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Getting down from the ideological trees

Countries in Europe need to work together on refugee policy. They simply need to divide up their responsibilities

Read this article in German.

There are politicians who try to find solutions, and others that don't. Anyone following the debates in the German parliament since the 2017 federal election will know that the parliament is divided between the constructive and the destructive, much more than between left-wing and right-wing. I might have different views than my colleague from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).But she is focused on finding solutions. Solutions other than my own, but still solutions at the end of the day. By contrast, the right-wing AfD party is acting like a petulant child, who have things going so well for them that they have now decided to cross their arms and just say no to everything.

Truth be told, things are easy for the destructive forces in Europe, because the constructive forces are falling so far behind in coming up with something that would actually be achievable. The destructive forces are nurtured by politicians who, travelling from summit to summit, cannot go beyond trading insults and admitting failure.

Europe is suffering from Seehofer Syndrome. Named after the German Interior Minister and opponent of Chancellor Angela Merkel's refugee policy, the condition affects politicians who are under the illusion that we can just put our feet up, instead of looking at the big picture and taking action. Politicians suffering from Seehofer Syndrome are chasing themselves and other people up ideological trees, where they sit atop ranting and raving, refusing to come down.

Germany is failing to agree on a sensible, humane policy to manage and control migration and refugee flows because of debates about upper limits and bringing family members who can claim subsidies. Equally, Europe is failing to agree on a unified distribution policy for refugees, despite debate after debate.

Time to get down from the trees

Ultimately nothing good has come of this. So, now is the time to get down from those ideological trees and get back to the discussion table! People deserve solutions, otherwise we have no-one else to blame for the rise in populism. The whole point of Europe is to deliver what individual countries cannot deliver on their own: peace, prosperity, and especially today, the fight against climate change and a way to manage migration and refugees.

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Just before Christmas, Austria's new chancellor Sebastian Kurz said that the method of distributing migrants across the EU according to fixed quotas is flawed. Speaking to German paper *Bild am Sonntag*, he said that forcing countries to accept migrants is not getting us anywhere. 'If we continue on this path, we will only divide the European Union even further. Member states should be the ones to decide whether to accept any people and, if so, how many.'

But is that realistic? The European Union is a community of values. These shared values and goals are laid down in treaties. The preamble and Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty on European Union talk about respect for human dignity and human rights, solidarity between peoples, the promotion of peace, security and progress, and sustainable development in Europe and the world. Article 78 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union obliges all member states to develop a common asylum policy which underpins the principle of non-refoulement and complies with the Geneva Convention and the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

A common asylum policy

That is what makes sense. We need a common asylum policy, because the underlying challenges can simply not be tackled by individual member states alone. Uniform procedures and conditions to recognise, accept and repatriate arriving refugees are vital if we are to manage the flow of refugees. But what matters the most is effective protection for those who need it, coupled with a reasonable attitude from our continent which is in line with our values. Our absolute priority is to protect life. Respect for the dignity of every individual forms the very foundation of Europe.

Reforming and developing the common asylum policy must therefore be

consistent with our values and respect existing international refugee and human rights conventions, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the guarantee of family reunification. The choice for the countries of Europe is not 'whether' to cooperate on refugee policy. Any country that doesn't wish to cooperate is welcome to leave the community and come back when they realise what a bad idea it was to leave. But when it comes to 'how' they should cooperate, much more imagination and empathy is needed than we have seen so far.

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I don't know any organisation or any business where everyone can do the same thing successfully, regardless of skills, resources and beliefs. In school, biology teachers teach biology and French teachers teach French. Both draw on their own individual expertise but work towards a common goal – to provide a solid education for those under their care and to prepare them to cope on their own once they leave school.

In the EU however, a biology teacher – to continue with the analogy – should supposedly also teach French, regardless of whether they think they can. This is justified in the name of solidarity, as if a biology teacher would show solidarity by covering a French teacher even when the French teacher is not sick. Instead, they would still be better off spending that time preparing for the next biology lesson than teaching French.

Connection and mutual dependence drive solidarity

Solidarity comes from a deep sense of inner connection, as is observed in families. Family members go out of their way to help each other, but in different ways. In Europe too, there is a sense of solidarity, especially when it comes to external threats. People in Europe also build connections, as millions do in cross-border projects or when it comes to twinning towns. Connections, such as those between the people of Germany and France, don't appear out of thin air. They are created piece by piece, to heal the wounds caused by violent disputes.

Another force that drives solidarity is mutual dependence. Everyone pays social contributions because that's the only way to make sure everyone can get the vital services if they need them. After all, everyone knows that they too could find themselves in a situation where they are on their own and suddenly need solidarity.

We in Europe are undoubtedly dependent on each other. But the way we feel this and believe this comes and goes in waves. Maybe it would help to think of the 1.3 billion people in China every now and again, and then think about how someone from Liechtenstein, Austria or the Netherlands feels by contrast. I believe we could try to resolve the stalemate in Europe by viewing migration and other issues as a whole package, which requires everyone to play to their own strengths and preferences to make things work. Some could take in more migrants, while others could do more to protect external borders, for example.

We need to take another look at whether the division of responsibilities amongst member states is possible.

Countries which are not used to high levels of immigration should not be treated in the same way as those that have been used to it for decades. That goes for Germany too and the rigid way that refugees are distributed across the country's federal states. When my father emigrated from Italy to Germany in 1960, there was nobody waiting here for him except his wife. There were no means of support, but there was plenty of prejudice about. Today Italians are a part of Germany. Their children can even become members of parliament. Integration takes time and immigrants must be allowed time to integrate. But we all need more empathy towards each other, even towards those who are sceptical or hostile to immigrants and people displaced from their countries.

Participation has always led to stronger identification and more will to become actively involved in society, more so than through any imposition. This is also the fundamental idea which political scientist Gesine Schwan campaigns for; she wants to organise the arrival of refugees in Europe through municipalities.

Let's also bring this proposal into discussions about family reunification. Why don't we get our fellow citizens together in town halls and community centres with the children or parents left behind, and ask them whether we can count on them to help? I'm sure that many places would offer their help; they still do to this day. But, at the same time, they'll also have a few questions. Where will they all live? Can our kindergardens cope? Where are all the children, elderly people, sick people, disabled people? Why don't we help them first but, instead, watch them get left behind in the war?All valid questions, which we are still figuring out the answers to.

We need to take another look at whether the division of responsibilities amongst member states is possible. Is it possible to provide effective protection of external borders while upholding the right to international protection and offer relief in resettling those seeking protection? The EU would have to review its financial plans accordingly. Dividing up responsibilities would help to break the stalemate in the EU on a common European asylum system, so member states can reach compromises.

What's more, why don't we in Europe agree on ambitious, attractive projects and invite the various levels of authority, civil society, businesses and science community in member states, and even external partners, to provide their input and make these plans a reality? The Commission would be responsible for coordinating and overseeing a fair division of labour and financing. And then Europe would finally be able to deliver again.



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