected as Commission President by the European Parliament on 15 July last year you said that migration would be a priority during your mandate. We expect you to deliver on your promise.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Faced with humanitarian crises of unprecedented magnitude in our direct neighbourhood - from Libya to Ukraine, from Gaza to Iraq and Syria - due to civil wars, conflicts and failed states, we are called upon to do more.

We must fight the causes of migration, not the migrants. This includes closer cooperation with countries of origin and transit, also through agreements on migration management and mobility partnerships. The continued instability in Libya has allowed human trafficking to flourish. It has become a multi-million dollar business! These criminal traffickers are making money off other people's misery and putting their lives at risk by sending them on the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean in rickety boats. The human trafficking networks must be tackled. We now have to do our utmost to fight criminal human traffickers in our own neighbourhood too.

But this can only be part of the solution - the traffickers will find other routes as long as demand is strong and people feel it is their best option. We must support the ongoing talks between the

Libyan political forces currently led under the auspices of UNSMIL and with the involvement of the Maghreb diplomacies. Hopefully these regional and UN efforts will lead to a Government of National Unity in Libya. This is key to stabilize the country and the EU must be prepared to deploy comprehensive assistance including a security sector reform.

Combating the causes for which refugees flee their home countries is of course the right thing to aim for. Yet, one might doubt the sincerity of this aim if at the same time international aid is cut, as happened during the last MFF. Amongst the Parliament's group leaders today there were calls for a fundamental increase in funding for humanitarian and development aid as a condition for agreement on the EU's budget for 2016. Furthermore, the debate on this long-term objective must never be used as an excuse to cover up the pressing need to provide immediate help.

The European Parliament believes that the EU must better connect migration, humanitarian aid, development and security issues. We cannot allow any more - as has been the case previously - that these different policies undermine each other.

Funding has to be better focused and streamlined.

Let me assure you, in the ongoing debate about our asylum and migration policies, the European Parliament will be the voice of solidarity. We will work constructively towards policies that are humane, realistic and based on our European values. We will stand by your side, at this European Council which you decided to convene, if you launch an asylum and migration policy which responds to today's challenges humanely and effectively.

Thank you for your attention.

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