

## The Lost Honour of Europe

*MSc Sociology graduand, **Maria-Christina Vogkli**, offers her reflections on the current political situation in Europe*



Last week has been a dreadful week for Europe. In Portugal, a constitutional crisis has occurred after Portugal's constitutional president denied the anti-austerity Left-wing party to form a majority government even though it secured an absolute majority. With the aim of appeasing financial markets and satisfying Brussels, democracy has been downgraded on the grounds that appointing a left wing government would be too risky for Euro and the country's E.U. membership.

In Poland, the conservative and Eurosceptic party Law and Justice won parliamentary elections introducing a radical political discourse around welfare spending, the possibility of banning abortion, and in-vitro fertilisation. Its leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski even claimed that migrants bring dangerous diseases with them.

These political developments take place while Europe faces a refugee crisis with tremendous consequences. The current surge of refugees crossing Europe is estimated at 630,000, while Turkey now hosts 1.9 million Syrian refugees. So far this year, 390,000 migrants have made it to Greece. However, hundreds of them have died in the waters between Greece and Turkey and 3000 have drowned in the greater Mediterranean Sea.

During their meeting in Brussels, the European Union and Balkan Leaders have agreed to facilitate the safe arrival of refugees in places such as Germany and Scandinavia before winter. Europe's response to this crisis has been to create 100,000 places in reception centres along the route from Greece to Germany, half in Greece and half in Germany. Hungary and Croatia have closed their borders, while refugees are trapped, exposed in the cold being refused to continue their journey. Keeping in mind that 250,000 refugees have passed through the Balkans since mid-September proves how inadequate Europe's response has been.

During his lecture at LSE, Joseph Stieglitz said that the best proxy of one's quality of life is in which part of the world one is born. In this context, being a refugee is a completely random fact and anyone of us could be in their unhappy shoes, should we have been born in the wrong part of the world.

Coming from Greece, I follow the Greek news and particularly the refugee crisis closely. Every morning, one hears about a boat having capsized in the Aegean leading to the death of infants and young children. From a point onwards, one gets easily accustomed to that if one does not

bother to fully realise the magnitude of this tragedy. Nonetheless, if one decides not to ignore this piece of news, one conceives that the Mediterranean Sea has been transformed into a water tomb for thousands who wrongly lose their lives. The same danger holds for those who managed to cross the Mediterranean Sea and are now facing extreme weather conditions in the Balkan countries.

This tragedy has become an integral part of the Greek residents living on the islands close to Turkey. These people are the ones who rescue and primarily take care of the refugees who survived crossing the water borders. Fishermen who use their boats in order to rescue refugees whose boats deflate or flip over or in the worst case collect dead bodies. Elderly women who take up the grandmother's role when holding infants, the baker in Samos who baked bread for all refugees on the island and Greek families who accommodate refugees' families for a period of time. In Athens, different anarchist and non-governmental organisations have squatted empty buildings in order to provide homeless refugees with a secure place to sleep and pharmaceutical care. While this functions on a micro-level, it shows a strong solidarity towards displaced people, who managed to survive horrific conditions including war, economic exploitation with the aim of assuring their travelling to better places and extreme weather conditions. It's those people who take care of the refugees despite the fact that they are not obliged to.

However, the question remains if those who are responsible for protecting the refugees and their well-being do so. The European countries have immersed into a debate and negotiation with respect to the number of refugees they are willing to accept, while other countries close their borders. Despite the fact that their rhetoric appears to involve their intention to protect the refugees' lives, their actual role in protecting human rights and the tremendous living conditions in the countries of origin is insufficient. This is mainly achieved by ignoring what the experience of being a refugee actually means and with its causes are.

The past week has been a horrible week for European history. Its utmost values, namely democracy, equality, the value of human life itself and solidarity have been downgraded. All the ideas which have flourished in the Enlightenment seem to have been defeated by the politics of fear, racism and the triumph of the economy over democracy. While the peoples of Europe are in most cases welcoming refugees, it is the governments of the E.U. who close their borders and do not take up the responsibility of keeping to the ideas of Europe.

This week has once more shown how feeble the European Union's reflexes are when it comes to protecting human dignity and democracy. It is acknowledged that politics with the European Union need to comply with regulations and policies taking numbers into account. However, one of the darkest pages in the European history, namely the period of Fascism, derived from the debasement of the human life and dignity along with the abolishment of democracy. The current political developments and the refugee crisis are reminiscent of these dark pages, since within the European context democracy, equality and human dignity seem to be rather fragile as European values.

In particular, the focus on statistics that the E.U. has adopted for the management of both the financial and the refugee crisis allows for tacitly giving its consent to human lives being lost, democratic processes being cancelled and dangerous rhetoric being introduced and legitimised in the political discourse in specific national contexts. It is the European Governments' role to restore its humanitarian ideas and in many cases educate its people not to embrace the politics of fear. Ironically, in various European countries it is the people who endorse these ideas and should become an example for their governments. Europe is facing a financial crisis, but above of all it faces a political one deriving from its having lost its honour, values, ideas and historical past which have allowed for great achievements. Conclusively, Europe has been brought to another crucial page of its history that still remains to be written, hopefully not in the darkest of colours.

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