

Migration at the G20: Thinking Ahead Without Acting in the Now

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Executive Summary

This year's [motto](#) of the G20 in Hamburg is "shaping an interconnected world", recognising the importance of international cooperation in solving global issues. It is indeed a coordinated global response that is required to best answer the problems that might accompany migration, such as a high flow of asylum seekers embarking on the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea. In 2015, when Europe was struggling to deal with the then refugee crisis, the topic was thoroughly discussed at that year's G20 hosted by Turkey, which was directly involved. This year, in light of the migrant crisis in the Central Mediterranean there was discussion of the topic. However, the Leaders' Communique has not thoroughly addressed the issue. While the leaders have committed to a long-term solution that aims to combat the root causes of migration, they failed to deliver an immediate response, refusing to pursue UN sanctions on human smugglers or promise to offer support to the Italian Government in tackling the crisis. Instead, they reaffirmed a country's sovereign right to control its own borders. This policy brief recommends actions be taken to deliver on these issues.

Another Migrant Crisis

In the last few years terms such as migration, refugee and asylum seeker have dominated the international discourse. Often misused, these terms have been crucial in describing what was a global refugee crisis. Conflict, leading to human rights violations and abuses, has forced millions of people to flee their home countries. Consequently, more than [65.6 million](#) people require assistance. As it stands so far, in 2017, more than [22.5 million](#) people are [refugees](#), that is people that have fled their home because of violence, persecution or war; more than [40.3 million](#) are Internally Displaced People ([IDP](#)), who, like refugees, are on the run, but unlike them have instead sought safety within the borders of their own country. Lastly, [2.8 million](#) people are [asylum-seekers](#), that is those who are awaiting to know whether they will be granted asylum. These are different to [economic migrants](#) who may often come from impoverished countries but are not eligible for asylum because, unlike refugees, they are not fleeing persecution as established under the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. However, they still have the right to claim asylum. Because of this, economic migrants often undertake the same journey with asylum-seekers in the hope of obtaining asylum nonetheless. This results in an even larger flow of

migrants, contributing to the creation of more disorder and further drawn-out processes to concede or refuse asylum in the country of arrival.

This exactly describes what has been happening in the current migrant crisis affecting the Central Mediterranean Sea. So far this year [85,000](#) migrants have arrived from Libya in Italy, [85 per cent](#) of which are economic migrants. The growing flow of migrants, now 20 per cent higher than last year, has heavily burdened Italy, who has declared the situation “unsustainable” and threatened, just a few days before the G20 Hamburg Summit, to [close](#) its ports to foreign boats carrying migrants if other members did not start to share the burden. This crisis has thus fuelled again the “[long-dispute](#)” relating to how the burden of accommodating refugees and migrants is shared by EU members. Clearly the situation has become unbearable and global discussion is required before the situation spirals out of control.

Previous G20 Responses to Migrant Crisis

The topic of migration has not always dominated discussions at the G20 summits. However, it has dominated the meetings in the last few years following the 2015 refugee crisis, when more than a million migrants fleeing conflict, human rights violations and abuses took the hazardous journey through the Eastern Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. As the number of refugees increased and as more started heading towards the north, European countries struggled to respond

to the crisis as they disagreed on a best plan of action and resettlement. Some, like Hungary, restricted their borders; others, like Germany, opened their borders offering asylum to many.

Migration was placed at the top of the agenda of the G20 Turkey. Closing the summit, the [Leaders Communiqué](#) stated that the refugee crisis was a cause for global concern because of the “humanitarian, political, social and economic consequences” that it would have. The leaders called for a collective global response, and for states to “share in the burdens associated with it, including through refugee resettlement, other forms of humanitarian admission, humanitarian aid and efforts to ensure that refugees can access services, education and livelihood opportunities”. Moreover, the leaders committed to political and developmental action in order to stabilise the refugees’ countries of origin so that resettlement is possible. The same commitments of assistance and protection to refugees as well as burden-sharing were emphasised again at the [G20 summit in Hangzhou](#) last year.

Today, EU officials insist that the crisis in Eastern Europe has been [resolved](#). This is because of an [agreement](#) the EU reached with Turkey in March 2016, stipulating, on Europe’s part, that it would reduce the flow of migrants in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea thus also limiting their journey through the Balkans towards Northern Europe. According to the deal, illegal migrants that arrive in Greece, should be sent back to Turkey, on the

premise that the latter should offer a safe place to refugees. At the same time, asylum seekers in Turkey were to be resettled in Europe. [However](#), until now only a little over 3,500 refugees, among the ten million in Turkey, have been resettled and less than 1,000 have been returned to Turkey. Worse still, following border restrictions in the Western Balkan region, with Hungary and Bulgaria adopting tighter border controls, approximately 10,000 refugees and migrants are stranded in Serbia.

Nevertheless, the number of migrants crossing the Eastern Mediterranean Sea has decreased from [1,400 a week to 27](#). Even though still questionable, this has led officials to consider the situation under control.

Yes to Long-Term Action but Unclear on an Emergency Plan

Considering recent events and the numbers of migrants arriving on Italian shores, the issue of migration needed to be discussed so to try and tackle the crisis before it possibly escalates. On the first day of the G20 Hamburg Summit, [Donald Tusk](#) responded to the most recent events during the EU press briefing by calling for “solidarity and cooperation” from the international community. After stating that Europe should work together towards a long-term solution, achievable only by tackling the situation in Africa, Tusk expressed Europe’s solidarity and support for Italy and, most importantly, declared his intention to request that G20 countries take collective action against

migrant smugglers. In this, he revealed his intention to propose that the leaders “pursue UN sanctions against the smugglers”. However, Tusk was quite sceptical that even this bare minimal action could be taken, highlighting the hypocrisy of certain G20 members for potentially not fully supporting such a request. By the end of the summit, the [Leaders’ Declaration](#) confirmed that Tusk had not been mistaken. Indeed, while the leaders have committed to act against human smuggling and trafficking, they have not mentioned Tusk’s proposal. Rejecting such a proposal, which could have been a small step forward in honouring their commitments, puts into question whether the leaders will actually take action on delivering what was stated.

Furthermore, the leaders have also called for “coordinated action” towards states and people that are under “political and financial pressure”, and for the adoption of both an immediate but also durable response. However, it is unclear whether this refers only to the countries from which the refugees originate or also to those southern European countries that receive the high flow of migrants. Moreover, unlike the previous G20 Summit in Turkey, the leaders have not committed to sharing the “migrant burden”, but instead have stressed the importance of ensuring the “sovereign right” of each country to have control over its own borders in respect of their national interest and security. Although this might be the result of a compromise in line with certain countries’ policies, it is still unclear whether it is largely

meaningless or should be concerning. Indeed, if this were also to apply to those countries within Schengen it would suggest migration is a potential threat to national security and could undermine the agreement and its specific characteristic of championing, amongst other things, the free movement of people. Unfortunately, there have already been attempts by the EU's member countries to control their borders. An example is [Austria](#) who just a few days before the summit was intending to deploy its armed forces to block the flow of migrants coming from Italy (not that this is the first time it has done so).

All in all, the leaders' commitment to long-term action in combatting the "root" causes of migration is commendable. However, the failure to take concrete proactive action against migrant smuggling through UN sanctions, as had been proposed, and the absence of a common decision on an immediate and emergency response, are disappointing.

What Now?

All in all, migration once again constitutes an issue that needs a coordinated and considered response. The G20 Leaders Declaration did not do this. Indeed, while the leaders have committed to achieving a durable solution crucial so that refugees can one day return home, and to stopping the flow of migrants, they were not clear on what they will commit in the short run in the face of the increasing flow of migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean. Immediate action needs to be taken to control and avoid

escalation of the issue. In this regard, this policy brief sets out the following recommendations.

Firstly, effective action must be taken to stop human smuggling. This is crucial for various reasons. Indeed, migrant smuggling in Libya has become a [real market](#) where migrants are bought and sold as if they were goods, not human beings. Here, migrants who have already paid a high price for their journey are beaten, their families held for ransom and women often assaulted. All this while they are waiting to board a boat to Europe or be sold again to other smugglers. Therefore, it is crucial to act against human smuggling to protect migrants and their human rights.

Moreover, human smuggling has become a profitable business, only last year it turned over [US\\$1.6 billion](#) in Libya alone. Consequently, smugglers are becoming increasingly powerful and are [aiding](#) terrorists, thus further contributing to Libya's [destabilization](#). Human smuggling needs to be countered to achieve a durable and definite solution in which refugees' resettlement is possible.

Secondly, as also stated in the EU press briefing at the Hamburg Summit, there needs to be support for countries, like Italy in this case, that find themselves receiving a high flow of migrants on their shores. It is easy for leaders to talk about the sovereign right of a state to control its own borders just because geographically

they are not the first European country on the migrant route. These countries should not be left alone to respond, as stated by [Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni](#) at the G20 Summit. Doing so would only further worsen the situation. Indeed, globally the issue has the potential to escalate further and generate another crisis. On a smaller scale, this could potentially damage the European Union as discontent on Italy's part could fuel the current populist wave that has characterized the global political discourse so far.

Now it is summer, the favourable weather will only increase the number of migrants. Action is urgently needed to avoid disorder and an increase in the number of migrant deaths. Failure to do so will only further endanger migrants, increase the smugglers' power and burden Italy.

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