
BRUSSELS MUST BITE THE BULLET ON A COMMON EU MIGRATION POLICY

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The EU Commission is soon to re-enter the conflict over immigration. Whether it will do so timidly or in a blaze of political courage remains to be seen when it unveils ideas for a European Labour Authority, writes Giles Merritt.

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The EU Commission is soon to re-enter the fray over immigration. Whether it will do so timidly or in a blaze of political courage remains to be seen. In the coming weeks, it is due to unveil its ideas for a European Labour Authority, a powerful new instrument that isnt specifically about migrant labour although its goals clearly include speeding the resettlement of immigrants and helping to find them jobs.

Jean-Claude Juncker, the Commissions president, signalled this initiative almost in an aside when delivering his annual State of the Union speech last September. No details have since emerged to adorn the few bland words that spoke of better managing cross-border situations and promoting the opportunities offered by the European labour market both for businesses and workers alike.

We will have to wait and see what mandate the Commission proposes giving this new body, and what the reactions from EU member states will be. The idea of a new authority could either pour fresh oil on the flames of Brussels unresolved refugee burden-sharing scheme, or if handled adroitly it could help create a new framework for addressing Europes looming migration problem.

Slowly, and often reluctantly, policy planners across Europe are waking to the fact that the rising retirement trend coupled with low fertility means the EUs active workforce of 240 million people will within 25 years be about 30 million fewer.

Thats a huge chunk of missing tax revenues and consumption, as well as an additional healthcare and pensions burden. Increased productivity and more efficient labour markets will help, but the most obvious solution is more immigration.

The commission has for some time been quietly forecasting all this but has refrained from headlining it for fear of exacerbating Europes refugee row. It is nevertheless groping its way toward a common migration policy, with officials looking at ways to back away from the deadlock between EU governments over its refugee burden-sharing plan.

This was proposed by Brussels in the wake of the 2015-16 migrant crisis, but torpedoed by the

Visegrad bloc of central and eastern Europeans.

Instead, the Commission should focus on a more constructive and voluntary approach that goes a good deal further than resettlement quotas. Member states should be asked to agree on what are, and are not, national responsibilities and prerogatives on immigration. That would do much to define the parameters for collective EU-level actions.

Built into the new framework should be an agreement on more flexible policy responses so that member states could decide which problems to handle themselves. An emphasis on voluntary actions would reassure governments that Brussels has abandoned rigid burden-sharing.

On the financial side, the Commission is considering some sort of European Solidarity Mechanism to spread the costs of investing in re-settlement, housing, and training of migrants.

This would help to cover ancillary costs like stepped-up development policies for Africa. Brussels thinking is that the EUs poorer members – notably the Visegrad refuseniks – might prefer to contribute in kind to the new migration strategy by supplying equipment and personnel to relevant initiatives.

The Commission is likely to have a tough fight ahead as, so far, the populists have won all the battles over immigration. Playing on fears that Europe will be swamped by unregulated boat people, some of whom might even be jihadists, opponents of immigration have successfully championed the need for walls rather than the integration of newcomers.

But that wont resolve Europes manpower needs, or the irresistible pressure being exerted by population explosions both in Africa and the Arab world. The case for a measured, long-term pan-European migration strategy is irrefutable and needs to be argued by the commission more loudly and with far greater conviction than to date.

Meanwhile, an interesting footnote is that commission policymaking on migration is now to be largely in Greek hands. In an unusual anomaly, the promotion of Ms Paraskevi Michou as the incoming director-general for migration and home affairs means that both she and her Commissioner, Dimitris Avramopoulos, are of the same nationality.

Its to be hoped that this departure from normal practice wont in any way weaken the commissions hand when it urges a new EU approach to thorny immigration issues.

Kaynak/Source: