

Migration and the future of the EU continue to top the agenda

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The debate on the future of the European Union has been ongoing for quite a while now, precipitated by the fact that the United Kingdom will leave the EU sooner or later. The migration issue continues to top the European agenda, particularly how it can be best handled. Moreover, the EU is also one of the main issues dominating the electoral campaigns in the Netherlands, France and Germany.

At the beginning of this year, Malta assumed the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Malta is and will continue to chair meetings of the Council and its preparatory bodies. Migration is one of the main priorities being pushed forward by Malta and the Maltese presidency is pushing for the swift implementation of measures agreed to whilst also pushing for further action.

Migration is an important aspect dominating the debate on the future of the EU. It is evident that the majority of Europeans do not want the EU to be complacent on the matter, but want the Union to act fast. According to the latest Eurobarometer survey, published in November last year, 45% of EU citizens identified migration as the most important issue the EU is currently facing. The survey also showed that 22% of Europeans living in Malta are mainly concerned about migration. The survey also reveals that 54% of respondents (EU28) do not trust the EU, although Malta is bucking that trend, ranking as the third country where the EU enjoys the most trust, with 62% of respondents living in Malta stating that they trust the EU.

Progress has been registered in relation to migration. The agreement reached with Turkey last year, for instance, has led to a decline in the number of migrant crossings between Turkey and Greece. Other initiatives include the setting up of a European Border and Coast Guard as well as the Migration Partnership Framework, aimed at increasing levels of cooperation between the countries involved. This particular Partnership attempts to address the main reasons which drive people to leave their homes in search of better pastures. However, there is still much more that can be done. Discussions are ongoing to improve the mechanisms which are already in place as well as to propose other measures.

During an informal meeting of Home Affairs Ministers which took place in Valletta on January 26, discussions focused on the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Discussions centred mainly on the core principle of solidarity, along with proposals to improve IT systems to improve border security.

The migration issue forms part of the wider debate on the EU's future which was discussed during an informal meeting of Ministers responsible for EU Affairs in Valletta on January 24. Maltese Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for European Affairs Louis Grech stated on that occasion that the EU must deliver on its promises and that policy must be attuned to the concerns being raised by citizens. He emphasised that the Maltese Presidency will not only aim to ensure the long-term sustainability of the EU but to also help restore faith in the overall European project.

Discussions on migration and the EU's future continued on February 3 during an informal summit of EU Heads of State or Government held in Malta. During the summit, agreement was reached for the EU to assist Africa further by mobilising an additional €200 million for North Africa, whilst also helping to enhance Libya's capacity to manage its land border. The funds will also go towards managing the refugee camps in Libya. These camps were described by Prime Minister Joseph Muscat as being in a "dire" state. The decisions taken during the summit were enshrined in the Malta Declaration which mainly addressed the Central Mediterranean migratory route through more focused assistance to Libya in order to help it stabilise its borders. During the afternoon session of the meeting, leaders of the EU27 discussed the preparations for the upcoming 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties, planned to be celebrated in Rome on March 25.

When the European Coal and Steel Community was founded in 1950, the main objective was to create a climate of peace and stability based primarily on the idea of cooperation between European countries. It remains an idea that one needs to recall even today. The result of last June's referendum in the UK are still being felt across the EU today and Member States must work together even more to ensure that the other 27 Member States remain part of a prospering EU in order to continue guaranteeing peace and stability.