Session 3 – Towards a true European common migration and asylum policy

Background note

According to data released by the United Nations, the global number of international migrants is growing. From 154 million in 1990, the number rose to 175 million in 2000, to more than 230 million in 2013, and, the UN believes, will reach 400 million by 2040.

The findings suggest that countries will find themselves forced to take increasingly extensive measures to deal with the phenomenon.

Nowadays, even people who live in the most impoverished or unstable areas of the world can readily perceive the enormous gap between their own living conditions and the respect for fundamental rights and other privileges of citizenship accorded to people in developed countries with consolidated democracies, such as in Europe.

The worsening tensions and conflicts in many parts of the world, exacerbated by the effects of climate change, are causing ever larger numbers of people to leave their places of origin.

Official figures of the European Commission indicate that Europe's population of over 500 million people includes more than 20 million immigrants from non-EU states (about 4 per cent of the total population of the 27 member states and 9,4% of the 214 million regular migrants in the world). These figures are even more startling if we consider that in 2011 the European Union refused entry to 343,000 would-be immigrants and that 468,500 more were detained after managing to enter irregularly.

The size and complexity of the issues raised by migration demand a holistic management of the phenomenon. Although policies need to be diversified to deal with the discrete problems immigration entails (such as combating organised human traffickers, preventing the exploitation of irregular migrants, saving the lives of migrants at sea, processing asylum applications and meeting the challenges of integration), the overall approach needs to be as unified and as consistent as possible.

Research shows that well-managed migration can have positive effects for the hosting countries: there can be some potential benefits, for example, in relation to

the demographic equilibrium in some European countries, with aging population a lowering birth rate, or in relation to labour market imbalances.

Conversely, the poor management of migration (or the lack of structured policies) can cause or aggravate problems such as social tensions (intolerance, racism and xenophobia), disorderly urban expansion as well as crime.

The European Union has adopted the so-called "Global Approach to Migration and Mobility", which establishes four general priorities of equal importance: improving the organisation of legal migration and facilitating mobility; preventing and combating irregular migration and countering human trafficking; strengthening the synergies between migration, mobility and growth; and strengthening international protection systems.

Many of the policies adopted by the EU in recent years broadly follow these guidelines. We can point, for instance, to significant progress that has led to the granting of protections to long-term non-EU residents.

Efforts to protect the fundamental rights of migrants have inspired significant initiatives such as the recent Common European Asylum System.

Other important achievements in this area include the setting up of the Eurosur system, the approval of new rules on the surveillance of maritime borders (which also serves the objective of safeguarding fundamental rights), the partial strengthening of Frontex and the work to strengthen EU policies towards third countries in relation to mobility and migration.

Even so, the overall impression is that the headway made to date has not been enough to ensure an adequate response from the EU not only to humanitarian emergencies caused by the deteriorating socio-political situations in neighbouring countries such as Syria and Libya, but also and more generally to the steady growth in the number of desperate refugees attempting to reach the European Union.

The general consternation caused by a number of, unfortunately not isolated, tragic events has heighted calls for the European Union and all its member states, regardless of their geographical location or proximity to the routes used by immigrants, to make a stronger commitment, not only in financial terms.

It is estimated that over the past fourteen years, more than 23,000 people have lost their lives trying to reach Europe by land or sea. The Mediterranean route is particularly deadly, so much so that over the past 20 years the route to Italy alone has cost the lives of around 20,000 people.

Broad-ranging discussions are now taking place on whether all European member states should accept greater co-responsibility for the care of migrants and asylum-seekers, in accordance with the principles of solidarity and the equitable division of responsibilities enshrined in Article 80 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. Similarly, the application of uniform standards of reception and integration throughout the EU is an issue now under examination.

Recently it has been appointed a European Commissioner with *ad hoc* responsibility in this area.

In the light of these considerations, it seems appropriate to ask the following questions:

- Is the new asylum system effective enough or could the ever-increasing number of applications be processed more effectively by adopting the proposals on the creation of specific facilities in transit countries or in EU reception countries?

- What concrete action can be taken to share the task of managing immigration flows and to increase joint responsibility for conducting rescue operations and managing crises on the borders of the EU, as stipulated in the principles set out in Article 80 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU?

- Are the instruments of the European Union for the economic and social integration of migrants adequate to promote better living conditions and prevent hostility and tensions?

- How might a revamped common foreign policy and more robust European policies for development cooperation respectively prevent or at least achieve a more orderly management of migratory flows from origin countries?