

Are the migrants drowned off the coast of Lampedusa a European tragedy?

At a time of crisis for the European project, when we witness various attempts to renationalise powers previously devolved to Brussels, tragedies like the one in Lampedusa can become an opportunity for the EU to reaffirm the principles on which the EU project was initially founded, and claim back a role that has recently been questioned as never before in recent history. Finding an EU answer to the tragedy of Lampedusa is therefore essential not only to avoid more deaths in the Mediterranean, but for the EU itself and its survival as a political project.



Cecilia Malmström (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-849_en.htm), the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, is well aware of this opportunity and is trying to find this solution, but there is no straightforward answer. Tragedies like the one in Lampedusa earlier this month are **no accident** (<http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/nina-perkowski/no-accident-why-have-19142-died-at-europe%E2%80%99s-frontiers>), nor were the 19,142 deaths that have occurred at the EU borders in the past two decades. They are a 'side-effect' of the fortification of EU borders and the closure of legal routes to migration for low-skilled migrants, particularly those non-white and non-Christian.

Increasing the militarisation of the Mediterranean and sending FRONTEX to patrol the coasts from Morocco to Turkey – Commissioner Malmström used a more diplomatic **'from Cyprus to Spain'** (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-864_en.htm?locale=en) to define the scope of the proposed mission - will not terminate the desire for people to leave their countries in search of a better future. On the contrary, it may end up forcing people towards even more dangerous routes. Smuggling is not the cause of migration. It is 'a reaction to borders control', to use **Hein de Haas** (<http://heindehaas.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/smuggling-is-reaction-to-border.html>)' words. Moreover, we should not forget that many boat people are escaping from violence, persecution and war and the risks they are prepared to take are judged against this background, not some abstract health & safety handbook.

Opening up opportunities for legal immigration - temporary, seasonal, long term – and making access to asylum for those escaping persecution possible, would provide a more effective answer.

Poorer countries are doing much more than the EU member states to provide shelter and protection to refugees fleeing persecution from places like Syria or Libya. The number of refugees who have been accepted on resettlement programmes in the EU embarrassingly small if compared to the hundreds of thousands of people hosted in countries like Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Tunisia. What the EU is doing is signing a cheque to warehouse people as far away from its shore as possible. This is based on a narrow interpretation of the obligations deriving from the UN Refugee Conventions and international law. Protection is not only about keeping refugees alive, in a refugee camp somewhere remote. Protection is also about giving people the opportunity to rebuild their lives as autonomous and self-reliant people. Refugees are survivors. Given the opportunity, they will be able to create a new life for themselves. For many who have lost everything, this opportunity can only be found in Europe. Instead, to apply for asylum in the EU is increasingly difficult and often the route is by travelling 'illegally', possibly on a boat like the one that sank in Lampedusa.

Anti-immigration, anti-Islam, anti-EU sentiments are strong in most EU member states, fed by those hoping to gain political capital and power out of the fear of the other. Directing societal anxieties towards the 'other' is a well known tactic in times of crisis such as the one we are living in, this helps to divert attention away from domestic problems and maintain a sense of shared belonging. What is at stake now, however, is who is 'us'? – that is, are we Italians, English, French, Germans or Europeans? - and who 'the other'? Pro-EU politicians, like Commissioner Malmström, struggle to maintain and build forms of solidarity that cross national(ist) borders. By showing EU leadership in searching for ways to avoid such incidents in the future and publicly mourning the deaths of migrants as Europeans (e.g. the **visits** (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-13-799_en.htm) of EU President Barroso and Commissioner Malmström to Lampedusa), the EU commission pro-actively makes Lampedusa a truly European tragedy, claims the incident as a matter of 'home' affairs and strategically projects the boundaries of 'us', as a community of values and solidarity, beyond individual member-states.

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