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‘Africa does not need even more emigration to Europe’

Philosopher Julian Nida-Rümelin discusses solidarity, migration and the ethics of a more just world order

Read this interview in German or Russian.

In recent weeks, Germany witnessed a heated debate on migration which almost brought down the grand coalition government. While much of the attention focused on a dispute between Interior Minister Horst Seehofer and Chancellor Angela Merkel (who belong to different parties that form a political union), the Social Democrats (SPD) presented their own five-point plan to tackle the migration challenge.

We talked to philosopher and social democrat Julian Nida-Rümelin, who published a book on the ethics of migration in 2016, about the possibility of an ethical, yet realistic migration policy.

You have described the migration problem as a ‘litmus test for humanity’. How can progressive forces manage to bridge the gap between responsible policy and humanitarian considerations?

Social democracy in Europe has got into a difficult situation with regard to the migration issue: its voters, more so than those of liberal or conservative parties, expect a strong, protective state that guarantees education and social security. These voters do not trust the global finance and product markets, nor the global labour markets. Their solidarity with people in need therefore reaches its limits when society’s internal cohesion seems at risk and the state appears helpless.

The SPD’s Italian sister party, the Partito Democratico, had brilliant election results just a few years ago and has recently shrunk by around half. Election analysis showed that the party’s results were best in the districts with a high average income. The lower the average earnings, the worse the results were. I have always believed that only a policy which reaches beyond the classic social democratic clientele can succeed today, but only when it does not deter its base.

From the Trump election in the US, we are familiar with the pattern of losing one section of the voters from among the working classes and skilled workers to conservatives and right-wing populists. The migration issue and globalisation in general play a central role here. Progressive forces have to take seriously again the desire for connection and reliability, for social security and governmental responsibility and the role of nation states in achieving social balance and general solidarity.

How can we evaluate migration on the basis of justice? How can a reasonable migration regime help contribute to a more just world order?

As a matter of fact, this seems to me to be the most important and most often overlooked question. Many of those who come to Germany want to work here for very understandable reasons, because they see no prospects for themselves or their families in their home countries. We should have created a legal immigration option many years ago for these people. Merkel's party, the Christian Democratic Union, blocked this. Now, hopefully the government will start working on this, at the instigation of the Social Democrats. However, this must absolutely be combined with measures against brain drain and with compensation for the migrants' countries of origin. It's not acceptable that a rich country solves its skills shortage by exacerbating the shortage in the countries of origin.

Most importantly, however, 720 million people worldwide are chronically malnourished, a third of the world's population lives in extreme suffering, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet none of these people come to us via the routes organised by smugglers, because they do not have the necessary means. Humanity and solidarity require us to help these people. With just a tiny fraction of gross world product, between 0.5 and 1 per cent, we could eliminate hunger and extreme absolute poverty, defined as a purchasing power of less than 2 dollars a day. Africa, our neighbouring continent, needs fair economic cooperation with Europe, access to the EU agricultural market, joint ventures, infrastructure, foreign investment, new forms of development cooperation and training centres, not more emigration to Europe.

What might that look like specifically?

In my book about the ethics of migration, which was published in 2016, I articulated seven premises on which migration policy should be based. First, design migration policy in such a way that it contributes to a more humane and just world. Second, design internal

migration policy, that of the host societies, in such a way that immigration is perceived as an enrichment rather than a threat. Third, decisions on migration policy must be compatible with the collective right to self-determination of the citizens of that country.

Fourth, migration policy should be designed in such a way that it does not worsen social inequality in the host country or jeopardise the structures of social balance – the welfare state – and in a way that it can be rightly accepted across all social groups. If this is not the case, migration policy can facilitate right-wing populist and nationalist forces, which, if strengthened, can eventually threaten democracy as a whole. Fifth, migration policy in general, but specifically that which is focussed on economic and labour migration, has to compensate fully for the resulting disadvantages faced by the regions of origin.

Sixth, according to all available data, migration is largely ineffective, and even in most cases counterproductive in comparison to other measures in combating world suffering and alleviating the inequality between the global north and the global south, between the economically developed and the less economically developed regions. That's why the capacity of global society for solidarity should not be predominantly connected to transcontinental migration, but should be used instead for generous transfer payments to the suffering regions and in particular for building a more just global economic order. And finally seventh, do not demand from migration policy anything that you won't accept in your own social surroundings, and practice in your social surroundings what you expect from migration policy.

What role should the concept of borders have in this context? Are borders, from a social democratic perspective, bastions against globalisation or barriers to achieving a more ethically acceptable world?

I see myself as a republican cosmopolitan. I am concerned with the necessary conditions to form a more just world, politically and socially. This requires multilateral cooperation, global political institutions and a vibrant EU that shows solidarity, but it also needs well-functioning nation states and local authorities. Borders are indispensable for this. Borders that secure the freedom of each individual person in the form of individual rights protected by the state, but also national borders, which prevent unregulated migration. Without borders neither individuals nor nations can function.

After weeks of internal debate on immigration in the Christian Democratic Union, Germany's Social Democrats have now expressed their own views on the migration challenge in a five-point plan. Is this

plan heading in the right direction?

Yes, I fully agree with each of these five points.



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