

IN DEPTH

Europe splits over refugees: policies vs. public opinion

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In August 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel claimed that the Dublin regulation “does not work” and that “a common response for the whole of Europe” was needed to face the arrival of refugees to EU territory. Shortly after, the European Commissioner for Migration, Dimitris Avramópulos, declared that “the old Dublin has died”. Nevertheless, until this day, the European Union continues to be incapable of deciding on a real common asylum policy. The European reply to the hundreds of thousands of persons, who have risked their lives, trying to reach EU territory, has been marked by urgency, unilateralism and populist speeches. Never before, there has been such a clear lack of leadership in the Union. The German Chancellor has lost the consensus which had previously given her a position of hegemonic power inside the EU. Even in the worst moments of the economic and financial crisis, with the Eurozone split into two uneven halves of debtor and creditor countries, Merkel could always count on a reduced group of governments which assumed and defended her austerity policies, some even more fiercely than the Chancellor herself. On the other hand, the decision of Berlin, taken in the summer of 2015, to open the door to the arrival of refugees from the war in Syria, hoping that most European partners would act accordingly and show solidarity with the German gesture, has ended up isolating Merkel, leaving her weakened both at home and in the Union. As a consequence, there has been no European reply.

While the political speeches spoke of, in the best of cases, the “migration crisis” or “humanitarian crisis”, if not directly using the populist right wing’s arguments that have taken the upper hand, even in countries with a long tradition of welcoming

refugees, a new wall has been built around the European Union. And it has been built precisely by those who were the first ones to bring down the Iron Curtain. Hungary has closed its borders with fences of barbed and razor wire, in order to “stop the invasion” and “crime”, and to preserve “the European Christian values”. Since the month of July, a new law authorises summary expulsions of immigrants, who are transferred to the border without even a study of their cases. New patrols have been deployed in an authentic man hunt along the fences, built on the Hungarian border with Serbia and Croatia.

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The internal division among EU member states also led to the temporary reintroduction of border control, thus suspending the Schengen Agreement for the free movement of persons. The European Commission was left alone, defending a plan to spread the rehousing of 160,000 refugees over all its member states, which could not be applied due to the opposition of some countries. Today, according to figures, published by the EU executive late September, only 5,651 persons have been hosted so far, the main load being carried by six countries. In Lebanon – a country of just over six million inhabitants, there are currently 1,200,000 Syrian refugees, of whom 70% live below the poverty threshold, according to UNHCR. The European Union, facing only a tiny part of the worldwide humanitarian crisis, posed by a total of 60 million displaced persons, has seen how some of its fundamental pillars, such as freedom of movement, were staggering when it was necessary to pronounce a joint response to this emergency.

What has been the Union’s solution? Outsourcing political and humanitarian responsibilities. Brussels decided to put itself in the hands of Turkey, a country each

day further away from the democratic standards, but committing to accept the return of migrants who reached the Greek coast in exchange of 3 billion Euros. This treaty, described by Amnesty International as a “historic blow for human rights”, has been replicated without any problem by the EU in the agreement, recently signed with Afghanistan, for the deportation of migrants and asylum seekers who fail to regularise their situation and would see themselves forced to return to a country with an on-going covert civil war. NGOs in the region have warned against the fact that the forced return of hundreds of thousands of Afghans, already started from Pakistan, can cause a severe humanitarian crisis and more political instability in the southern border areas of the country.

“ The Mediterranean Sea is world’s most dangerous border to cross; the European responsibility in the deaths in the Mediterranean is undeniable ”

Concern and commitment

In the Eurobarometer of last spring¹, presented by the European Commission, immigration remains the main concern for 48% of the EU citizens (10 points lower than during the previous wave, at the end of 2015), followed by terrorism (39%). Nevertheless, a large majority of Europeans (67%) showed themselves in favour of a common immigration policy for the Union. While the Estonians (with 73%), the Danes (with 71%) and Czechs, Latvians and Hungarians (67%) were, according to the Eurobarometer, the nationalities where immigration was most perceived as a problem, the Spanish (34%) and Portuguese (17%) are on the opposite side of this ranking. However, expressing this concern does not mean that there is no will to be involved. Last May, Amnesty International published its new Refugees Welcome Index², revealing how the governmental policies are not always in line with the public opinion. According to this study, one in ten people worldwide would be ready to shelter a refugee in their home. This percentage increases to 29% in the UK and 20% in Greece but, on the other hand, is

as low as 3% in Poland. Support for access to asylum is especially intense in Spain (78% strongly agree), Germany (69% strongly agree) and Greece (64% strongly agree). In general, a large majority of the people, participating in the survey, would like their government to offer refugees more help. The index uncovered the “shameful manner in which governments have played with the lives of people who are trying to escape war and repression, adopting short term policies” – according to Amnesty International’s secretary general, Salil Shetty – but also the disparity of opinions, causing an internal split in the EU, divided on differences in immigration and asylum policies.

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The Mediterranean Sea is, according to a report from the International Organisation for Migration, world’s most dangerous border to cross, and the European responsibility in these deaths is undeniable. The inability to react forcefully before a tragedy that has been lasting for years, the disarray in the discussions on funds and resources for rescue operations in the Mediterranean, the indifference towards every recent cry for help of the Italian and Greek governments, the inhumane conditions in many asylum and detention centres, and the insistence in the use of security arguments, rather than pushing through rules for shared hosting, are parts of this European failure.

1. Eurobarometer presented by the European Comission

2. Refugees Welcome Index, Amnesty International

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