

BLOG POST

THE EUROPEAN MIGRATION POLICY: ALL ABOUT THE BEGINNINGS

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On 10 September, the President-elect of the European Commission presented the new distribution of portfolios among the 27 new Commissioners. Hearings of the Commissioners-designate will be held in the European Parliament. Upon the announcement, the press focused on a controversial move in this challenging exercise, which combines 6 priorities, 8 Vice-Presidents including 3 Executive Vice-Presidents, 4 political leanings, and of course 27 national appetites. Was it unfortunate to entrust Margaritis Schinas from Greece with leading a group of Commissioners tasked with “protecting our European way of life” which includes the implementation of the migration policy? It is difficult to look at this overlap and not see something reminiscent of the most insidious populist discourses which accuse migrants and asylum seekers of threatening European security and way of life.

As is often the case, the controversial overshadows the essential. It feeds on everyday political froth. The most worrying element is not the naming of an ambiguous priority and, despite the thoughtless way it was presented, we can understand that Ursula von der Leyen wanted to express that she has heard the reticence of many Europeans with regard to the lack of an effective EU migration policy. What should give us pause for thought is first of all the vague outline of the announced content of Margaritis Schinas’ responsibilities¹ and secondly the uncertain nature of the duties entrusted to Ylva Johansson², the Commissioner appointed by Sweden who will be directly in charge of implementing the “New Pact for Asylum and Migration” announced during Ursula von der Leyen’s election speech at the European Parliament on 16 July.

The strategic focus of policies intended to protect Europeans’ way of life seems to dilute the efforts to achieve a new migration deal rather than to strengthen them. These policies have been coupled with challenges that are respectable but divergent such as the implementation of a European education area, or the even more incongruous policy to counter hybrid threats. The initial plan announced by the President-elect was stronger. In the protection of ways of life it included compliance with the rule of law, for which the inherent values are very close to those of migration policy. Similarly, it is very unfortunate that the migration strategy is separate from the EU’s external action service led by the High-Representative-designate Josep Borell³.

1. Mission letter to Margaritis Schinas, Vice-President-designate for Protecting our European Way of Life, 10 September 2019.

2. Ibid., European Commission website.

3. “A Union that strives for more, my agenda for Europe”, Ursula von der Leyen, 16 July 2019, p17-19.

The list of tasks entrusted to Ylva Johansson confirms the energetic announcements of the Commission's President-elect. She intends to take ownership of the previous Commission's general approach, which is in many ways more ambitious than the Member States' majority consensus: to look for a new solidarity basis of first-entry countries for the Dublin Regulation, to arrive at effective solutions to solve the disputes which have affected sea rescue operations, to find new sustainable avenues for legal immigration, including humanitarian corridors in the event of emergencies and enhanced cooperation with third countries. It is not clear, however, which political impetus and new rhetoric would reassure European citizens in the long term and overcome the paralysis brought about by populists. Failing this, it remains a catalogue which hangs like a millstone around each European Council's neck.

While the intentions are good, we cannot see a change in method which would generate a shift from crisis management mode to the preparation of a sustainable and credible future.

Will the Commission return to the tradition of European Council strategic meetings which, from Tampere in 1999 to Stockholm in 2010, brought real momentum to the construction of a common European asylum area? In light of the deadlock in which unanimity has failed for the last three years to approve proposals to reform the Dublin Regulation, will the Commission have the courage to launch heightened cooperation in line with the real state of strengths and responsibilities between Member States? Will it take into account the new global circumstances brought about by the Marrakech Accords to build a legal migration relationship on a mutual basis with countries of departure, African nations in particular? Will it accept to consider the new realities of professional mobility to open up new legal immigration avenues?

The Jacques Delors Institute submitted for discussion these new proposals which open up a space between a total rejection of all forms of immigration and the relinquishment of its control⁴. Enrico Letta, its President, has just reminded in an opinion piece in *La República*⁵ just how the new Italian situation constitutes a real opportunity for such insights. We believe that Margaritis Schinas, one of the most experienced Commissioners, and Ylva Johansson, the former Swedish Labour Minister, have the necessary strengths to take the bull by the horns. Let us hope that the parliamentary hearings and Ursula von der Leyen's desire to support a Europe that strives for more will give them the opportunity to do so.

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4. "For a European policy on asylum, migration and mobility", report No. 116, November 2018.

5. 12 September 2019, for a German-Italian pact in Lampedusa.