



## European inaction, bad manners and the Mediterranean tragedy

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The ongoing tragedy in the Mediterranean is, without any doubt, the European moral scandal of our times. It is the one issue that in the future will prompt questions about where we were and what we did to stop the thousands of people trying to cross the sea to come to our continent from dying. Books will be written, movies will be made and our children will want answers.

As we know too well from the past, this kind of raising moral questions has a deep as well as a superficial side to it. Many people will take these hard questions very seriously; but there will also be easy answers that will suit most. Some will say that it was a collective failure, that everybody was to blame — which means, in practice, that no one can be blamed.

We can call this the ‘European inaction’ mantra. We can find examples of European inaction everywhere, from the eurozone crisis to youth unemployment, but it is difficult to define what exactly constitutes ‘European inaction’ as a mantra. Is it a failure of the EU institutions (the European Parliament, Commission, Council, Court of Justice)? Is it a failure of all or just some of them? Is it about inaction of European states and governments? Or about inaction of the European citizenry, which, as many people say, does not even fully exist? ‘European inaction’ is rapidly becoming another element of the ‘everybody is at fault, so nobody is at fault’ attitude.

I will argue that such an attitude is wrong in both moral and factual sense. ‘European inaction’ will not explain the refugee situation in the Mediterranean. What does explain it, though, is the inaction of the Member States: French inaction, German inaction, British inaction, Portuguese inaction and so on. I think I am well-equipped to know why this is the case.

I happened to be the European Parliament’s rapporteur for the [European Refugee Fund](#) during my mandate 2009-2014. When I needed to explain what we had to do in order to respond to the plight of the refugees I had a few simple numbers ready to deliver. If the world’s refugee population was in the millions, the group most vulnerable totalled around 200,000 at that time. According to the UNHCR, these were those refugees that could neither go back to their homes nor stay where they were. My mission was to establish a true European Resettlement Programme that would help the most vulnerable of the vulnerable to start a new life in the EU, i.e. those people that are facing a life or death risk; women and children who have been victims of sexual and physical violence, men and women who have been victims of torture and people with medical conditions that cannot be treated in refugee camps. Some of these refugees end up despairing and risking their lives by crossing the Mediterranean. If we would resettle them at

least we would make sure that people who truly have a right to being relocated in the EU need not drown in the sea.

Some more numbers: the USA tends to resettle 80,000 refugees every year. With other traditional resettlement partners, such as Canada, and new resettlement countries such as Brazil and Chile, the international community solves the cases of about half of the refugee population in need of resettlement every year.

What about the EU? We resettle less than 5,000 refugees every year. Five thousand! My home country, Portugal, resettles the grand total of 30 refugees each year (yes, that's no typo, it is thirty people indeed — some years even less than that).

My numbers may be a bit outdated, but this is still the general framework. My aim at the time was quite modest: I wanted to get the EU to resettle about 20,000 refugees per year, or at least to achieve that number by 2020, which was the goal that NGO's were putting forward at the time. To achieve that goal, we increased the amount of financial help that Member States would receive per each resettled refugee and helped change the Fund's rules in order to make them more focused and simpler to use. The government of Sweden — a country with a long history of resettling refugees — had officially stated that the EU should resettle 100,000 refugees per year, and practically solve the situation of the remaining 'most vulnerable of the vulnerable' that stay ashore in perilous situations every year, some of which are among those risking their lives at the hands of human traffickers when crossing the Mediterranean.

Now comes the part about European inaction. I ended up dealing with six presidencies of the EU: Sweden, Spain, Belgium, Hungary, Poland and, finally, Denmark. With the exception of the first and the last, I never saw any kind of political will towards solving the refugee situation on the part of the governments concerned. The Spanish presidency usually stuck with defending the Council's position because, well, 'that's the Council's position.' I had the dubious pleasure of listening to the Belgian prime minister defend the EU on the grounds that post-war Europe was a continent that 'produced' refugees, while I knew his government had not moved an inch towards closing a simple legislative file that would help refugees in present times. Hungary, itself the target of the first large-scale UNHCR operation in Europe in 1956, never even uttered as much as a word on refugees during its six-month stint as EU Presidency, except when forced by reasons of protocol. And Poland excused itself by saying that France and Germany were really the ones in charge, and that the UK — although it had an opt-out from these policies — was also against the project.

To tell the truth, the Scandinavians behaved themselves particularly well: the Swedes initiated the legislative procedure and the Danes, who in fact had a complete opt-out from such matters and thus would not receive a single euro from the Union for the refugees they resettled, finally helped close the file.

The Poles were right, though. Everybody knew that, each time the file got stuck, the French were never far away, either because they had a presidential election coming (which seemed to be always the case) or because Madame Le Pen was throwing one of her tantrums about too many foreigners being in France already. The Germans decided to interfere in the end of the legislative

procedure by (successfully) blocking article 80TEU on inter-state solidarity from being used as a legal basis. Beware: we sat through very long meetings because Germany and other Member States were against even mentioning the word ‘solidarity’ as a legal basis for refugee policy. And, as the Poles had said, the UK was indeed also against us completing the legislative procedure, even though they had a right to opt out of it at any point.

As I write this, I am aware that I am breaking one of the rules of etiquette in EU institutions: you’re supposed to not mention countries by name nor accuse specific governments of lack of political will. That is considered ‘blaming and shaming’, which is bad manners and is frowned upon as it breaks the ‘omertà’, or code of silence, of the European Council.

I don’t care. With thousands of people dying in the last few years in the waters of the sea where once our civilisation was born, it may be time for some bad manners.

Thus I blame and shame — and so should you. As the European Commission is currently proposing a distribution grid to resettle refugees in EU countries according to specific criteria (GDP, size, population), and as — again — France and other countries are blocking this worthwhile initiative, we should all blame and shame.

The so-called ‘European inaction’ is not *European*: it is French inaction, German inaction, British inaction, Polish inaction — it is Portuguese inaction, too. Governments will defend themselves, and point out how humanitarian they are and how burdened they are by migrants and asylum-seekers. Meanwhile, they are still blocking any real solution to the plight of refugees. And whereas they are usually all too eager to reduce their policies to ‘European rules’, they now discover that refugee quotas are a terrible imposition of non-elected eurocrats, but by the time a new tragedy at sea occurs, they too will talk about ‘European inaction’.

In any case, as with other moral outrages of past eras, this is not ‘everybody’s and nobody’s fault’ after all. It is, quite simply, our dear countries’ elected governments’ fault. And yes, because we elected them, it is maybe our fault too, because they are scared that we, the voters, will punish them for accepting more refugees. But fear of the electorate (or fearing what they think the electorate thinks) does not absolve them. On the contrary, it just makes their lack of moral clarity and their ineptness at collective leadership even more shocking.

Let us, therefore, go ahead and blame and shame. Let us all point our fingers at our governments. It will be considered rude, but maybe it will make them change their course of action.