





COMMENTARY


The ‘European way of life’: stuck between values and reality?

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On 10 September 2019, President-elect Ursula von der Leyen, presented the names and portfolios of her new Commission, which includes several “slightly original and bizarre” job titles¹ such as “An Economy that Works for People” and “Protecting the European Way of Life”.

Especially the last one, attributed to one of the Commission’s Vice- Presidents, raised concerns and gained significant media attention.

As from November, Margaritis Schinas will have the mission to protect our European way of life, which is a rebranding of the Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship portfolio². Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), NGOs and civil society organizations, accuse the Commission of adopting far-right rhetoric and have dubbed it “a fake portfolio”³ and an “insult to European values”⁴.

So how do we define our European way of life and what threatens it so profoundly that a commissioner has been appointed to protect it? With a continent being geographically, linguistically and culturally diverse as Europe, ‘our European way of life’ is very hard to define. Additionally, does the portfolio suggest that migrants do not fit in ‘our way of life’ and that we need protection from external cultures?

Despite several calls for the title to be dropped⁵, Von der Leyen stands with the title. In an op-ed that was published in multiple newspapers, she argued the following: “we should be proud of our European way of life in all of its forms and dimensions and we should constantly preserve, protect and nurture it.”⁶ Likewise, Schinas defended the title with a strong opening statement during his hearing on 3 October.⁷ Yet, there appears to be a great gap between these European values and the sometimes bitter reality of European migration policy.

What is ‘our European way of life’ about?

Margaritis Schinas, member of the New Democratic Party in Greece and previous Chief Spokesman of the European Commission is to run the EU’s policy-making on migration, security, employment and education. According to the portfolio, our European way of life is “built around solidarity, peace of mind and security”, and one of the Commissioner’s responsibilities is to “address and allay legitimate fears and concerns about the impact of irregular migration on our economy and society.”⁸

Moreover, the portfolio requires us to “work more closely together on security, notably on new and emerging threats that cut across borders and policies”⁹. The issue that is causing so much turbulence, is the connection between the portfolio’s name ‘Protecting the European Way of Life’ and a job

¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/commission-job-titles-bizarre-eu-parliament-president-sassoli-von-der-leyen/>

² <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-post-to-protect-european-way-of-life-called-disgusting-reprehensible/a-50378215>

³ <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/news/claude-moraes-%E2%80%98protecting-our-european-way-of-life%E2%80%99-%E2%80%98anachronistic-and-insulting-title%E2%80%99>

⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/outrage-over-protecting-our-european-way-of-life-job-title/>

⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/schinas-puts-up-good-performance-but-meps-want-european-way-of-life-title-ditched/>

⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/von-der-leyen-on-european-way-of-life-we-cant-let-others-take-away-our-language/>

⁷ <https://qz.com/1721178/the-eu-job-for-protecting-our-european-way-of-life-explained/>

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-margaritis-schinas-2019_en.pdf

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-margaritis-schinas-2019_en.pdf

description that links the policy fields of migration and security. To that end, von der Leyen mixes language of border protection, security and migration in the mission letter addressed to Schinas¹⁰. Accordingly, the job description argues to “better link our work on internal and external security” and to “take into account the links between international terrorism and internal security”. She is ultimately being criticised for seemingly constructing a distinction between ‘Europeans’ (and our vaguely described way of life) and the ‘other’, from whom we must protect ourselves, thereby creating a sense of exclusion.

In an attempt to make up for the criticism she clarified her idea on our ‘European way of life’ by posting a tweet¹¹ that included the second Article of the Treaty of Lisbon. According to this Treaty¹², our Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. These values are common to all member states, in a society where pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality prevail.

Schinas also further explained his role during his hearing on 3 October. As follows, he portrayed a union of nations that revolves around human rights, freedom and equality. At its core, being European, he argued, means “protecting the most vulnerable in our societies” and “being open to the world; extending heart and home to those who are less fortunate”. He also acknowledged the controversy caused by the title, saying “I do not by any means tackle lightly the debate that has been triggered by the title given to this work.” But he reassured that his mission is defined by the values laid out in the Lisbon Treaty, as previously stated by Von der Leyen.¹³

Yet, a portfolio that is seemingly all about solidarity, openness and human dignity is overlooking migration and security among other tasks. Reflecting on EU migration policies in recent years, and most notably since the so-called migration crisis in 2015, which placed the topic high on the agenda, Von der Leyen’s and Schinas’ link to these values are contradictory. There appears to be a gap between the above stated values and reality. So, does the creation of this portfolio indicates Europeans are moving towards a way of life where policy makers prioritise European values or will they continue to protect old habits?

A reflection of the EU’s take on migration

In an era of strong geopolitical turbulence, few debates have occupied Europeans more than the “migration crisis”. In many EU member states, identity politics and right-wing nationalism gained momentum and the use of xenophobic language has been on the rise ever since. To this end, migration has been framed and thought of as a threat to our security, values and ‘way of life’.

From being an economic threat at first, ‘outsiders’ were rapidly criminalized and associated with religious terrorism and criminal activity¹⁴. Populist political forces and the mainstream media benefit from public concern regarding migration and do everything to keep it alive. The framing of refugees

¹⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-margaritis-schinas-2019_en.pdf

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1172198617509191680>

¹² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:12007L/TXT&from=EN>

¹³ <https://qz.com/1721178/the-eu-job-for-protecting-our-european-way-of-life-explained/>

¹⁴ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/europe-faces-welcoming-crisis-when-it-comes-to-migrant/>

as a security issue, now more explicit than ever in the newly created portfolio, has been visible for a while now in the EU policy.

Determined to avoid political backlash and to address the immediate challenge of migration, the European Commission (EC) launched a comprehensive European Agenda on Migration in 2015 to promote an inclusive response to all aspects of migration.¹⁵ Building on this Agenda, the 'European Union Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing the root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa (EUTF for Africa) was designed to flexibly respond to different dimensions of crisis situations.¹⁶

The EUTF is the EU's main financial instrument for engagement with Africa and is almost fully funded by Official Development Assistance (ODA)¹⁷. Although it has been recognized that the Fund provides needed support to displaced persons and creates opportunities for development¹⁸, there is increasing concern that it prioritises EU interests and is focused on quick fixes instead of on long term development. Furthermore, by responding to a political sense of emergency to stop irregular migration, some of the projects risk fueling poor governance, encouraging smuggling and violating human rights, as in the case of Libya.¹⁹

To further mobilise action and resources in the EU's external work on managing migration, the EU adopted the New Partnership Framework. Under the framework, the EU sought tailor made partnerships with key third countries to better manage migration flows.²⁰ It further states that "*a mix of positive and negative incentives*" should be used to [...] "*to reward those countries willing to cooperate effectively with the EU on migration management and ensure there are consequences for those who refuse*"²¹.

One of the most controversial partnerships according to this framework, was the EU-Turkey deal²². Both partners agreed that irregular migrants arriving on Greek islands should be returned to Turkey in return for financial assistance and visa liberalization for Turkish citizens²³. However, the basis on which the deal was constructed – that Turkey is a safe country- failed and other parts of the deal - including a safe pathway out of Turkey - have mostly been neglected²⁴.

Instead, refugees have been living in inhumane conditions and both Greece and Turkey have been unable to provide effective protection as required according to international law²⁵. Although the deal was heavily criticized by human rights organisations²⁶, it was praised as a success story by the

¹⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration_en

¹⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/eu-emergency-trust-fund-strategic-orientation-document_en

¹⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/eu-emergency-trust-fund-africa_en.pdf

¹⁸ https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/bp-emergency-for-whom-eutf-africa-migration-151117-en_1.pdf

¹⁹ https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/CONCORD_EUTF_Monitoring_short.pdf?1fdb40&1fdb40

²⁰ https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-2072_en.htm

²¹ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/docs_autres_institutions/commission_europeenne/com/2016/0385/COM_COM\(2016\)0385_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/docs_autres_institutions/commission_europeenne/com/2016/0385/COM_COM(2016)0385_EN.pdf)

²² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/03/the-eu-turkey-deal-europes-year-of-shame/>

²³ file:///C:/Users/Maxime%20VC/Downloads/towards-a-new-policy-on-migration_eu-turkey-statement-action-plan_2019-09-01.pdf

²⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/03/the-eu-turkey-deal-europes-year-of-shame/>

²⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/03/the-eu-turkey-deal-europes-year-of-shame/>

²⁶ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/54850>

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European Commission²⁷. Therefore, a similar idea of cooperation had been established with other partner countries, including Libya, Ethiopia, Niger to name a few.²⁸ In Libya, the EU supported a fragile government with poor governance, and human rights have been endangered while feeding into the detention and smuggling industry²⁹

Some politicians argue that EU migration partnerships with countries like Libya and Turkey are a success³⁰ and have dramatically reduced the number of irregular migrants³¹. Yet, this approach is not without a significant human cost³² and laid bare a far worse crisis at the same time: a crisis of solidarity amongst member states. This becomes visible when you give some perspective to the arrivals in the midst of the so-called 'refugee crisis'. At its height in 2015, around a million refugees and migrants fled to Europe, which presents roughly 0.2 % of EU population.

If one considers other host countries, such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey for instance, it is hard to argue that Europe is the frontline of the world's refugee crisis. Per 1000 inhabitants, Lebanon was leading the list globally and hosted 232 refugees by October 2015, Jordan hosted 87 refugees and Turkey received 21³³. The EU only received 2 refugees per 1000 inhabitants, and has substantially more resources compared to those other countries.

None of this is to argue that the influx of refugees didn't create any issues, but it sure gives some perspective. If there really was a migration crisis, it had very little to do with numbers, and much more with the incapability of EU member states to step up and share responsibility. The lack of solidarity has not been limited to third countries but is also highly visible within our borders. Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic have refused to take part in the European Union's resettlement program for refugees in 2015³⁴ and Hungary, furthermore, approved the "Stop Soros" law which criminalises aid to undocumented asylum-seekers³⁵.

At the same time, Germany opened its gates and accepted more than one million refugees in 2015, during what German Chancellor Angela Merkel described as "extraordinary circumstances". Greece and Italy on the other hand have been left alone and both struggled to cope with the migrant surge. Consequently, refugees have been living in very poor conditions and struggle to ensure respect for procedural safeguards and transparent asylum procedures.

So, where do we go from here? Although migration flows have dropped³⁶, it remains a highly divisive issue in the EU. This year, 2479³⁷ migrant fatalities have been recorded already in the Mediterranean;

²⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_5049

²⁸ https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-1595_en.htm

²⁹ https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/CONCORD_EUTrustFundReport_2018_online.pdf

³⁰ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/44704/Migration:%20the%20EU's%20partnership%20approach%20continues%20to%20deliver

³¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/migratory-pressures/>

³² <https://theglobepost.com/2018/09/08/eu-migrants-libya/>

³³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/10/global-refugee-crisis-by-the-numbers/>

³⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42270239>

³⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/hungary-approves-stop-soros-law-prohibits-resettlement-of-alien-population/>

³⁶ <https://migration.iom.int/europe?type=arrivals>

³⁷ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

still, migrants continue to risk their lives. Turkey, which is currently hosting 3.6 million³⁸ Syrian refugees, is no longer willing to bear the burden alone. The Turkish President Erdogan is even threatening to “open the gates” to Europe³⁹, if it does not receive additional financial assistance for a resettlement plan in northern Syria.

At the same time, Greece has announced⁴⁰ it would restart deportations according to the EU-Turkey agreement, as tensions are rising again. Migration to the politically and economically fragile country has already exceeded last year’s influx⁴¹ and the conditions in Greek refugee camps are worsening and ‘chronically overcrowded’⁴². Turkey’s threat to open its borders could aggravate tensions even further.

How, then, can we think of a sustainable way forward? Reflecting on the EU’s policies on migration in recent years, the EU has been everything but a Union based on tolerance and solidarity with respect for human rights; yet Von der Leyen claims that these are some of the ground principles ‘our way of life’ is based on. While there are fewer migrants arriving irregularly in the region⁴³, anti-migration rhetoric has increased and remains a priority in continental politics. By adopting the language of the far right, Von der Leyen plays a dangerous game and sends mixed messages as to what she and the EU really stand for.

Reconsidering ‘our European way of life’: the way forward

The current EU approach to migration has intrinsically linked migration and security and focused on short-term solutions to long-term problems. The agenda has been driven by domestic member states’ agendas rather than by what is mutually beneficial for both the EU and its partner countries. Essential to this response has been the externalisation of migration controls to partner governments – including the funding to Libya and the deal with Turkey – to keep migrants outside Europe.

This out of sight out of mind approach to migration has failed to prevent migrant’s deaths; resulted in further abuse and reduced access to safe and legal pathways – forcing migrants to the services of smugglers. At the same time, it has also created a crisis of solidarity within EU borders. There is no system in place that allows for a fair distribution of responsibility, which lays at the heart of the bloc’s inability to reform the Dublin Regulation⁴⁴.

As a consequence, Europeans continue to argue with one another over whom should host the asylum-seekers that reach European shores. Additionally, migration has been an election topic for years now with right-wing political candidates rising and anti-migration parties gaining in power. This complicated political context makes it hard to promote a positive approach to migration.

³⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey>

³⁹ <https://euobserver.com/tickers/146227>

⁴⁰ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/18201/new-greek-government-announces-plans-to-tackle-migration>

⁴¹ <https://quillette.com/2019/09/13/greece-tensions-rise-again-as-migrant-crisis-escalates/>

⁴² <https://www.dw.com/en/greeces-moria-fire-exposes-refugee-camp-pushed-to-limit/a-50649770>

⁴³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/migratory-pressures/>

⁴⁴ https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/all_at_sea_europes_crisis_of_solidarity_on_migration.pdf

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Despite the controversy over the title, European values, including those of solidarity; human dignity and freedom have been placed high on the agenda by Schinas. With a freshly elected Parliament and an incoming Commission, there's an opportunity to revise the EU's 'hard security' model on migration and to adopt a long-term approach that is mutually beneficial for both the EU and its partners outside the bloc.

Furthermore, the EU should tackle citizens' socio-economic anxieties about migration in order to make a more human-centered approach politically feasible. Yet, the question remains for now: will European values take centre-stage again or will 'our way of life' remain stuck between values and action?

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