


World Economic Forum in Davos

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"Hoping for prosperity – reflections on flight and migration to Europe"

Thank you very much for inviting me to address this Forum today.

In bringing together people who want no lesser a goal than a better world, Professor Schwab, you have made Davos and this Forum a place without equal. It has become a forum of ideas and of exchange between society, politics and the business community, all of them united in their wish to master the major challenges of our age.

And this year, you intend to discuss primarily how the fourth industrial revolution will be managed. Looking at your wide-ranging agenda, I was struck once again by how closely our global community is interwoven, at so many different levels, and by how many interdependencies already exist. This is true in particular of the rapid digitisation, the increasing connectivity, of the world.

Today I would like to look at one particular form of the increasing connectivity of societies and global interdependencies. According to the latest study by the World Economic Forum, pretty much the world's top concern in the next while will be refugee flows. Almost sixty million people, more than ever before, are currently fleeing – for many of them, their lives are on the line. The hundreds of thousands of people seeking protection on our continent are presenting the European Union with arguably its biggest ever test.

Migration in general is not a new phenomenon; it has occupied both policymakers and society since time immemorial. People have always gone on the move. And in all those centuries, their motives have actually remained unchanged: the desire to escape poverty and squalor, unemployment or oppression, persecution or war, or the desire to improve themselves, and sometimes a sense of adventure and curiosity. Whatever the reason for it, however, migration has always been associated with hope – the hope of a new, a better, a secure life.

In many cases, ladies and gentlemen, migration has been an engine for progress and economic growth. Most economists believe that labour migration in particular has brought opportunities for increased prosperity not only for the migrants, but also for their host countries and states of origin. The economist John Kenneth Galbraith once described migration as ""the oldest action against poverty"". Additional workers help create value-added; the desire to improve one's situation produces new dynamism. A look at the list of US Nobel Laureates and Oscar winners shows just how much a country can benefit from migrants' creativity, including as it does between three and four times as many immigrants as people born on American soil.

Contrary to what we used to believe, poorer countries of origin often benefit from the emigration of talented people too. Losses can often be balanced out: on the one hand, by the money migrants send home, and, on the other, by know-how and education gains if the migrants later return to their home countries.

The speed at which a whole society can benefit from migration is shown by the 25 years of strong economic growth enjoyed by the fledgling Federal Republic of Germany after the end of the Second World War. Germany, which had lain in ruins, developed into the country of the ""Wirtschaftswunder"". Not only did it absorb the refugees and displaced persons from the former German eastern territories, but shortly afterwards Germany deliberately recruited millions more, the so-called guest workers, who were to and who wanted to go back to their countries of origin after a limited time in Germany.

As we all know, things turned out differently. Some of the guest workers took up permanent residence in Germany, contributing to prosperity and growth ever since. Especially in the 1970s, however, many of them lost their jobs in the recession. In the end, then, the receiving society too paid a price, because it had failed to integrate the migrants and give them access to more education, and at the same time it failed to call for efforts towards integration on their part. Sometimes such omissions have an impact right down to the third generation, in the form of education deficits and unemployment. Similar developments – social exclusion on the one hand and self-isolation on the other – can be seen in other European countries, too.

Further, not all migrants have taken on board all European fundamental convictions. This is true in particular of some people who come from or whose families come from Muslim-majority countries, in relations to their views on, for example, the role of women, tolerance, the role of religion or our judicial system. The failings are very obvious in areas

where enclaves have developed, where the rules and values of a democratic state based on the rule of law have been circumvented or even replaced by fundamentalist convictions and extremist behaviour.

One key lesson from our own history, but also from recent European migration history, is therefore this: migration and integration must be thought of in tandem.

Europe is currently experiencing a large-scale form of migration provoked by violence: the arrival of hundreds of thousands of people fleeing war and conflict, persecution and massive human rights violations. Allow me to say this quite clearly: it is our humanitarian responsibility to take in such victims of persecution. In most countries, this responsibility derives from the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, and in Germany the right to asylum is furthermore anchored in our constitution, the Basic Law. We must not think in terms of usefulness with regard to taking in refugees. People who need our protection are allowed to cost something.

A society which regards itself as a community of solidarity will act in a spirit of solidarity in relation to refugees, too. If we were to shirk this obligation, it might or indeed surely would bring some financial gain. But we would be losing something of great value – namely our respect for ourselves, our sense of being at ease with ourselves.

I know that many of you watching Germany viewed the behaviour of countless Germans last summer and autumn as either emotional exuberance or naivety. But we Germans – and this is a point I want you to take away with you – we saw more in it than that. For many older Germans, that willingness to give the new arrivals a welcome was an act of commitment to a country which, after its steep fall, now wants to be open and to show solidarity, and never again to be xenophobic or racist. For large sections of the younger population, this natural openness was the fruit of their positive experience as citizens of the world, as Europeans. On top of that, many who themselves came from families with migrant backgrounds offered their linguistic skills. This all made for an uplifting experience.

At the same time, however, I am of course aware that even if civil society has achieved something extraordinary in many places during the last few months, the readiness to demonstrate solidarity is not infinite.

What the state and society are able to achieve and how long they can continue to do so depends on many factors: how well the economy is doing, how great a state's institutional, financial and social welfare capacities are, how big a cultural and social gap has to be bridged, and how willing the refugees are to integrate. Not least, it also depends on how much experience a society has with migration and the integration of migrants.

It's not that long ago that we in Germany started frankly discussing the fact that receiving societies are also affected by migration – regardless of whether the migrants stay temporarily or permanently in Germany, regardless of whether we are talking about refugees or migrant workers. It's a fact that a large proportion of the population sees migration less as a boon and more as a cause of uncertainty and the loss of the world they

know. We all know that new arrivals bring with them different customs and views, different languages, religions and, in some cases, different values into everyday life. Wolfgang Thierse, former President of the German Bundestag, gave us this – perhaps over-dramatic – description of what needs to happen: those who come to us should feel at home in an alien country, and the native population should not feel alien in their own country.

As a rule, after people get to know each other they come to accept one another. Sometimes, however, conflicts develop. Following recent events in several German cities, for instance, fears grew that fundamental achievements of our civilisation, such as tolerance, respect and the equality of women, could be undermined. It was also feared – and this is perhaps even more problematic – that the state was not always able to uphold law and order everywhere. This anxiety and concern call for credible answers from a democratic state run by rule of law, since people will not get on board with the change unless they can believe that their politicians are aware of the problems, can do something about them and have the requisite foresight.

On the question of how many people a society can take in, we can see that there is no magic or mathematical formula to determine that. Rather, the scale depends on an ongoing process of negotiation in society and the world of politics. For example, what we want and are able to achieve today would not have been possible or even conceivable in Germany ten years ago, and most certainly not twenty years ago. But even today, we are discussing limits in terms of the number of people we can absorb.

Politicians must now reconcile citizens' desire to see their society continue to function and the humanitarian urge to help those in need of protection. That could mean that policymakers have to develop and implement strategies to limit the number of people coming to our country – and not as a knee-jerk defensive reaction but as an element of responsible governance. A limitation strategy may even be both morally and politically necessary in order to preserve the state's ability to function. It may also be necessary in order to ensure that mainstream society is on board with the humanitarian acceptance of refugees. In that sense, limiting numbers is not in itself unethical; it helps to maintain the support of society. Without acceptance, a society is not open and not willing to take in refugees. And it's precisely for that reason that the Governments of Germany and other European countries, and Brussels too, are upping the search for ways to reduce the number of refugees.

Those pursuing inhumane policies rife with resentment argue in favour of closed doors – as many populists in Europe are doing. Our actions, in contrast, are guided by another objective: precisely because we want to protect as many people as possible – as problematic and tragic as it may sometimes be – we will not be able to take in everyone.

And there's another point. If democrats refuse to talk about limits, they leave the field to populists and xenophobes. The increase in votes for right-wing populist parties in nearly all European countries starkly highlights this danger. But peoples' concerns and worries

need to be discussed at the heart of society. The far right must not be allowed a monopoly on talking frankly about people's worries and concerns. No – society as a whole must do it, the democratic centre, in open and democratic discussion.

Let me point out one more consideration here. Humanitarian action is necessary and possible at various different levels. Those from the Middle East who manage to reach Europe are just a minority of the many, many who are at risk or have been displaced. My visit to a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan about a month ago reaffirmed my conviction that many Syrians want to stay as close as possible to their homes so that they can return as quickly as possible when the opportunity arises. They do not want to come to Europe if they can find somewhere to stay and preferably an income, earned legally and without exploitation, closer to Syria. Assistance for refugees – and this will apply most especially if the flow of refugees into Europe is curbed – will now require much greater efforts beyond our borders. So let us do more, be it at the level of government or civil society, to help these people in transitional situations. Let us also step up our endeavours for a peace settlement in Syria, which the people of that country will need first if they are to make a fresh start.

Anyone who talks of limits cannot be silent on the subject of borders.

In the European Union, the external borders define our common area of freedom. Protecting the external borders by no means has to equate to sealing ourselves off. But we should carry out checks and manage our external borders. Openness must not lead to the complete disappearance of borders. However, borders are no longer forbidding if bridges or gates are established to allow in those who have a right to enter our continent.

The freedom of movement within the Schengen area can only be preserved if security is guaranteed at the external borders. Conversely – and developments during the last few months have shown this – if the external borders are not effectively protected, national borders will once again become important, and freedom of movement within Europe will be at risk. That's why, in Germany as elsewhere, a growing number of people no longer want to rule out national border checks if and as long as the European borders are not sufficiently safeguarded. Losing freedom of movement would certainly not be a good solution – neither for us Germans, nor for Europe as a whole. Can we really not come up with a better idea?

It is true that hardly any other problem has divided and thereby jeopardised the European Union as much as the refugee question. I absolutely understand that the assessment of how many refugees can be absorbed is different in each country: in France it is different than in Poland or Germany or Italy. The variety is huge. I understand that in Central European societies, which found themselves in a completely new political landscape 25 years ago and had to fundamentally adjust to the new conditions, the fear of change as well as concerns about preserving national sovereignty and identity are especially great.

However, I find it difficult to understand when countries whose citizens once experienced solidarity as the victims of political persecution now deny solidarity to those fleeing persecution. I also find it difficult to understand why a retreat into nationalist thinking is seen as a solution at a time when globalisation is leading to ever stronger international links, not only in the flow of goods and capital but also through the mobility of people.

Not only would I therefore like to see European states showing solidarity with Germany, which is bearing such a heavy burden, in this situation. I would also like to see a discussion in which the citizens of Europe do not put all their strength and imagination into shaping a retreat into national solutions but, rather, into ideas for a Europe in which everyone feels included and by which they once again feel represented. A Europe which offers better political and economic prospects to everyone than any individual nation-state. Do we really want to risk seeing the great historical success which has brought Europe peace and prosperity collapse as a result of the refugee question? No-one, absolutely no-one, can want that.