

HUBERT VÉDRINE

Former French Foreign Minister

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The last to speak is Hubert Védrine, former French Foreign Minister. Perhaps you can respond a little bit to the challenge of what Europe should do. At the moment, Europe does not have a policy on the refugee crisis.

Hubert Védrine, Former French Foreign Minister

The complicated thing is that several extremely serious problems have arisen at once, so this complexity must be analysed. But if we focus only on the interactions between them, progress cannot be made because these are also separate issues. So, the interaction must be analysed and, operationally, despite everything, the problems must be distinguished from each other. We are supposed to be talking about refugees here, but there is also the issue of better coordination and effectiveness in the fight against terrorism, which overlaps with our topic a little, but does not lie at the heart of the refugee question.

Migratory flows will continue growing worldwide. It is absolutely necessary for the departure countries, the transit countries and the arrival countries to move towards co-management. Much more must be done than what has been achieved so far. The recent EU-Africa meeting in Malta was a first step, but it is not enough. It did not address the refugee issue as such. We could talk about the new diplomatic situation that might be taking shape since the idea of a broad coalition to defeat ISIS was announced. To me, this is the most important moment since the end of the Cold War. I think we managed the end well, but the post-Cold War period has been a failure. So this is a very important time. There are many things to say about this point, but that is not exactly our topic.

On the refugee issue, I think that if extremely clear measures are not taken to distinguish asylum seekers from others, the right to asylum is going to disappear. Care must be taken. If genuine asylum seekers, persecuted for various reasons, or even threatened with death, or fleeing atrocious wars, are lumped together with those fleeing poverty throughout the world, European opinion will turn against all of them. We will not even manage to save the right of asylum! To me, saving the right of asylum requires identifying those who are entitled to it because they are persecuted — not just because there are modern conventions, but also because this is as old as the history of Christianity in Europe and asylum in churches. This is Europe. So if we fail to focus on asylum, even if it is very complicated, because all the problems are coming at the same time, there is a real threat to the right of asylum.

Appealing to generosity is not enough for the right of asylum. Generosity is possible on the human level, because what these people are going through is appalling and the emotion is immense, but it is not a sufficient response. Look at how European public opinion has shifted, for example in Germany: how quickly Mrs. Merkel was praised, and now she is already on the defensive. Look at the history of walls. It is very easy to criticise walls. There have always been walls throughout recorded history. It is not true that they serve no purpose. The Great Wall of China kept out the Mongols and others for centuries, although that did not last forever. In any case, there is no point in criticising the transit countries for restoring border controls because external controls do not work. This brings us to Schengen.

To me, the first step in saving the right of asylum is to reassure Europeans by telling them that when we signed the Schengen Agreement, in an upbeat mood in 1985 and later, controls were obviously transferred to the Schengen zone's outer borders. But that was a very idealistic period in Europe, and a no-borders ideology, "sans-frontiérisme" in French has reigned for a long time. Freedom of interior movement was considered much more important than external controls. That would be a nice, wonderful, remarkable idea if the world were generally a peaceful place. But when we are confronted with what has been happening in recent years, it no longer works. The peoples of Europe, the people in the arrival countries, the destination countries, think that everything in the world is actually out of control, that there is no international community, that neither deregulated financial flows nor migratory flows, etc. are under control. People are reacting to that and they are reacting because they want to protect themselves. At first this was considered

unmentionable, the return of the far right, the dark years, etc. and it was thought that these magic formulas would suffice to take the wind out of the extremists' sails. But that is not enough because it is the overwhelming majority of Europeans who are worried, not the extremists.

So I think the first step must be restoring, or creating, the Schengen zone's external borders. It is mind-boggling that from the start, we have not had European border guards, a sort of external federal police. It took years to set up the Frontex agency, which in any case lacks sufficient funding. We have not given ourselves the means to tell the difference straight away between asylum seekers and others, so everything is being managed in the confusion of the crisis. We must find a way out of this!

If we do, we can tell Europeans, "You have no right to reject these people, who are truly in danger, and if Europe is incapable of responding generously, when all is said and done, it no longer exists, and its inclination to lecture the rest of the world no longer has any basis." Defensive, aggressive people can be told that only if the ability to control our external borders is demonstrated. To me, restoring controls at Schengen's outer borders is a necessary precondition to maintaining our generosity.

I agree with what Chief Rabbi Korsia said: there are people coming for shelter, but who want to go back home one day. That is not an integration and assimilation issue. They must be able to wait in decent conditions and, in this regard, it is absolutely true, as Kemal Dervis said, that the front-line countries, Turkey, of course, but also Jordan, Lebanon, etc., must receive much more help. Somebody else recalled that this is a global phenomenon. The country with the highest percentage of refugees in the world, I think, is Pakistan, not to mention situations in Africa. This is not just a European issue.

That is why I see a link between restoring normal external border controls and generosity, and I agree with the idea that we must think about a majority vote on this issue, to bring about a decision-making system in Europe that has been lacking until now. But this cannot be done without re-establishing control mechanisms. If the only choice is between closing the borders and generosity, it will not work. All the elements must be brought together, leading us at last to build, in crisis, pain and urgency, a harmonised asylum policy in the Schengen zone. The Dublin Convention must also be amended. Mrs. Merkel had announced that in the beginning. She had to give up on the idea afterwards, but she was right on this point. She announced it too soon, but she also backed up too soon. The Dublin Convention requires the first arrival country to manage everything! Italy, Malta and Greece cannot be asked to do that. It would be an unbearable burden for them.

It is almost impossible for the Greeks to take on the responsibility of controlling Schengen's external borders, not just because of the country's current troubles, but also on account of the islands' geography. They are unmanageable external borders. So Schengen must be rebuilt based on geographical coherence. Some think tanks in the Netherlands are starting to propose a mini-Schengen that they think will be coherent. It would include the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany and Austria, but not France. Granted, it is a Dutch think tank, but this idea could never have been set down in writing before.

One issue keeps coming back: to save the right of asylum in Europe, and saved it must be, the credibility of Schengen's external border controls must be restored.

I would add that in the future, independently of co-managing migratory flows, which affect the whole world, the United States, Mexico, Africa, Australia, etc., unfortunately there will be more refugee crises. Nobody can tell if the world will be peaceful enough that there will no longer be any asylum seekers. That is why it is impossible for Europe to be the only land of asylum in the world. Of course it must remain that. As I said before, if Europe totally renounced the idea of asylum, it would no longer be Europe. But other places in the world must also develop a sustainable asylum policy. Other countries have bravely done it. During the tragedy in Cambodia, there were Southeast Asian countries that hosted people from neighbouring countries for 10 years, sometimes, until they went back home. That did not worry us too much because we were more focused on Europe, but there are countries in the world that have already been confronted with these very serious problems.

Those are my ideas for Europe, but at the same time, they do not concern Europe alone.