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By failing to help refugees Europe fails itself

George Soros

Most citizens view legal migration positively, but border chaos fuels populism, writes George Soros



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As many as 400,000 people will make dangerous journeys to reach [Europe](#) this year, about half of them fleeing the civil war in Syria or brutal government repression in Eritrea. By the time they reach the west, they will have had to risk their lives twice: once in fleeing their countries, and again in entering ours.

The victims of many previous conflicts have had better luck. After the 1956 Soviet invasion, 200,000 Hungarians fled to Austria and Yugoslavia; within months almost all had been resettled in countries as far flung as the US, Australia, Brazil and Tunisia. A generation later, when war scattered millions in Indochina, the international community resettled 1.3m. In the 1990s, the Balkan conflicts displaced almost 4m people, and again the world helped.

But in the present refugee crisis the [EU has failed](#) to act collectively, leading countries to take matters into their own hands. Hungary is building a fence along its border with Serbia. Frontline states are shirking their obligations under the

European asylum system, for instance by failing to provide adequate reception and asylum processing capacity, thus encouraging them to move elsewhere in the EU. France and Austria have temporarily reinstated passport controls at borders.

After the Refugee Convention was adopted in 1951, Europe served for decades as its moral and operational backbone. No longer. In May, the European Commission proposed a comprehensive agenda on migration that, if implemented, would give Europeans what they seek — a sense of control over migration flows. In most EU countries, citizens view legal migration positively; it is the [chaos at their borders](#) that sends them into the arms of populists.

Yet only two aspects of the commission's agenda received immediate support: a military mission targeting smugglers in the Mediterranean, which launched last month, and a robust effort to return migrants who are found not to qualify for international protection. The rest of the plan, which aimed to save lives and create livelihoods for those unable to go home, came under attack.

The most resisted idea was a mandatory plan to take 40,000 asylum seekers from Greece and Italy to be processed in other member states. In the end, only 32,000 were accepted on a voluntary basis. The impact on most of those countries would be minimal — and they, too, are likely to be beneficiaries of the relocation principle when migration flows shift. A proposal to resettle 20,000 refugees from camps in the Middle East also proved unattainable.

These programmes embody the spirit of shared responsibility that lies at the heart of the EU. If they do not become permanent and mandatory features of the common European asylum system, it will fall apart. If improved, however, the European asylum system could serve as a model for international co-operation on refugee protection.

Europe must make it possible for refugees to apply for asylum in safety. This does not mean offering protection to everyone in need. But those whom Europe does accept should not be forced to risk their lives. In practice, this would entail allowing people to apply for asylum from abroad. Thousands of Syrian refugees with skills needed in Europe — doctors, nurses, construction workers — languish unemployed in Lebanese and Jordanian camps. The EU could allow them to apply for labour visas.

As it pursues one integrated migration and asylum policy, the EU should eliminate the waste and redundancy of 28 parallel systems. There should be a single European asylum and migration agency, for example, that processes asylum applications for the entire union. Eventually, a joint border guard should be established, too.

The EU's migration system must be remade to reflect a more collective and generous spirit — and one that is more faithful to European values.

The writer is chairman of Soros Fund Management and a philanthropist