

How to achieve solidarity in Europe on refugee flows

By Susi Dennison

The refugee crisis and its political fallout has become over the last year a direct threat to EU cohesion. And it is not over: another summer of massive inflows, tragedies, and European confusion could break the European Union.

Yet despite the threat, solidarity between member states has proved elusive. European-level solutions are necessary both to address the urgent refugee issue and to demonstrate that the EU can serve its member states and its public in a crisis. But such solutions have not been forthcoming. National responses to what is essentially a European crisis are becoming more and more attractive.

What divides us

The most divisive issues currently involve how to process and integrate the refugees who are already in Europe, and what to do with those who do not qualify for asylum. The EU-Turkey deal, intended to go some way towards answering that question, is now foundering over whether visa liberalisation is a price Europeans are willing to pay for Turkish support. Goodwill is running out on both sides of the Aegean Sea, but also in EU capitals.

The EU needs two things to respond to this situation:

- A strategy for unblocking the impasse over refugees already arrived in the EU. As argued in the recent ECFR paper, "Bear any burden", this means a new system of responsibility sharing for asylum decisions and implementation.
- More political attention to a sustainable longer-term vision for dealing with future refugee flows, in which foreign policy tools and resettlement should play a part.

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Both parts of this broader concept of the response to the refugee crisis are important, but cooperation between member states on the second will be important for generating goodwill on the first. It may be time to look to the long-term strategy to resolve the immediate political impasse within the EU. There is an upcoming opportunity on the international stage for the EU to work towards, in the form of the UN pledging conference to be hosted by US President Barack Obama in September.

The role of resettlement

Creating new legal pathways to the EU will have to be a part of any strategy to reduce spontaneous migrant journeys to the EU. It represents a crucial corollary to efforts to increase external border security. Within the spectrum of legal pathways available – which includes family reunion, and other types of visas to work or study in the EU – resettlement (scaling up the number of refugees taken directly from camps outside the EU) is the easiest way to reach the most vulnerable, to reduce the incentive to make the dangerous journey to Europe, and to facilitate screening for security.

For these reasons, many of the member states that have been reluctant to participate in relocation of migrants within the EU find resettlement a far easier subject to discuss. However, the political climate around the refugee crisis has so far limited actual commitments and implementation of promises on resettlement.

As of May 2016, the European Council reported that actual resettlement within the framework of the July 2015 European Council conclusions on the issue (including from Turkey) was 6,321, against a target of 22,504.

The case for “internationalising” resettlement

The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) has called for a global initiative to resettle 10 percent of the five million Syrian refugees – around 500,000 people. The ambition of the Obama-hosted UN pledging conference in September is to double the number of resettlement (or other forms of legal admission) places pledged for refugees worldwide. Against these targets, the EU’s current commitments are insufficient.

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Simply calling for more help from the international community for the EU in handling the refugee crisis, as European Council President Donald Tusk did at the G7 in May, is unlikely to bear fruit. In fact, the EU is not bearing the brunt of refugee challenge in terms of numbers. UNHCR estimates that developing countries host 86 percent of the world's refugees. Consequently, other countries and regions are likely to want to see that the EU is doing its maximum before signing up to a global initiative.

The EU has always been a central humanitarian force at the UN. In the wake of disappointing European engagement at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, half-hearted participation in the September pledging conference would underline a disturbing trend in EU commitments on this front. The EU's current buck-passing approach both internally and with neighbouring countries such as Turkey is already having an impact globally. Kenya's announcement in May that it plans to close the Dadaab camp, and send over 300,000 refugees back to their – often conflict-ridden – countries of origin, is perhaps the first example.

The risk of a race to the bottom in terms of international support is real.

How to get there: The road to the September summit

To avoid this outcome and to make the UN pledging conference effective as a means of decreasing EU arrivals, the EU needs a large and credible proposal of what it is willing to give on resettlement.

A group of EU member states comprising France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom could agree and negotiate with partner member states an EU contribution to this goal, leading by example in making increased national commitments themselves. Groundwork within the EU ahead of the summer break would enable EU diplomats at the UN to enter the pre-Summit discussions in September in an influential way with a solid, worked-up deal on the table, showing that the EU is pulling its weight on what is essentially a neighbourhood issue.

It is far better in the current environment for the EU to be on the front foot. If the September relocation quotas "imposed" by Brussels and Berlin were rejected by member states, what chance would there be of implementing pledges made in a deal brokered by the US, even further from the national contexts?

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