

INTERVIEW

Enrico Letta: “There is no European spirit when it comes to the issue of migration”

By [Laurent Joffrin](#) , [Tonino Serafini](#) and [Célian Macé](#) — 22 January 2018 at 19:36



Enrico Letta, 12 January in Paris. Photo Martin Colombet. Hans Lucas for Libération

The former Italian Prime Minister, who launched sea rescue operations in 2013, is calling for the European Union to move forward on the migration issue. He recommends a “new courageous attitude”.

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Italian Prime Minister from April 2013 to February 2014, Enrico Letta is currently Dean of the Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA) at Sciences-Po and President of the Jacques Delors Institute. A committed European, he set up the “Mare Nostrum” operation in October 2013 to rescue refugees in the Mediterranean. He is calling for the European Union to make migration a priority issue. A theme which he also discusses in *Faire l’Europe dans un monde de brutes* (Fayard, 2017), written with Sébastien Maillard, Director of the Institute.

Everywhere in Europe, States are taking measures to restrict the arrival of migrants. In France, a contested bill will be presented to the Parliament in February. Does this inward-looking attitude worry you?

Things have changed significantly in Europe in the last five years. In October 2013, more than 600 people died when two vessels sank off Lampedusa and between Sicily and Malta, sparking great upset. These dramas opened up a window of opportunity to take action and enabled the government, of which I was leader, to launch Mare Nostrum, an operation which saved 100,000 people in the Mediterranean. Over the last five years in Italy, we have gone from this large-scale humanitarian operation to agreements with Libyan militias who undertake violent acts to prevent migrants from reaching Europe. Public opinion has become tense.

In 2011-2012, polls conducted in Italy revealed that migration was considered a priority by only 2% of people. Today, it is the leading concern for 35% of citizens polled!

Images of the “jungle” in Calais, of Lampedusa, of the assaults in Cologne, have had a major impact. People feel that States have lost control of the migration issue. Extremist parties are having a field day. They have come to power in Austria, and have won many seats at the German Bundestag. Brexit won over in the UK. The future of the European Union will be shaped by its response to the migration issue.

What can be done to prevent the migration issue from causing the collapse of the EU?

The issue must be considered in the opposite manner: instead of making migration a subject of division, Europe must rather use the issue to move its construction forward. It really is THE subject for which Europe must play a greater role. The First Vice-President of the European Commission should be the EU’s “Migration Correspondent”.

Let us show the public that the refugee situation is not out of control. Whatever it takes, we need a new courageous attitude with regard to migration. The equivalent of what the President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, did in 2012 for the economic and financial crisis, after four years of hesitation and buck-passing. A similar moment is needed in response to the refugee crisis. Five years ago, if we had organised things, if we had made humanitarian corridors based on the model recently created and funded by the Sant’Egidio community [*Editor’s note: an NGO close to the Vatican*] and the Waldensian Church [*a small protestant movement in the North of Italy*] – which concerned 1000 refugees -, we would not have given Europeans this impression of chaos with one million refugees on the Balkan route.

We know, however, that 90% of illegal migrants arrive in Europe by plane, with tourist visas. Yet it is the migrants who arrive on our shores after crossing the sea who spark emotion. Boats give an impression of invasion.

The more military Operation Sophia replaced Mare Nostrum in the Mediterranean. Has it proved satisfactory?

When Mare Nostrum was blocked for political and electoral reasons (it was insinuated in Italy that the operation created an appeal to migrants), the arrivals continued. Even today, I am criticised by Italian populist parties who label me as “*the one who invited the migrants*”. Mare Nostrum being pulled was a disaster. There was nothing else in place. Sophia is something, but it is insufficient. I am

calling for a “Sophia++”. We are the wealthiest continent on the planet, so we can provide European funding for sea rescue operations. We must do this, no excuses. European values are at stake.

What must be changed within the EU with regard to the reception of refugees?

I oppose the key principle of the Dublin Regulation which states that refugees must submit their asylum application in the first country by which they enter the EU. The countries of arrival [*Editor’s note: Italy, Greece*] are thereby saddled with the responsibility of the migrants. Yet migrants do not wish to stay in these countries; they want to travel north.

This imbalance dictated by geography is a source of disagreement between States. Countries in the north criticise countries in the south for not doing their job to restrict migrants. Southern countries decry that northern countries are shirking their responsibilities and pushing them on to them.

My experience as Prime Minister is full of bitterness on this issue. When the Lampedusa sinking occurred, I sought European solidarity to set up Mare Nostrum. I was told that it was “*an Italian problem*”. I told our European partners: “*If you leave me to face this issue alone, you will also suffer the consequences*”. The problem did of course become European when refugees opened the Balkan route.

What would be an alternative to the Dublin Regulation?

We must first of all adopt a system which gives migrants the choice of country in which they wish to apply for asylum. This choice would be based on family reasons: “*I want to go to such a country because my brother, a cousin, an uncle already lives there*”. Those who do not have family in a country would be distributed fairly across Member States. Then we have the issue of unaccompanied minors. A European task force must be created to deal with this aspect. Lastly, strict checks must be in place to ensure that those entering the EU do not have links to terrorist organisations.

EU Member States talk about hosting refugees but never about economic migrants...

These are two separate issues. One of the reasons why Europe has failed in this respect is that it has unsuccessfully made the distinction. At the end of the first migration wave in Germany in 2015, people spoke about Syrians, but in practice, there were also many Kosovars, Albanians, Moldovans, who were not entitled to asylum. This ultimately made the system break down.

The distinction is also important for political reasons. Half of the refugees who arrived in Europe in the last three years are there due to the West's failed wars: Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. We understand Europe's and the West's responsibility to migrants coming from these countries.

What can be done about migrants who apply for asylum but are rejected?

They must naturally be treated as economic migrants. The real problem is that there are only two ways to access Europe: asylum or illegal entry. All migrants attempt to enter as asylum seekers, and become illegal immigrants if their applications are rejected.

Are you calling for a third avenue, of legal access for economic migrants?

Absolutely. With quotas. As regards the issue of economic migrants, I have always championed a Canadian-style policy, namely that visas are issued according to a nationality distribution system. In Canada, the idea is to select a great number of countries of origin, but with small quotas, which brings about improved integration.

Would these quotas be calculated in accordance with the economic demand in host countries?

This would have to be debated by Member States. Unfortunately, Europe is not ready for this. Rather, it is governed by fear. Such considerations must be regarded in the medium or long term yet must be kept in mind. If in the next five years the EU has not come to a clear decision on these issues, anti-migrant populism will win.

Most Eastern European Member States refuse to host any migrants. To move forward with a European immigration policy, will this require a two-speed EU?

We have realised that while we thought that the European spirit exists, it does not. On these issues, East and West, North and South do not think in the same way. We have pretended that this is not the case for fifteen years. The quota system was the wake-up call. When I saw how Poland supported Hungary in its refusal to host migrants, I was shocked: legally, it claimed the legitimacy of defending “*ethnic homogeneity*”. None of Europe’s founding countries would have ever imagined such an argument being put forward!

This goes further than a mere political dispute... There will naturally be a two-speed Europe. We cannot go on like this. We must convey the idea that Europe is not a solidarity supermarket, in which European structural funds can be used, while leaving the rest.

There is a second subject that has been completely underestimated: the weight of the past. The resettlement quota system was clumsily managed. In Eastern Europe, it was perceived in public opinion to echo the rhetoric of Moscow during the Soviet period, when they were obliged to host Ukrainians, Siberians, etc. It was easy for populist parties to say “*Brussels is like Moscow*”.

France has started to install hotspots in Niger and Chad to pre-assess the asylum applications of the most vulnerable refugees listed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Are you in favour of this move?

This cooperation with third countries, which prevents refugees from undertaking a dangerous journey, must become a European policy. Yet all this can only work if there are two parallel access routes: asylum and economic visa applications. Otherwise, only the illegal access avenue remains, which is specifically the avenue which stirs up negative public opinion.

To restrict migrants, Europeans are negotiating agreements with third countries, such as Turkey or some African nations. What is your opinion of this?

I was very critical of the agreement with Ankara. The Turkish agreement is a case study in what not to do. We have struck deals with persons who should be shut out from managing a humanitarian crisis.

Can the juxtaposed controls which entrust France with the task of managing the entry of migrants in the United Kingdom continue after Brexit?

The natural consequence of Brexit will be a “change of border”. The British will once again be responsible for these checks. They must understand that leaving the EU has repercussions. This should be made clear, otherwise we are giving credit to the idea that the EU is a shop which can be entered or left according to one’s interests. I think that the British have committed their greatest mistake of this century.

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