

Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland Timo Soini

German Council on Foreign Relations (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik, DGAP*)

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ON MIGRATION

Dear Mr Secretary General, Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to thank the German Council on Foreign Relations for the kind invitation to speak here. It is a great pleasure to address this prominent forum.

I wish to use this privilege for a conversation about migration. Being in Germany, in front of a German audience, gives a feeling of being right at the gravitational centre of the current mass movement. Therefore, I value the opportunity to come to Berlin today very highly.

My intention today is to talk about this issue from the point of view of Europe. I shall try to get a glimpse of the big picture. First, however, let me start by saying a few words about how the issue is being felt in Finland.

For long, Finland has been seen as a country as far from major migration routes as it gets. In all honesty, it is the way we have seen our position ourselves. Not anymore.

This summer asylum-seekers started pouring over the invisible border from the Swedish town of Haparanda to Tornio on the Finnish side.

I admit: like many other countries and governments, we were caught by surprise.

Receiving roughly 600 migrants per day may not sound much, but relative to our population, the number of asylum-seekers is of the same order of magnitude as that of Germany or Sweden.

In fact, the absolute numbers have been among the highest, too. During the last week of September, more people applied for asylum in Finland than in any member state except Germany and Sweden – as reported by the European Asylum Support Office.

An over-whelming majority of immigrants – over 70 % – have been Iraqis. Other significant groups have been Somali, Afghan, and Albanian nationals. Contrary to Germany and many other European countries, only 2 % declare they come from Syria.

Why Iraqis? Good question. One evident factor is the social media. Online, and especially among Baghdadis, Finland has been portrayed as an especially welcoming country for Iraqi asylum-seekers.

Whether this narrative is true or not is arguable. Although it may be portrayed as an example Finland's positive image abroad, it is a success we could probably live without.

Lately the experiences of new asylum-seekers in Finland have also been shared in the social media. And the image of Finland among Iraqis has become somewhat more realistic.

The location at the northern end of the Baltic Sea is an unlikely site for uncontrolled immigration. Tornio has been a Nordic open border for over 60 years. Passports have not been checked since 1952.

Before reaching the final border, the irregular migrants had travelled, without documents, from one edge of Europe to the other. Many of them had traversed Greece – through FYROM and Serbia – and on to Hungary, Austria, Germany, Denmark and Sweden. Along the way, they had crossed the external Schengen border not once but twice.

So when they appeared in the sleepy twin town half in Sweden and half in Finland, there was some degree of disbelief.

Border management has, of course, always been central to our security. To the East, we have a longer land border with Russia than all of the other EU member states – or NATO members – combined.

But the Western border with Sweden? It was something that nobody in his right mind could have imagined.

Anyway, like many other European countries, we were faced with an unprecedented challenge, and we were not prepared. At first, many migrants continued undetected to other parts of the country.

There have been serious capacity issues. Finland has not introduced Schengen controls, but launched instead a police-based operation to control the influx at and near the border. Since two weeks or so, asylum-seekers crossing the border have been registered and their finger-prints have been taken immediately after entering Finnish territory.

Gradually, some control has emerged. A registration centre has been set up in a former high school – in many ways the kind of hot spot we have been trying to establish in the Southern member states.

Of course the conditions are different. However, getting the first response right is no rocket science. Establishing a functioning hotspot is possible. We must and we can succeed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

My intention today is not to talk only about a narrow Finnish perspective. But our case shows that in Europe, no member state will be immune to this mass movement of people.

By definition, migration is an international issue. No country can deal with the new migration and refugee challenge alone.

What does this mass migration mean for Europe? First of all, and let me be clear about this: people fleeing war or persecution deserve all our sympathy, and are entitled to protection. There can be no back-tracking on the international obligations, nor on our moral responsibility.

Having said that, mass movements like this are complex things that escape simple statements.

In the past few weeks, there have been over-simplifications of this issue at both ends of the political spectrum. And just as many in the middle.

The real world is complex. When people are on the move in this number, the crowd includes the full range of human variety. There are those who are fleeing mortal danger, war or persecution. But not everyone is.

Some are looking for a better life. Some hear about their compatriots reaching Europe and may see an opportunity presenting itself. Some have been tricked by criminal gangs.

And then there are those who may not even qualify as civilians.

Now, looking for a better life is a noble goal. It keeps societies dynamic. There's nothing wrong about looking for a better life. But it is not the same thing as "a well-founded fear of being persecuted", as defined in the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees.

Europe is and should continue to be a place where life gets better for many immigrants. But Europe simply cannot become the destination for the entire world's population. Mass emigration can never be a solution to the economic and social problems in Africa and the Middle East. In fact, emigration can make those problems even worse.

Already, there is clear evidence that people outside the actual conflict zones are on the move. Many of them have seen an opportunity in the chaotic pictures streamed live from Europe.

In the long run, the pace of current irregular migration is not sustainable. If we can't get the situation under control, what we see today will only emerge as the tip of the iceberg.

Moreover, for people truly in need of protection, the solution cannot be a long, perilous journey to and through Europe. The way to shelter cannot go through smugglers' rings and sub-standard inflatable boats. There must be a way for people to be safe closer to home.

In order to keep the European structures standing, we must take control. First of all, the security of external borders has to be restored.

In order to have an immigration policy that respects human rights and the plight of the most vulnerable people, we have to have order first.

Without order on the borders and control over who comes where and on what business, the trust in the system will break. And if people lose trust in the system, we are in deep trouble.

I believe that each European member state has to remain responsible for its own border security. Finland certainly takes this responsibility very seriously.

Free movement inside Europe is only made possible by the integrity of our external borders. The first will not survive without the second.

Along with the restoration of border security, asylum-seekers must be registered upon arrival. For this we need the hot spots in Greece and Italy, and those hot spots have to be made fully operational without any further delay.

A crucial partner is, of course, Turkey. Germany has a special relationship with Turkey, and we turn our eyes to Berlin in order to find a workable and mutually beneficial cooperation with Turkey.

We fully support strengthening our co-operation with Turkey. Turkey faces serious challenges. Not only with over two million Syrian refugees it shelters. But also with the escalating military conflict in neighboring Syria. And it's somewhat worrying domestic developments.

Turkey should be involved in the discussions on our common challenges, including migration.

On the one hand, we need to help the refugees in Turkey. On the other hand, to support Turkey in border control, in the fight against organized crime, and against the smuggling of irregular migrants.

Draft Action Plan on EU-Turkey cooperation on support of refugees and migration management is an important step in this discussion. We support the EU institutions' work to finalize the negotiations with Turkey.

In the long term, the most important objective is, of course, to address the root causes of migration. This needs to be done together with countries of origin and transit and with the international community.

We should fully use the existing toolbox of foreign policy. This includes bilateral relations, work in international organizations, development co-operation and promotion of human rights. As well as trade and agricultural policy.

We have to act promptly and with common goals. Stopping wars is paramount. Preventing them is even better.

We have to address urgently the conflict in Syria and Iraq. We need to support the mediation efforts in Libya.

To this end, Finland has pledged to increase its resilience support Syria and its proximity. We also plan to join the EU regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, and the EU Trust Fund for Sahel, Horn of Africa and North Africa.

Money is needed, but it will not substitute resolving the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and the Horn of Africa.

At the same time, we have to deepen our understanding of the root causes of migration. Ongoing conflicts are a major push factor in today's mass movement. But not the only reason.

Distinguished guests,

We live in a world where everything can be seen and heard far outside our continent. A politician makes a statement and is quoted out of context in Yemen. People make life-changing personal decisions based on Facebook postings.

If Iraqis are coming to Finland in search of a Utopian idea – and when they are then inevitably disillusioned – isn't it our responsibility to provide them with more accurate information?

Tackling the root causes of migration is also a question of communication. Having more experience, Germany is probably better placed in understanding the signals in the social media in Asia and Africa. For Finland it is something we will have to learn better quickly.

According to a recent World Bank report, a large-scale migration of people from poor countries to richer ones will reshape economic development for decades. The report suggests that if countries with ageing populations can create a path for refugees and migrants to participate in the economy, everyone benefits.

Our success as nations will be measured by the success of integration. Germany has a lot to teach us.

But the report also stresses that the migration must be carefully examined and managed. In Europe we are a long way from that situation.

In the long run, Europe needs controlled immigration. Europe also needs a stable neighborhood – one that is able to provide its people with security and employment.

Dear All,

We don't need to convince each other with political rhetoric. We need to fix this.

Thank You.