



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Migration crisis, HC 427

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Members present: Keith Vaz (Chair); Victoria Atkins, James Berry, Mr David Burrowes, Nusrat Ghani, Stuart C. McDonald, Naz Shah, Mr Chuka Umunna, Mr David Winnick.

Questions 207 - 268

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Mr Khalid Chaouki**, Member of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and Chair of the Culture Committee, Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean, gave evidence.

Q207 Chair: Could I bring the Committee to order and refer everyone present to the Register of Members' Interests where the interests of members of this Committee are noted? I warmly welcome Mr Khalid Chaouki, the Chair of the Culture Committee of the Italian Parliament. Thank you very much for coming here today. We have an interpreter also for you, so if at any time you want anything translated, have no hesitation. We would certainly be doing that in your Parliament if we came to give evidence to one of your committees. I am delighted that you have come here to give evidence to us. Thank you for coming.

The Committee is conducting an inquiry into the migration crisis, and of course Italy is at the forefront of dealing with this crisis. The figures that this Committee has and this Parliament has is that last year 3,771 people have died trying to cross the Mediterranean, principally from Libya to Italy. We know that Italy has been facing a migration crisis. Who do you blame for this crisis?

Mr Chaouki: First of all, thank you very much for your invitation. I am Khalid Chaouki and I was born in Morocco and grew up in Italy. We are here first of all to speak about immigration in general and the challenge for the European population of that crisis. It is not an Italian problem and it is not a Greek problem—it is a European problem, it is a global problem for us. But I prefer speaking Italian.

Chair: Please feel free.

Mr Chaouki (Translation): I think the responsibility for the deaths that we have been seeing since 3 October 2013 is of the European Government and Mediterranean Governments.

Q208 Chair: You think principally this is the failure of the EU to deal with this crisis?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): I think so, yes.

Q209 Chair: How much of this do you think is due to the crisis that has gripped Libya?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): Large responsibility, in fact, and the fact that after Gaddafi's exit the instability of the country has not been solved yet and nothing has been done to solve that problem.

Q210 Chair: Because we know that some kind of a deal was done between your former Prime Minister Berlusconi and Colonel Gaddafi to stop the flow of illegal migration, it was only following the demise of the Gaddafi regime that the Mediterranean crisis began. Do you agree with that?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): I do not think we can choose between what we face, the dictatorship agreements and our social responsibility. We have to be honest with ourselves and we have to have the courage to follow our values in all European situations. I think we have to support the liberation of these populations from such dictatorships without being accomplices to those dictatorships.

Q211 Chair: Of course. We have heard some very shocking figures: that there are approximately 500,000 people on the coast of North Africa waiting to cross into Italy when the weather gets better. Can you confirm those figures or do you have any other information to give us as to the numbers waiting to come over?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): I think it is more at the moment, not that figure.

Q212 Chair: More than half a million people waiting to cross over?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): Yes, especially from Libya, and I know of many people in the southern part of Libya that are detained in prisons and are blackmailed every day in relation to their ties with their relatives in Eritrea, Somalia and other countries. We are not talking about people who choose to put their own life at risk by voluntarily deciding to cross the Mediterranean. They are blackmailed in relation to their families in order to cross the Mediterranean.

Q213 Chair: Yes. We will come on to human trafficking in one second. I just want to try to get a figure out of the chairman if he could tell me. We think it is about 500,000: he says it is more than 500,000. Could he give us an approximate figure of what the Italians believe is the number seeking to come over?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): We have the data of the IOM, which refers to 800,000.

Q214 Chair: From Italy's point of view, you are the external border of the EU, and that has not changed, obviously, since Italy joined. Why is it not Italy's responsibility to

process those seeking asylum and for them to be resettled there, or do you think that responsibility ought to be shared by other EU countries?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): Facing this level of people and this level of crisis, no single European country can face the situation on its own. We have to process and confirm the asylum application directly from the transit countries. We also have to confirm the availability of the European countries to accept the migrants.

Q215 Chair: Do you think people who arrive in Italy ought to be shared out among the other EU countries, that they are not people who should remain in Italy? Is that your view?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): Most of these people do not want to stay in Italy. Some have family ties in other European countries or with their own communities in other European countries. The relocation project that has been decided by the European Council has failed up to now because the numbers are really ridiculous compared to, for example, what other bordering countries with Syria have done.

Q216 Chair: Do you think that the Dublin Convention should be reviewed as a result of what you have been saying and the crisis that is occurring or do you think that we should stick to the agreement that we made in Dublin?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): The time when this Dublin Convention was decided has now passed. It is now another time. If we are not brave enough to review the Dublin Convention in light of the strong pressure that the European countries are under at the moment, we are not simply denying the right of some asylum seekers to go to other European countries but we are denying the solidarity principle, which is at the basis of the European Community.

Q217 Chair: Yesterday the EU Ministers decided that Greece was not doing its bit in order to secure its border and therefore the external border of the EU should be moved inwards and that, in effect, Schengen should be suspended. Do you agree with all those positions: first of all that Greece is not doing what it should do in order to stop people coming in and, secondly, do you think the Schengen agreement should also be reviewed and the freedom of movement should now be stopped in the EU?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): It is first of all unfair of the European countries to ask a country in difficulty, like Greece, to face the situation on its own. We have to support Greece via European policy aimed at controlling arrivals. We should not delegate the responsibility of controlling their own borders to these countries that have already difficulties of their own.

As far as Schengen is concerned—I am referring here also to the opinion of the Italian Government—we cannot give up a big win like the Schengen agreement that we have made. This would be a defeat against the threat of terrorism that wants to compromise our liberty and freedom of movement and freedom of travelling.

Q218 Chair: Finally from me, how do you know that the people coming over from North Africa into Italy are not people who support terrorism or are terrorists? What kind of checks are being made to stop jihadists returning through the Mediterranean route?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): Luckily up to now there has not been a single confirmed case of jihadists arriving in Italy by boat. Italy has implemented a mission called the Mare Sicuro, Safe Seas, aimed at controlling and stopping the activity of such human trafficking and traffickers. Up until now we have been able to stop 1,500 traffickers more or less. This is of course a priority for us. Of course it is not possible to exclude the possibility that some infiltration by terrorists could happen, but up to now we are lucky to say that no cases have occurred.

Q219 Mr David Winnick: However unfortunate it is that so many hundreds of thousands of people have fled and are fleeing—and recognising, as the Chair implied, that obviously one should be very much on guard against those who wish to inflict terror—would you accept that the overwhelming majority coming to Europe in such circumstances as we know, do so simply because they are so fearful for their lives, their children's lives and will take any opportunity, however dangerous, to reach Europe?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): I have spoken with many of those people and I would like to take this opportunity to invite you aboard one of the boats that I have worked on in the last few months.

Mr Chaouki: It would be a big honour for us to welcome you.

Mr Chaouki (Translation): There are some people that live between the risk of dying and the possibility of finding a way via the sea. Many times I say to my colleagues that if you were born in Syria or Mogadishu like those people, would you not have done the same things that they would do in order to at least have a small chance of continuing their life in a better country.

Q220 Mr David Winnick: While we have the utmost contempt for the gangsters who use the people we are speaking about and the boats that in so many instances are totally unsafe, is it not the case where it was Italy that took the initiative in setting up the rescue operation, Mare Nostrum?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): On 3 October 2013 Italy saw more than 200 people dead on its shores. We had to decide if we should proceed and save the remaining people, the people who did not die, and accept them in Italy somehow or leave them dying at sea. Obviously saving the people at sea is not a definite answer to the problem, but I think that people's lives are sacred. It is so important. This is a principle that no policy can be used to differentiate one population from another.

Q221 Mr David Winnick: While I have spoken of the contempt that we have for the gangsters involved in bringing people over, the need, as you have said, is to save lives. Are you satisfied that the replacement of the operation, which I mentioned and that caused a good deal of controversy in the House of Commons, is adequate to saving lives?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): Saving the lives of 170,000 people in 2014 is a big win for our marine corps and whoever works for these rescue operations. However, at the same time I think that the solution is not stopping these people in the other part of the Mediterranean, but you could resolve the problem by changing the situation or improving the situation in the countries of origin of these people.

Q222 Mr David Winnick: One more question, if I may. As I understand it on the figures from last year, of the 942,400 people who claimed asylum in the EU last year, nearly 78,000 were accepted by Italy. Is that so?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): Yes.

Q223 Mr David Winnick: Although that is a high number—and I am not suggesting it would be otherwise—would you not accept it is nowhere near Germany, Hungary or Sweden. It is certainly more than Britain.

Mr Chaouki (Translation): According to our numbers, Italy is the third country as far as accepting migrants, after Germany and Sweden. However, I would like to put our discussion in a more regional and Euro-Mediterranean type of context. When I talk with my colleagues about Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey or Tunisia, I realise that our figures are ridiculous and quite embarrassing compared to their pressure. Obviously Europe cannot accept everyone. That is obvious. However, we have to provide for a window of temporary acceptance.

Q224 James Berry: Thank you very much for coming to give evidence to us. I don't think any of us would find it difficult to understand why someone in a particularly poor country, who is not suffering any particular abuse, and more so people in war-torn places where they are suffering torture and so on, would want to make the trip to Europe. But do you agree that it is right, as a matter of principle, that people coming to Europe should be claiming asylum in the first country they arrive in?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): People arrive first of all in Europe and not into one single country. The hotspots, also called centres, as they have been defined by the recent European agreement, should be European facilities for first acceptance, first reception. It is obvious that a country like yours or the Scandinavian countries are very far geographically from the hotspots. Therefore, the more exposed countries could not face on their own the pressure that they are subject to at the moment. Therefore, I think that the idea of quotas and splitting the quotas among the countries is the most fair at the moment.

Q225 James Berry: I entirely understand that from your perspective in Italy, but in terms of migrants who choose to cross to Italy, having arrived in Italy, which is a safe and pleasant country, and choose to cross Europe in an attempt to settle in Britain, is that something that you think is acceptable or do you think that migrants in those situations should be claiming asylum in the first country of entry?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): Italy nowadays welcomes tens of thousands of refugees and migrants in their facilities. The problem arises when these people do not want to stay in Italy. Italy could not have all these people on its own. Especially, the country could not identify all these people on its own and oblige them to stay in Italy.

Q226 James Berry: As you know, the UK is not part of the Schengen system, and nor would it be until the external border is as safe as our external border here. What support do you think you need from the EU to strengthen your border, which is obviously very difficult for you to control?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): First of all, the most important piece of support would be a European database for migration, a European standard for the assessment of asylum applications and a European standard for the services offered to the refugees. There are differences nowadays between the countries that offer a five-star level of reception and other countries that have more economic difficulties in guaranteeing such services. Obviously, asylum seekers tend to want to go towards the five-star level of reception countries, however, we should find a standard level, a fair level.

Q227 James Berry: I was listening to a programme on BBC Radio 4 over the weekend about migration, which was very interesting. One of the suggestions being made by one of the commentators was that the land borders should be opened, certainly for defined periods, to stop people making the treacherous journey across the sea that your country has done much to discourage people from doing. Do you think that would help, opening the land borders to stop people making journeys by the sea? Would it work?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): I think it could be an attempt but we should work more on the transit countries at the moment. Libya and Sudan are strategic countries as far as transit.

Q228 Stuart C. McDonald: Earlier you said that the Dublin regulations were out of date, essentially. What would you like to see them replaced with? What sorts of arrangements would you like to see?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): By comparing refugees to any other kinds of migrants, by a European asylum permit, thus fostering freedom of movement of the refugees among the countries, as it happens today with normal immigrants. This is a prospect in the medium and long term. Also an important answer could be the idea of the quotas distributed among the European reception centres.

Q229 Stuart C. McDonald: You also mentioned hotspots that the European Union has tried to establish to bring some order to the processing of migrants. So far only one of six proposed hotspots has been opened in Italy. Is there a particular reason why the other five have not opened yet?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): In recent weeks two other hotspots have been activated. The aim is moving to seven hotspots. Obviously we cannot ask all the first arrival countries to implement an identification process in order to find out who has the right or not, without these being followed by an immediate relocation action for the asylum seekers, because we have very serious problems regarding the identification of these migrants. On the one hand you have to take into account the right of our country to identify people and, on the other hand, we have the possibility of the person wanting to go to another country. So first identification, we read about it in the documents, and I can assure you that those occurrences are among the most serious and worst ones that I have seen.

Q230 Stuart C. McDonald: A final question relating to problems of identification, a report in December suggested that out of 65,000 people arriving in Italy by sea during that month, 29,000 were fingerprinted. What needs to be done to try to increase the number of

migrants who are being fingerprinted and what support can be provided by other EU countries?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): From the point of view of Italy, we have tried to increase the number of identifications. The problem arises when we think about the prospects that we provide to those people. When the relocation idea was approved in other European countries, there was an increase of people from Eritrea and other countries that voluntarily came forward for identification.

Q231 Mr David Burrowes: The charity Save the Children has provided statistics from your Italian Ministry of Labour and Welfare that 13,000 unaccompanied children arrived in 2014 and almost 4,000 children disappeared after arriving. What is Italy doing about that crisis, those missing children, and what evidence do you have of what is happening to them and how many of them have gone into the hands of traffickers and those exploiting them?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): This is a serious problem that Italy is facing together with other countries at the moment. We also have a problem with illegal trafficking and mafia organisations in some areas. We have a problem of exploiting migrants for work purposes. Parliament is currently investigating via an investigation committee on such phenomena. The problem occurs when these migrants arrive and they disappear somehow. This is confirmed by the figures you said. Also we have a problem as far as the provenance countries of these minors is concerned. Egypt is one of these countries. This is a serious situation. It is not only a problem of disappearance and trafficking of minors, it is a problem of organ trafficking. Especially concerning some areas in Africa like Sinai, we have discovered such situations via the people that we have accompanied there.

Q232 Mr David Burrowes: What do you think about the call that is being made to countries like this country to accept some of those unaccompanied children? Something like 3,000 is the call made by Save the Children and others.

Mr Chaouki (Translation): As far as minors are concerned, we could not only accept them but also foster their adoption by families and therefore their integration into the Italian family system. However, that is as far as Italy is concerned. As far as the European level, there are no specific initiatives at the moment for minors. This would be another point we should focus our attention on so that we could also sort out the problem or work on the problem of unaccompanied minors.

Q233 Mr David Burrowes: The Danish Parliament, as we speak, are debating various proposals, one of which is to pass legislation to delay family reunions, to increase the wait from one year to three years. If that was passed—as I think it could well be—what would be the impact in relation to yourselves in terms of those willing to take the journey?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): We want to implement the integration of the new arrivals, integration within the families of the new arrivals. Family reunion in Italy has been a positive element as far as integration into society is concerned.

Q234 Mr David Burrowes: If further countries delay family reunion, like Denmark, what do you think will be the impact on more journeys being made by families coming to Italy?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): I think this is a risk because it would hinder the regular channels of migration and it would foster irregular migration.

Q235 Mr Chuka Umunna: One question, moving away from some of the figures and the regulation of the arrivals and more in relation to those who settle in Italy and how you go about ensuring that they are welcomed and integrated into your society. We will be taking evidence in relation to this inquiry, after this session, from those involved in settling asylum seekers here. There have been some issues in relation to how that has been done and the reaction of the local communities to those people. That is the context of my question.

Mr Chaouki (Translation): You are talking to someone who in 2013 decided to shut himself inside one of the facilities and check on the facility because it was not up to the standards required, in Lampedusa. I think the situation has changed during the last few years. It is not a perfect situation. However we have decided not to choose the emergency method because the emergency method many times has fostered corruption. Someone tried to improvise by opening a centre when they did not have the requirements or they were not authorised to do so. The Italian Government has decided to give a role especially to the municipalities in Italy by discussing the problem with the regions, in order to foster a widespread reception in the whole of the national territory. It is more facilities, not big centres, investing in integration, Italian language courses, training. Unfortunately not all the Italian regions were ready to co-operate with the Government. Some had some political kind of prejudices.

Q236 Mr Chuka Umunna: Can I ask two questions as a follow up to that? One is in relation to the way in which, for example, your refugees are housed. You said that local authorities in particular have been given a role. To what extent, aside from local authorities playing a role, are these facilities contracted out to private companies to provide the facilities? That is my first question.

Mr Chaouki (Translation): We are trying to identify those facilities that already have some kind of experience with reception, that satisfy criteria of transparency and which foster the exit of the migrant from the reception centre into the society via a system called SPRAR.

Q237 Mr Chuka Umunna: My only other question was in relation to the Italian language courses, is that something that is freely provided to the refugees? Is that a free service and free provision that is easily accessible for them?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): Yes, we try to use this as much as possible. Also it is free, of course. We try to have the support—and this is key—of the associations, the NGOs, the Church and, as far as this is concerned, especially Pope Francis has been of great support in reception.

Q238 Victoria Atkins: I want to get a sense of the size of the problem facing Europe and, it follows, Italy. On a very quick analysis, the following countries have conflict around

the Mediterranean: Nigeria, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Central African Republic—it is a little bit further away—Yemen, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, Egypt and Eritrea. The combined population of those countries, very roughly, is 522 million people. The population of Europe, according to most recent figures from Europa, is 503 million. How can Europe absorb even a fraction of those very troubled areas and give those migrants a good and safe home?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): I do not think the answer is welcoming and receiving all desperate people in the world. However, we have to take some responsibility especially regarding some particular situations and I will give you an example regarding Syria. We have a situation where we are trying to combat the situation in Syria and I totally agree with the direction and what is being done in order to try to combat Daesh. Daesh is a threat for Europe, but it also is a threat for the local population. We can't have a strategy against Daesh but at the same time have no strategy for refugees from the lands governed by Daesh.

Q239 Victoria Atkins: Just one more question. How helpful then was it for Angela Merkel, one of the most powerful leaders in Europe, to open the doors of Germany to all refugees, having the implications it will for Italy as a corridor to Germany?

Mr Chaouki (Translation): Angela Merkel made a very revolutionary gesture in welcoming 1 million refugees.

Victoria Atkins: That is one way of describing it, yes.

Mr Chaouki (Translation): However, it is not the only solution. It is not enough. The first solution would be working to develop the countries of provenance of the refugees, reviewing our co-operation with those countries with a view of co-development and not with a view of just looking at our interests as we did in the past.

Chair: I am sorry to interrupt; we must end it there because we have other witnesses. I just wanted to thank you. We are glad that you were released from your detention—

Mr Chaouki: Sorry for—

Q240 Chair: No, it has been very, very helpful. We are glad that you have been released from your detention in Lampedusa, which you went into. One very quick answer in relation to another inquiry that we are doing. I know it is difficult to give us a quick answer but you might like to write to us with further information. You arrived in Italy when you were two years of age. You were elected as a member of the Italian Parliament. You founded the Young Muslims group in Italy. One of the other inquiries we are doing is on radicalisation. Can you offer us—maybe not today at length because we have other witnesses—an explanation as to why young Muslims in Italy have been radicalised and, therefore, they decide to go to fight in Syria? Maybe a short answer now and a longer answer in writing.

Mr Chaouki: Yes, it will be a very interesting discussion with you because I think the big problem for us today is to understand how many European young people decide to be the enemy of their country, their community, their families many times, not only here, in Paris, in Italy. In Europe today, until now, we haven't had the time to debate and understand what is the origin of the big problem.

Chair: We would appreciate it if you could write to us about this because obviously it is a long answer that we need but we would be most grateful. Thank you for your invitation to join you on the boat. The Committee will consider this.

Mr Chaouki: You are welcome.

Chair: For those of us who cannot swim these are obviously difficult decisions, but we will certainly look at it. We are most grateful. Thank you for coming all the way from Rome to give evidence to us today. Thank you so much. Thank you, grazie.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Mr Gergely Gulyás**, Member of the Hungarian National Assembly and Vice-Chairman, Foundation for a Civic Hungary, gave evidence.

Q241 Chair: Thank you. Could I call to the dais the Deputy Speaker of the Hungarian National Assembly and Vice President of Fidesz, the Hungarian Civic Alliance? Mr Gulyás, thank you very much for coming. Again, we are very happy for you to use the interpreter. We will leave it to you to decide whether you want to answer in English or to use the interpreter and answer in Hungarian.

Now, Hungary has been very tough as far as the migration crisis is concerned and we have watched developments in Hungary. Why did you decide to build a fence in order to keep the migrants out of Hungary?

Mr Gulyás: Dear Mr President, dear honourable MPs, I would like to speak also Hungarian, not only because of the same opportunity but I think about these legal questions better if I can use my mother tongue.

Chair: Sure.

Mr Gulyás (Translation): We think that the Schengen agreement is of enormous value. It is a valuable asset for Europe, but even if it wasn't, it is still a provision in force and, therefore, we have to comply with it. It obliges us to protect not only the Hungarian borders but the EU, the Schengen borders. If we look around Europe what we can see is that the only places where the borders can be safely protected are places where there are physical borders, where there are fences. Therefore, for us it was not a matter of choice: it was our legal duty.

Q242 Chair: In erecting the fence, has it been effective to stop people coming in? Presumably you were reacting to the concerns of the Hungarian people. I assume that is the case. Has it been effective in keeping people out?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): What I can report to the Committee is that 400,000 people arrived at the borders of Hungary and entered Hungary and, after having erected the fence, only a few dozen. There is no doubt that different European societies, different communities, have different approaches to the issue of migration and generally the Visegrad countries are more definitively rejecting the idea of migration than their western European counterparts.

Q243 Chair: Indeed, but as far as the migrants are concerned, they do not want to stay in Hungary, do they?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): That is absolutely correct. All the 400,000 travelled on from Hungary.

Q244 Chair: They want to go to Austria and from Austria they want to go to Germany, so we could not understand why Hungarian troops stopped people boarding trains in order to go on a journey that would lead to Germany, because they did not really want to stay in Hungary, did they?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): Around 80% of those entering our country would like to end up in Germany, and the Government made a decision on 5 September that they would accept migrants and they put no upper limit to their number. But according to the first statement issued by the Government this limitless number related only to Syrian refugees, but it was a fact that there was no upper limit to this acceptance of refugees from that country.

Q245 Chair: Is Hungary getting any resources from the EU to deal with people arriving there and to process people?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): Hungary only received a basic amount that would only amount to about 10% of what we spent on protection and processing. What I would like to emphasise is that before 5 September, before that statement was made, there was a willingness to co-operate on the side of the asylum seekers, on behalf of the migrants, and afterwards that changed and that willingness to co-operate has vanished. We managed to register everybody prior to that statement and afterwards we couldn't. In terms of Hungary helping people to get to the trains it happened only after this famous statement, never before.

Q246 Chair: Yes. Some quick answers to some very quick questions. You are a very experienced European parliamentarian and I have seen you at a lot of the conferences on this very subject, so, first of all, do you think that Dublin needs to be revisited or are you happy with the Dublin agreement?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): Of course, Dublin has to be rethought from the bottom up. But of course my position is that as long as it is a provision that is still in force, we will comply and it will have to be complied with. Also I would like to note that almost everybody entering Hungary had come from Greece, and we had to be the ones who registered those people who had entered the European Union via Greece.

Q247 Chair: Sure, so you are in fact the second country. That is my second point. The decision taken by the EU Interior Ministers that Greece was not doing enough to protect its borders and, therefore, the external border of the EU should be moved inwards, basically around Hungary and the Balkan states, you support that? You think this is the right thing to do?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): Yes, indeed we ourselves proposed this solution earlier on. Obviously the European Union is made up of sovereign states and if Greece is incapable of defending the EU borders, then it leaves us with two solutions. One solution would be

to mandate Greece to defend the EU borders on behalf of the other EU states, or the other solution is that Greece bows out of Schengen, because if it is incapable of defending these borders, the common borders, then it has no place inside of that border.

Just quickly, I would like to remark that our other proposal is to include Bulgaria in the Schengen region. That would help us to close completely the Bulgarian and Macedonian borders to illegal entries.

Q248 Chair: Who do you blame for this crisis, which is obviously something that has been happening over the last two years now? This is not a sudden crisis, two years in the making. Do you blame the EU for failing to react quickly enough? Do you blame individual countries? Who do you blame for this crisis?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): Well, the very source of this migratory shock, this big movement, is that stability stopped in many countries of origin. Obviously, where the prior stability ended because of a military intervention, part of the blame goes to those who made this intervention, however well intentioned or however well reasoned that intervention was, and within this group of intervening people I include ourselves, Hungary. On top of that, I blame those as well who pretended that Europe is capable of taking on and accepting all of these people, but that is not the case.

Chair: Very helpful. Thank you.

Q249 Nusrat Ghani: Aside from the issue of the price of conflict, which is making people move towards more stable countries, would you agree with me that for us politicians the biggest problem we face or the biggest problem we will have to resolve, going forward, is the mass movement of people who are trying to make their way to the West to improve their economic situation? It is the biggest issue that we will possibly have to face in our generation.

Mr Gulyás (Translation): I entirely agree with you that this is going to be the greatest challenge of our generation and perhaps of the 21st century. Therefore, we have to rethink fundamentally issues of migration and issues of asylum.

Q250 Nusrat Ghani: In a bigger picture, even though we are talking about a particular issue here and now, you mentioned that your relationship with the people that you were trying to process changed when you were trying to establish those that had arrived from Syria, correct?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): If I may clarify this, what I understood by this is that the attitude of the migrants had changed. To begin with their numbers grew enormously. Hungary had otherwise decided already about erecting a fence over the greenfield borders, but this situation only justified our decision that we had made already.

Q251 Nusrat Ghani: It becomes incredibly difficult to work out who is a refugee, who is an asylum seeker, who is an economic migrant, especially if you are unable to effectively work with people and try to process them because they are not going to be forthcoming in giving information or handing over ID or tearing up ID, so it becomes

incredibly hard to work out those that genuinely need help and those who are economic migrants.

Mr Gulyás (Translation): That is entirely correct and the most difficult task is to decide and divide who belongs to which category, but this division as to who belongs to which category should be done outside Europe and not within. Hotspots only make sense if they are placed outside the Schengen borders, not within.

Nusrat Ghani: Outside the borders.

Mr Gulyás (Translation): Among the people who enter the Schengen borders there are refugees, there are economic migrants and, since Paris, we know full well that there are also terrorists among them.

Q252 Nusrat Ghani: A final question. Those that wish to settle in your country, how do you process them?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): Obviously, if somebody claims asylum in Hungary the procedure will have to be followed according to Hungarian provisions and EU provisions. What I would like to clearly state is, just because somebody is a refugee and forced to quit their own country, that does not entitle them to choose a country of safety. The provisions say they have to accept the first safe country.

Q253 James Berry: Thank you very much for coming to give evidence. For Schengen to work it is right, isn't it, that the internal border countries must have faith in the strength of the external border?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): This new phenomenon where we see borders rising within Schengen is a result of the weakness of the external borders. Let me give you an example about unfairness. The Austrian Chancellor saw a danger of Nazism within Hungary when we started erecting fences around the external border of Schengen. Currently, it is exactly the same Austria that is building a border within Schengen—a secure border, a fence.

Q254 James Berry: Yes, so you chose to erect a fence, which was controversial in a number of countries, including over here, and you have also said today, I think, that you feel you have not been given sufficient money from the EU centrally. If you had been given more money by the EU centrally to deal with this crisis, would you have done anything different to erecting a fence?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): No. The issue for us was not a budgetary issue, and, regardless of our financial situation, we complied with our EU obligations.

Q255 James Berry: Finally, the UNCHR assesses refugee status applications in the camps outside Syria and in other places and then puts people in vulnerable persons relocation schemes such as the one we have here. There is a view that people who do not go through that proper procedure, but instead choose to arrive at your border or the borders of Italy and Greece, are effectively jumping the queue and getting an unfair advantage against the people who have gone through the proper procedures. What do you think we can do to ensure people do not jump the queue and that the most vulnerable people who are still in the camps are dealt with in the proper way?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): In terms of border control, the most important provision is Article 31 of the Geneva Agreement. This provision tells us that if somebody comes from direct, imminent danger—let's say their neighbouring country is in a dangerous situation—then we have to let them in. If a migrant comes from a safe country, he or she is not entitled to cross illegally over natural or greenfield borders. Borders are part of national competence, but they are also part of EU obligations, within the Schengen Agreement, and we have to comply with those obligations.

Chair: Indeed. Of course you do.

Q256 James Berry: A quick final question—apologies. Do you think that your decision to effectively close the land border at Hungary has resulted in an increase in people taking the treacherous routes across the sea, particularly to Greece?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): The Hungarian decision in itself is far from sufficient to reduce the number of people arriving to Greece, but if there was a common agreement among the member states to do something similar, that would be sufficient to reduce the numbers arriving in Greece.

Q257 Mr David Winnick: We understand, of course, the tremendous pressure on your country, but are you aware there is concern about the way in which—what we have seen on television at the time—asylum seekers or people on the transit to a country where they will be claiming asylum are being treated? Are you aware of the sensitivity and the concern in a number of countries, certainly in Britain, among a number of people, over what we saw on television?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): Of course images have tremendous power, but that does not change the fact that our borders, which are Schengen external borders as well, were attacked, and we used legitimate and proportionate force to defend our borders.

Q258 Mr David Winnick: I will just put this question to you, just one question. As I understand the position—not unlike other countries, including Britain—I think it would be fair to describe your party as very right-wing. Perhaps you would differ. To the right of your party is an organisation that has 24 Members of Parliament: Jobbik, I think it is called. Indeed, at one time, if I am right, Jobbik even suggested that people who live in Hungary, actually born in that country, if they belong to a particular minority, should register, which reminded one of the 1930s Hungary. Is there enough understanding of the concern in Europe over such matters?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): If we end up mixing up incorrect pieces of information, then we can talk about any European country. The party you were referring to, Jobbik, is in opposition and are most evident opponents to the Government. We respect everybody's human rights. We follow a humanitarian approach as much as we can. Regarding the issues, Hungary only complied with its EU obligations.

Q259 Stuart C. McDonald: As I understand it, Hungary was offered help by international agencies with reception arrangements but that offer was turned down. Why was that?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): I am not aware of any means that were offered to us, any help, that we would not have taken on.

Q260 Stuart C. McDonald: Under the original EU relocation proposals, as I understand it, 54,000 or so refugees would have been taken from Hungary and relocated throughout the European Union. Is that not a positive thing for Hungary, and, if so, why challenge the relocation programme?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): There are two decisions here that I would like to disambiguate. One of them is a quota system under which Hungary would be obliged to accept only 1,000—an odd number—but we consider this decision unmanageable because there is no internal border, so everybody goes where they want to go. Somebody who is aiming to go to Sweden or Germany will find a way to go there, regardless of whether the quota tells them to be in Bulgaria or in Hungary.

Q261 Stuart C. McDonald: The final question is: your Prime Minister I think is on record as proposing internment camps for illegal immigrants, where they will be forced to work. Is that true, and do you think that is a helpful contribution to the debate?

Chair: We can accept a yes/no answer.

Mr Gulyás (Translation): I can give you a very short answer for that. Nothing like this has ever been said.

Chair: Thank you. We will accept that as an answer.

Mr Gulyás (Translation): There will be no internment camps.

Chair: Thank you.

Q262 Victoria Atkins: The response to the migration crisis of building a wall was met with some criticism from Germany and France, and indeed an Austrian official likened Hungary's behaviour to that of the Nazis, which it seems to me must be the ultimate insult. Did these reactions help foster good European relations?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): We do our best to achieve good European relations and we ourselves try to moderate our very decisive opinions about migration, but we have to act within European provisions.

Q263 Victoria Atkins: That is a very diplomatic answer. On the subject of relations, on a more serious note, we have learnt about what happened in Cologne on New Year's Eve. What effect, if any, has that had on community relations within Hungary?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): Within the borders of Hungary there are 13 national minorities. Our constitution provides for them the use of their mother tongue and the right to be educated in their mother tongue. They enrich our culture and we co-exist with them peacefully, but if someone accepts 1 million people in one year from a different culture, with a different religion, then we will end up with two parallel societies, and unfortunately we will see situations like this. Currently, this is not a problem that we face in Hungary.

Q264 Mr David Burrowes: Currently, the Danish Parliament is considering legislation to confiscate asylum seekers' valuables to pay for their upkeep. Is that a plan that would get support in the Hungarian Parliament?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): We did not make the same mistakes as the Danish have. Therefore, we have no intention to take any action that would be contrary to anybody's human rights.

Q265 Mr David Burrowes: In terms of your emergency legislation in September, the UN Human Rights Commission characterised your amendment to the criminal code and asylum law as making seeking asylum a crime. Do you agree with that characterisation?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): No, I do not. It was illegal entry into the country that used to be a summary offence, and we made it into a criminal offence. That is the new element. It is a criminal offence in Germany, illegal entry, and in many other European countries.

Q266 Mr David Burrowes: Just finally, you say there is respect for human rights in Hungary. Amnesty International report refugees from Syria in Hungary being threatened and beaten if they refuse to give fingerprints or board buses to reception centres. Is that report wrong, or, if it is correct, were the police not following the right orders?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): To our best knowledge, things like this did not happen. Had it happened, it would be treated as a very serious criminal offence. Amnesty International had several reports that were not exactly true to the facts about Hungary.

Q267 Chair: Mr Gulyás, who should fix this problem?

Mr Gulyás (Translation): Obviously, the responsibility is global. In order to create stability in the Middle East, a military presence is absolutely necessary. In order to solve the migration crisis, we will have to make it clear to everybody that the European Union protects its borders as much, for example, as the United States does.

If I may, a last sentence on this is that we need to take a significant financial responsibility and commitment so that the first safe countries could receive migrants adequately and, after the crisis had passed in their country of origin, they can safely return there.

Q268 Chair: Mr Gulyás, we are most grateful for you coming all the way from Budapest from your other duties to share this very important information with us. Thank you so much for coming. If there is anything else that you want to add to what you have said, please do write to us in either English or Hungarian. That would be fine. Thank you very much.

Mr Gulyás: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you.