



BUDAPEST CENTRE
FOR THE INTERNATIONAL
PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE
AND MASS ATROCITIES

Migration and Dialogue: Reconciling Worlds

Europe has been slow in adopting a coherent policy on migration and asylum. Now we are living through the continent's largest refugee crisis in decades – and what was once an abstract debate has now been thrust to the top of the policy agenda. We must be careful not to miss this historical moment and the choices that are set before us. It is not only about solidarity, burden-sharing, debates over quotas and managing flow. It is equally about universal values like human dignity, respect and non-discrimination, values to which Europe professes to aspire. It is about becoming more human. It is also about peace and security, stability and fundamental rights.

Until now, the public discussions have not been sufficiently coherent or balanced. In the vast majority of cases, particularly in countries directly concerned by migration, the debates have focused either on humanitarian and human rights issues or on concerns over security, sharing the burden equitably and gloomy prognostications of Europe's future. This makes it difficult to maintain cohesion at both European and national levels. It obstructs progress and fuels tensions.

The Budapest Centre for the International Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities has been following the crisis as it unfolds. Seeing through the 'lens of mass atrocities,' the present situation raises legitimate concerns over the potential for mass atrocities, such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

This is not being overly dramatic. No country is immune from the possibility of committing mass atrocities. Moreover, refugees constitute vulnerable minorities whose very presence can trigger fear, hatred and exclusionary attitudes within the host population and within Europe itself. These conditions can in turn lead to marginalisation and polarisation, breed extremism and radicalisation in the short term as well as the long term. Unfortunately, the history of Europe has proven that such trends could indeed lead to tragic results.

The Responsibility to Protect

Mass atrocities are crimes that are covered by the principle of the Responsibility to Protect, which was overwhelmingly adopted by most UN Member States just ten years ago. We have an evident responsibility to protect the populations that are entering our lands. Behind the abstraction of 'responsibility,' these are human beings and not just a

statistic. Political leaders play an outstanding and special role in this regard and thus bear tangible responsibility in tackling the emerging risks. They are responsible not only for representing the public opinion, which may strongly differ from actions taken during this period. They are also responsible for guiding public opinion towards viable solutions and finding the balance between values and pragmatism, interests and rules.

The risks that accompany such levels of migration cannot be handled effectively without empathy. On the one side, the receiving population must show understanding towards the wounds and traumas the migrants have suffered as a result of being forced to leave behind families and homelands, cultural values and the environment in which they were raised. They enter a new society where the rules, traditions and habits evoke only slight familiarity. They also have fears and concerns over their future and the way the new 'majority' will welcome them.

On the other side, the new 'minority' must show understanding for the concerns of the receiving side, which has its own fears: risking stability and security by providing homes for people coming from another 'world,' people with another set of rules and habits, even if this is only for a limited period of time.

One thing is nonetheless certain: both sides hope to live in security, stability and prosperity.

The Need for Dialogue

Structures for sustained dialogue between host and guest populations are critically needed at this time to mitigate the potential for violence on a large scale. Put more positively, there is an unprecedented opportunity in our time to promote peaceful coexistence of cultures and civilizations. But we must act in concert and early on if we are to have the impact that is so sorely needed at this time.

One important dimension of dialogue is providing accurate information in a way that builds mutual understanding. Information has power. The more that migrants and established communities are informed about one other and the challenges of their new situation the more they are able to perceive and act upon these realities in a balanced and compassionate manner.

Information could be channelled through a framework of sustained dialogue, which the Budapest Centre finds an effective tool for addressing the risks of mass atrocity crimes and the risks accompanying migration. In the course of dialogue where the participants hear one other and can be heard themselves, vital information is shared, and many feelings, fears and concerns are often diluted. Such dialogue could ease tensions and help build confidence and trust, which is the basis for cohesion.

Dialogue between communities with strongly differing approaches and values is not easy. It requires much patience and respect. Yet there is no other alternative for Europe's future. Of course, dialogue will be also needed between groups within the receiving countries themselves. Even in the best of circumstances, the risk for internal conflicts and misunderstanding will remain high. It is crucial that information flow continues unabated and that open and frank discussion of diverging views and approaches be given priority. Only then will the conditions be favourable for building a culture of peaceful relations and human dignity.

One step at a time... but first steps now

Dialogue is best introduced in a step-by-step manner, but first steps should be taken early on. It is important for newcomers to interact sooner than later with the local realities of their new situation and to be exposed to the reactions, concerns and emotions of the host population.

The process can begin already during the registration period by providing detailed and sufficient information for the immigrants on their new environment, including local customs, languages, habits and perspectives. Such a process will inevitably promote trust and confidence and make it easier to adapt even if initial expectations are not met.

The next and more difficult stage would be to enlarge the circle by including in the dialogue those sectors that are more resistant to change and adaptation. However, dialogue is also a necessity for those who argue for inclusivity, more humanity, dignity and solidarity. The current rules and regulations adopted in and for other circumstances will have to be revisited and the societal consensus renewed. This, too, will require empathy and tolerance. A trained and well-prepared civil society could be instrumental in facilitating such initiatives.

Political leaders bear particular responsibility to develop these capabilities and launch dialogue processes in the communities they represent in government. Such is their tangible and measurable contribution to the implementation of the Responsibility to Protect. It is now clearer than ever before that dialogue is no longer an optional activity alongside others. It is an essential element of the way forward. Indeed, the future is now and we must not miss its coming.