

We must reform the EU asylum system if we want to deliver on pledges of solidarity.

At the beginning of January, the Citizens' Protection Minister Christos Papoutsis proposed the construction of a fence along a section of Greece's 206-kilometer land border with Turkey, as way of cracking down on illegal immigration. In the following weeks, the proposal was reiterated, including by the Greek Foreign Minister, Dimitris Droutsas, who announced that the plan would go ahead. The fence is to be made of reinforced barbed wire set in a concrete base and will be erected along the 12.5-kilometer section of Greece's land border with Turkey that does not run along the Evros River.

Since other routes across the Mediterranean were closed, Greece has become the main point of entry of asylum seekers and migrants into Europe: according to the government, it accounts for 90% of all detections of illegal crossings into the EU. The country, a nation of 11 million inhabitants, is estimated to have now about one million irregular migrants, many of whom reached the territory through Turkey.

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The plan has been met with different reactions. Not all member states feel building a fence is a solution. Some consider it will simply drive more immigrants into crossing the Evros river, which fast currents are a threat and causes many migrants to drown.

The European Commission has also expressed reservations about the project which it considers a short term measure not able to address and manage the migratory challenges in a structural way. Indeed, building fences is unlikely to solve the underlying problem of migratory pressures, as migrants try alternative, often more dangerous, routes, and find themselves increasingly in the hands of human smugglers.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Amnesty International and other human rights organizations have also raised serious concerns about this plan. The building of fences is invariably linked with untold hardship and experiences of horrendous violence and grave violations of human rights. The experience of migrants on the move in Mexico is a chilling illustration of this: the wall running along the US-Mexico border, while doing little to deter irregular migrants, has made the journey of migrants headed for the US one of the most dangerous in the world. During the journey, migrants are vulnerable to abuses at the hand of private security guards, migration officials, military, people traffickers and criminal gangs. They face not only detention and deportation, but also extortion, beatings, sexual violence, abduction and murder.

The lesson that borders simply cannot be sealed is not learned. Political instability and huge inequality are key factors encouraging migration from all the regions in the world. Unless, these are tackled the only change a fence will achieve is to the specific routes taken by migrants. For migrants on the move to Europe, routes have been diverted from the strait of Gibraltar, to the Atlantic, the central and eastern Mediterranean Sea and they are now proliferating along Europe's eastern borders.

Measures which indiscriminately block arrivals also bluntly violate the right to asylum. Most of those who come to Greece via Turkey originate from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia and are entitled to protection. The recent influx has exacerbated the situation in Greece, where – despite ongoing reform efforts – there is still not a functioning asylum system and many thousands of asylum seekers are living in limbo. In September 2010, UNHCR described the situation facing those seeking international protection in Greece as a “humanitarian crisis”.

Trying to keep asylum seekers on the other side of the border with Turkey is neither viable nor lawful. The members of the EU are building a common asylum space and should share responsibility for those seeking asylum in Europe. Instead, the opposite is true: they are sending asylum seekers back to Greece, the country which under the so-called Dublin arrangements, is deemed responsible for their entry into the EU territory and can be requested to deal with their asylum applications. Last year, there have been about 7,000 requests to Greece by the other European states to take back asylum seekers. Many hundreds have been physically transferred, including an Afghan national, who as a consequence suffered inhuman detention conditions and ill-treatment, as well as a distinct risk of being returned to his country where he would face persecution. His became a test case before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (*M.S.S. v Belgium and Greece*) which was to decide whether returning asylum seekers to Greece, despite the well-known deficiencies of the Greek asylum system, was compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. On 21 January 2011, the Court delivered a landmark ruling vindicating asylum seekers and sending a clear signal that all EU member states should immediately stop sending people back to Greece. The ruling will have a lasting impact by enhancing the protection of asylum-seekers in the EU. It exposes member states’ hypocrisy in their common policies on immigration and asylum, where prevailing

self-interests make the human rights of migrants and asylum seekers expendable, and the so-often proclaimed solidarity a hollow word.

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A year on, did the EU and the world learn from the mistakes of Copenhagen?

A few weeks after the end of the 16th United Nations Conference of the Parties held at Cancun, Mexico, to agree on the future of global climate governance post-Kyoto as well as on specific measures to protect the planet against destructive climate change, the outcome is still provoking opposed reactions among the various stakeholders.

While trust in the United Nations process and constructive dialogue between developed and developing countries is being slowly restored following the failure of Copenhagen, essential, outstanding decisions remain to be taken and have been postponed until the next Conference to be held in Durban, South Africa, in December 2011.

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The balance of power highlighted at Copenhagen was confirmed at Cancun, with the ever more increasing power of emerging countries such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa – coordinating their respective positions within the so called BASIC group – and the rise of the developing countries’ voice at the negotiations table.

But what can be said about the European Union? When compared to the Copenhagen Conference, the 27 member states were at Cancun more unified and at last speaking with one voice. One might say this was due to the fact that, in comparison with Copenhagen, fewer heads of state and government participated themselves in the conference at Cancun, which meant that there were fewer national ambitions to satisfy. Some others might say that the Lisbon Treaty and the new high level figures representing the EU internationally had a lot to do with it. It is at least what I was hoping last year: that the EU would seize the opportunity offered by the Lisbon Treaty to be unified and facilitate the international climate negotiations by adopting the greenest line and promoting it.

Since Copenhagen however, no major progress can be noted even though climate change in Europe remained on the agenda, albeit in a less prominent role than the pre-financial crisis years. The EU has been discussing whether to unilaterally increase its emissions reduction target from 20 to 30% by 2020 compared to its 1990 level and whether to adopt an EU-wide carbon tax. If adopted, this could potentially help the EU not only become greener domestically but also gain credibility internationally.

The EU, although presenting itself as a “bridge builder” during the international negotiations, seems however not to be less or more important than other countries. Is it such a bad thing? Should we dream of more power and influence?

The real issue behind the climate debate is about the poorest countries being the most vulnerable and less equipped to climate change. If poor countries are increasing their influence on the international climate scene, this then can't be so bad. The climate debate is also about cooperation and solidarity, as opposed to competition. Competition increases tensions and is bound to make the negotiations fail, as we have already been the

witness. Equality among the Parties, if at all feasible, should therefore be preferred.

The European Union aims among others to represent the voice of its citizens on the international scene and promote values of peace, democracy and solidarity. The climate change scene is ideal for this.

Estelle Rouhaud

Redefining the European Union post Common Agricultural Policy.

In UK/EU terms the beginning of a new year started with one of the age old debates - that of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Following the announcement in November 2010 that the EU Commission was outlining negotiations for a forward looking CAP after 2013, discussion has once again been raised about the CAP's strengths/weaknesses and the role it should play in the EU's future plans.

At the time the EU Agricultural & Rural Development Commissioner, Dacian Cioloș, spoke of creating a "greener, fairer, more efficient and more effective" CAP that would help to make it more competitive and responsive towards greater sustainable growth in the EU. While I commend the Commissioner for looking to design a policy which is more understandable, and one which highlights the benefits of the CAP better to the general public, as Labour supporter I cannot help but feel a deep sigh brewing as I listen to yet another EU Commissioner talk about CAP reform.

With a UK government which is so obviously divided over the EU it is shame that supporters of the EU here in the UK are forced to defend the great success of the CAP in the wake of continued attack from the Conservative Party when the CAP is actually one area where most progressives see a real need for change.

A blueprint that identifies viable food production, the sustainable management of

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natural resources and climate action while maintaining the territorial balance and diversity of rural areas as the three principle objectives of a future CAP is all very positive, but I believe these 'reforms' highlight the EU's continued inability to really change and adjust to an ever-evolving international scene.

As budget constraints weigh heavily on the EU national governments, it cannot be productive or progressive for over 40% of the EU's budget to be allocated to the CAP. The success of the CAP is for all to see - the citizens of the EU no longer realise, or fear, the threat of starvation - there are mostly fair standards for farmers, the market has been stabilised and the EU can take pride in how the rest of the world marvels at such an achievement after centuries of war in Europe. But times have changed and so should the EU.

The EU is a force for good, one which allows individual European nation states to work together in order to achieve better results for its citizens than would have otherwise been achieved as separate countries. With that in mind the EU must look to the new challenges of the 21st century. It must look to combat the serious challenges of the global international system rather than simply the European one. International financial regulation, terrorism, international money laundering, better social welfare, human trafficking, and crucially the real threat of climate change should take up more of the EU's focus, and significantly, its budget.

In a time of huge economic structural upheaval due to the global financial crisis, the EU has an opportunity to shift its priorities and lead an international programme that

targets the social and economic insecurities which so many people in the UK, the EU and beyond feel on a daily basis. The EU budget should concentrate on stimulating economic growth and jobs, especially in the developing Eastern European states and not on a 20th century agricultural policy.

The EU must realise its potential to play a greater role in the better management of globalisation so that it can provide its citizens with the tools necessary to compete with China, Brazil and India. Protectionist, small island conservatives continue to search for reasons not to accept the fundamental international changes taking place, but Labour progressives are not helped by an EU budget and a CAP which is stuck in the past. The EU needs a future plan concerning its global engagement together with a CAP moving away from direct subsidies because the work for social justice and equality goes on.

Max Deckers