

Europe must find a united voice on migration Leader,

The Observer Domestic edition · 17 giugno 2018

The plight of Aquarius, the rescue ship carrying 629 migrants, stands as a potent reminder of the dire failings of European migration policy. No matter that the ship carried seven pregnant women and more than a hundred unaccompanied children rescued at sea as they tried to make the dangerous crossing from Libya to Italy. First Italy, then Malta, refused the ship entry to their ports. Eventually, Spain offered to let it dock in Valencia, four days away in harsh sailing conditions. Spain's socialist foreign minister, Josep Borrell, said this was a "symbolic act" to impel more coordinated action from a continent engaged in "ostrich politics". But the sad truth is that since 2015 – the year that the scale of the migration crisis became clear – the European appetite for a common, humanitarian approach to migrant and refugee flows from Africa and the Middle East has only dwindled. The Spanish gesture seems highly unlikely to prompt a desperately needed rethink. In recent years, the thrust of European policy has shifted from improving conditions for those seeking refuge within Europe, to stemming irregular migration flows regardless of the humanitarian cost. The philosophy appears to be that, so long as there are no drowned toddlers washing up on Greek beaches, Europe is discharging its moral and legal duties, regardless of whether they end up dead elsewhere.

As a result, the numbers of people coming across the Mediterranean have dropped dramatically, not because of an easing of the conflicts that drive them to seek sanctuary, but because European leaders have struck unsavoury deals with dictatorial states and repressive regimes to stop people arriving. Europe has channelled cash to Turkey and countries in Africa in exchange for their help in deporting unwanted migrants and preventing people from leaving for Europe.

This has simply shifted the focus, not the scale, of the humanitarian problem – from drownings in the Mediterranean, to exploitation, rape and torture elsewhere. Conditions in Libyan detention camps are appalling, and UN agencies say the Libyan coastguard – funded by the EU to return migrants to its shores – is co-operating with smugglers. Aid money is flowing to some of the most repressive and dictatorial regimes, such as in Sudan, whose abuses are driving the exodus of people in the first place. The millions of Syrian refugees living in countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan face terrible and worsening conditions as a result of cutbacks to UN aid.

This approach is entirely counter-productive: the more Europe focuses on making it less safe for people fleeing war and destruction to cross the Mediterranean, the more they are driven into the hands of criminal smugglers. The European-backed destruction of the wooden boats used by smugglers for the Libya-Italy crossing has simply led to more people attempting to make the journey on even more dangerous rubber dinghies, pushing up the death rate further.

Meanwhile, in Europe, thousands of refugees and migrants are trapped in intolerable conditions in camps on the Greek islands as they wait for their asylum applications to be processed, where there is a huge backlog. There have been no meaningful efforts to reform the Dublin regulation, which says refugees must be processed by the first EU country they set foot in and be sent back there if they move on to other parts of Europe. This has created the preposterous state of affairs in which two of Europe's poorer countries, Italy and Greece, have been left to process the biggest volumes of asylum claims.

Some argue that the Fortress Europe approach, based on preventing people from arriving here in the first place, is the only pragmatic response to the populists who have sought to make hay from the migration issue. But the truth is that in buying into the populist frame of irregular migration flows as a European crisis, mainstream politicians have created the oxygen populists need to thrive.

In Italy, the policy of closing ports to migrant rescue ships did not originate with Matteo Salvini, Italy's new populist interior minister, but with his centre-left predecessor, Marco Minniti. A failure to develop a fair, pan-European system based on resettlement quotas and a commonly funded network of reception centres has fuelled the anger of citizens in southern Europe; it is not surprising that far-right parties have capitalised on it.

Today, Europe remains more divided than ever. The populist nationalist approach, long championed by the Visegrád bloc, is gaining wider traction, with the interior ministers of Austria, Italy and Germany announcing a new "axis" of cooperation on security and immigration. Support for once-fringe ideas, such as asylum processing centres in Africa, is growing; even as Macron has offered to take in some of the Aquarius migrants who dock in Spain, he has reiterated his backing.

This is being talked of as an existential crisis for an increasingly isolated Angela Merkel, whose interior minister has threatened to defy her by introducing controls on Germany's southern border. But – far more than Brexit – it is an existential crisis for the EU itself.

Will Europe continue in its race to the bottom, or will leaders be able to come together to develop a shared, humanitarian approach to migration? The answer will shape the very future of the European project.