Confronting challenges unseen and unheard of for decades

This month’s editorial space is used to reproduce the better part of European Council President Tusk’s address at the 70th UN General Assembly debate. The speech takes a broad sweep at the unprecedented crises currently facing the European Union across the internal-external divide. On the one hand, Tusk passionately reaffirms the European Union’s cosmopolitan worldview and the soft power emanating from its values base, both firmly enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty. On the other hand, he balances humility with assertiveness: while accepting advice from “friends”, he lambasts the “sheer hypocrisy” of those wealthy countries (read: rich Arab states like Saudi Arabia) who hide their indifference to the plight of refugees by criticising Europe for its poor treatment of asylum-seekers. The address is emblematic for Tusk’s straightforward style, largely devoid of any diplomatic langue de bois. He does not name Russia but his harsh criticisms of violations of the values on which the United Nations is built are a clear rebuke of the Kremlin’s aggressive foreign policy in Ukraine and its support for a Syrian dictator who massacres his own people by using barrel bombs and chemical weapons against them. In his attempt at placing the EU on the right side of history, Tusk treads a careful balance between a modern interpretation of international law which puts the principle of human security ahead and the traditional canons of inviolability of borders and non-interference in the domestic affairs of another state. Sadly, his moral compass is not followed by all heads of state or government whom he is supposed to coordinate. The veneer of the “care” for refugees professed on behalf of the EU member states “engaged in animated discussions on relocation quotas” is indeed very thin. Echoing Tusk in the Wall Street Journal, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban spoke of the “hypocrisy” of other EU member states such as France and Spain, which have also built anti-migrant barriers but criticise Hungary’s recently erected razor-wire fence. On the way back home from New York, the European Council President will have to consider ways to overcome internal divisions and secure respect by all member states for the Union’s own values and international refugee law alike.

Steven Blockmans, Head of EU Foreign Policy at CEPS.

Address by President Donald Tusk at the 70th UN General Assembly debate, 29 September 2015

“I am here today to reassure you that Europe is as committed to its values and objectives now, as it has ever been: Europe will stay the course, even though it is now confronting challenges unseen and unheard of since for decades. Wars are raging both to the South and to the East of our borders. European leaders are tackling the consequences of borders being changed on our continent by force,
like in Ukraine, in violation of the Charter of the United Nations. We are also dealing with the refugee crisis, with terrorist attacks inside Europe and with economic difficulties in some Member States. As difficult as the situation is, I am sure that we will cope with it, and most importantly, we will, at the same time, remain dedicated to helping make the whole world a better place. Everyone who wishes to contribute to eradicating poverty, supporting peace keeping missions, solving the migration crisis, as well as to handling the causes and effects of climate change, can still count on us. For Europe, isolationism has never been, and will not be, an option. We are always ready to listen to the good and sound advice of our friends, also on the unprecedented refugee and migrant crisis that we face today. The myth prevails that Europe is the only rich place on Earth. This is not true; there are other places comparable to us in terms of wealth. But for some reason, refugees and migrants are not flowing there. This is because wealth is not the only element that determines where people choose the future for their children; such values like tolerance, openness, respect for diversity, freedom, human rights and the Geneva Convention are also a magnet attracting them to us. And we refuse to change in these respects. If in Europe we are engaged in animated discussions on relocation quotas, it is because we care. It is because we seek to be as effective and as inclusive as possible. But quotas are just a fraction of what Europe is already doing to help those who flee wars and persecution. By contrast, many countries represented here deal with this problem in a much more simple way; namely by not allowing migrants and refugees to enter their territories at all. This is why suggesting that Europe is an example of poor treatment or indifference towards asylum-seekers is sheer hypocrisy. In fact, the opposite is true, as we can see from the direction of their travel. No-one seems to be escaping from Europe, while people from all over Eurasia and Africa are coming to Europe. The crisis we are talking about has global dimensions and demands a global solution. First of all, it demands global solidarity. Everyone can offer help to the refugees. And those who do not want to, at least shouldn’t hide their indifference by criticising Europe for doing too little. It is no coincidence that the UN General Assembly debate this year focuses mainly on the situation in the Middle East, especially in Syria. Let us have no illusions. Syria’s crisis will not be solved unless a common denominator of interests is found among the regional players. But a peace plan must not only be a formula for defining a new division into spheres of influence. Here, in the United Nations, we should speak not only about the interests of the regional powers but above all about the interests of millions of Syrians, including those internally displaced and the refugees. The fight against terrorism is no doubt important in this context; that is why we welcome the fact that this aim is gaining the support of new and quite unexpected allies. But we cannot overlook the fact that many refugees are fleeing state terrorism, of which Syria is a dramatic proof.
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