

Interview with António Vitorino: progress made in asylum and immigration policy since 1999 (Lisbon, 24 October 2007)

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[Miriam Mateus] At the Commission, your other major area of responsibility was asylum and immigration policy. What does the European Union's common policy bring to Member States in this area? Have there been any significant developments in the last few years?

[António Vitorino] Well, the idea of a European asylum and immigration policy only gained a foothold in the Treaties, as it were, only when the Treaty of Amsterdam came into force in May 1999. In relation to asylum, the stage that was completed when I was still a Commissioner, up to 2004, was the 'first stage' of the asylum system, which involved the adoption of a number of minimum common rules which are now applied by the EU's 27 Member States. At the moment, we are in a period of transition towards the second stage of a common European asylum policy, which is the establishment, as from 2010, of a common European asylum system.

With regard to emigration, the shift is perhaps less extensive in that it is one of the most complex EU areas, and there is still considerable mutual mistrust among the Member States. It must be acknowledged, however, that progress has been made on some common rules on the rights and duties of immigrants from non-EU countries, on combating illegal immigration and people trafficking by means of common definitions of offences, more effective police and immigration service action and of cooperation in controlling the EU's external borders, which are common borders, and in ensuring the internal security of the European area, as well as with the adoption in November 2004 of a range of fundamental principles on policy for integrating immigrants into European societies.

Given the nature of migration flows, which are transnational and very fluid and which involve very significant numbers of people, I think it is undeniable that no single country now has the capacity to guarantee their proper regulation in isolation. The very dimension of the phenomenon therefore means that Europe-wide cooperation is needed.