

LAMPEDUSA, 3 October 2014 - Speech by Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament



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Honourable President of the Chamber of Deputies, Laura Boldrini,
Honourable President of the Portuguese Parliament and acting President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean, Maria De Assuncao Esteves,
Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini,
Honourable Vice Minister of Interior, Filippo Bubbico,
Honourable Chair of the Human Rights Committee of the Senate, Luigi Manconi,
Honourable President of the Sicily Region, Rosario Crocetta,
Honourable Mayor of Lampedusa, Giusy Nicolini,
Your Excellences,
Ladies and gentlemen,

We have come together in Lampedusa, to commemorate last year's tragedy. Three hundred and sixty six men, women and children died only 800 meters off the coast of this island. They came to Europe seeking protection. Hoping for a better life. But all they found was death.

We have come together in Lampedusa, because we cannot stand by and watch idly while more people perish in the Mediterranean. Since then many more have since drowned in the sea. 3000 already this year. Every single life lost off our coasts is a stain on our civilization.

We have come together here on Lampedusa, because we know some things are not right with our asylum and migration policies. But we want to make them right. I can't think of a better place than Lampedusa to mark a turning point in these policies. And I thank the Italian Presidency of the Council and the Portuguese Presidency of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean for organizing today's ceremony and conference.

Allow me to pay tribute to the local authorities, to the citizens, to the civil societies organisations for their courage, for their commitment to human dignity, for saving lives and helping those in need.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I believe that in our search for new asylum and migration policies we should start by being honest: There are no simple answers to a highly complex issue such as migration.

Those who say: "Pull up the draw-bridge. Don't let anybody in" ignore the fact that Europe has always been a continent of emigration - over the centuries Europe has seen its people leave for countries all over the world - and Europe has always been a continent of immigration. People will continue to come to Europe. And we have humanitarian obligations to help people fleeing war and persecution.

Those who say: "Let everyone in" ignore the fact that Europe cannot solve all conflicts around the world and cannot take in everyone wishing to leave from a conflict area.

Proper asylum and migration policies means having rules, and having fair rules means having some limitations and priorities, so that those most in need are protected.

Some local communities in Europe are really struggling with the influx of migrants. They no longer have the capacity to provide all those who arrive with decent living conditions. These communities need our support.

But as we are faced with humanitarian crises in our direct neighbourhood - from Libya to Ukraine; from Gaza to Iraq and Syria - as we witness people fleeing from the terror and brutality of the so-called "Islamic State", we are called upon to do more.

Only four per cent of Syrian refugees have found shelter in Europe whereas Lebanon a country of five million, is hosting one million Syrians. Yes, we can do more. Especially, if we act together and shoulder our responsibilities together.

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 loyalty and solidarity with a fair sharing of responsibilities among all EU countries.

Please allow me to outline three principles our common European policy should be based on.

First we have to create more legal avenues to get to the EU. This is essential to stop desperate people from embarking on the dangerous trip across the Mediterranean in rickety boats; to avoid driving people into the hands of criminal traffickers, trying to make money off other people's misery.

We should examine ways of giving people the possibility to ask for asylum or protection outside the EU.

Europe also needs a system of legal migration. Most other continents have one, too, like the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or Latin American countries. A system with clear criteria. To sum up: Europe needs a coherent, predictable approach to asylum and migration.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The second principle is solidarity. When people are dying right in front of our eyes surely human decency demands that we put forth our hand to save them.

But it is simply not fair to let the countries who border the Mediterranean deal with rescue operations on their own. After all, the management of the EU's outer borders is a common European responsibility, not a Maltese, Greek, Cypriot, Spanish or Italian issue.

And the task is growing: according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees 130.000 people have arrived to Europe by sea so far - that is double the number in 2013.

Yet, we are only starting to develop the right tools: to make sure that all countries immediately share information and that rescue operations have sufficient means and equipment and apply the same rules.

Italy's "Mare Nostrum", put in place after the Lampedusa tragedy, is an inspiration. Its patrolling has saved tens of thousands of lives. The Commission and FRONTEX are now setting up a European-scale response, Operation "Triton".

However the success of Triton will depend on the budgetary and operational resources – including aircraft and patrol vessels - the Union and the Member States are willing to volunteer to it.

The European Parliament will keep a watchful eye to make sure that Triton will have sufficient resources and fully respects fundamental rights.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have come together in Lampedusa to prevent more people from dying. But our responsibility does not stop here. We also have a responsibility towards those who survive.

155 people survived last year's tragedy of Lampedusa. But no one ever talks about them. Yesterday I met with some of the survivors and I was moved by their horrible experience and I told them how shameful we felt and still feel.

Most of these 155 survivors - almost all of them refugees from Eritrea who had left their home-country for similar reasons - are now scattered across Europe. Some have been granted asylum.

Some are allowed to remain temporarily for humanitarian reasons. Others have been deported.

In many cases it was pure chance where the refugees ended up. But we cannot leave the status and the rights of individuals to chance. Or worse: again to traffickers. That is absurd. That is not humane.

Clearly, we have to find a way to treat refugees fairly, decently and equally no matter where they end up in Europe. It is crucial to have the same procedural guarantees through the Union.

Clearly, we also have to find a fair sharing of responsibilities in a spirit of European solidarity. Last year an unprecedented 435.000 asylum applications were received by member states.

Due to the political turmoil in our neighbourhood these numbers are likely to increase. It's not fair that a small minority of member states is taking on the vast majority of refugees in the EU and is making concrete efforts on resettlement.

On the other hand, if you compare 507 million Europeans to this figure of refugees, it becomes manageable.

Recently, we have discussed within the European Parliament the intra-EU-relocation of asylum seekers as a concrete form of solidarity between member states. We believe this should be explored further.

To sum up the second principle: solidarity among EU member states is paramount. Both when it comes to countries receiving the greatest numbers of asylum seekers, and countries hosting the greatest number of refugees.

The third principle is that 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 European Parliament has also supported resettlement from third countries as a humanitarian measure.

The designated High Representative - and I am glad that you are here with us today Federica - will have a fundamental role to play in integrating migration in the overall EU foreign policy approach to our Southern neighbourhood.

The European Parliament believes that the EU must better connect migration, humanitarian aid, development and security issues and streamline funding. Too often our sectorial policies undermine one another instead of reinforcing each other.

Ladies and gentlemen,

it is a good sign that new Commission President Jean Claude Juncker has named migration as one of his political priorities.

I am hopeful that the new Commission will indeed put migration where it should belong: on the top of its in-tray.

Let me assure you, in the on-going debate about our asylum and migration policies, the European Parliament will be the voice of solidarity.

We will work constructively towards policies that are both humane and realistic. And we will not stop until no more lives are lost in the Mediterranean. Every life counts.

Thank you for your attention.

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