States and Migration: The Human Movement Podcast
Episode #23 ‘Europe’s Migration Crisis: Inside the EU’s Struggles and Solutions (with Margaritis Schinas)’

Enhanced transcript

By Emmanuel Comte

Abstract: When migration collides with geopolitics, Europe finds itself at the centre of global turbulence. In this episode, Emmanuel Comte speaks with European Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas to explore how the EU has confronted major migration crises—from the war in Syria and the displacement from Ukraine to high-stakes tensions with Belarus and Turkey. Offering exclusive insights from inside the Commission, Schinas explains the political struggles behind EU migration policy and outlines the ambitions of the new Migration Pact to reshape Europe’s approach for the future.

Disclaimer: *This transcript has been produced for educational purposes to support the understanding and integration of information discussed in the related conversation. It is not intended for use in quoting the conversation verbatim. For accurate quotations, please refer to the original recording.*

Introduction

Emmanuel Comte: As wars rage on Europe’s doorstep, migration flows remain a constant preoccupation. Today, we sit down for a conversation with one of the European Union’s most influential voices on migration and asylum policy. Margaritis Schinas, Vice President of the European Commission, has a career spanning over three decades. From the corridors of Brussels to the frontlines of the EU’s crisis response, Mr. Schinas has not only witnessed but actively shaped Europe’s migration policies.

In this discussion, we’ll review the EU’s responses to major migration challenges—from the Syrian displacement to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing fallout from Russia’s war on Ukraine. We’ll also explore what the new Pact on Migration and Asylum means for the future. Southeastern Europe—positioned at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East—has been at the forefront of these challenges.

Mr. Schinas, thank you very much for being with us today.

Margaritis Schinas: Thank you for having me.

Career Origins: The Road to Migration Policy

Emmanuel Comte: You’ve had a front-row seat to Europe’s political evolution over the past few decades. Looking back, what first sparked your interest in European affairs? And how did migration come to occupy such a central place in your work?

Margaritis Schinas: I was 17 and preparing to enter university—law school in my hometown—when Greece's accession to what was then the European Communities took place. The formal ceremony at the Zappeion Hall marked the beginning of the accession process.

That moment felt like a generational call. I understood that it was the duty of my generation to be the first to serve a European Greece. I didn't belong to the generation that dreamed of accession, nor to the one that made it happen—but I am part of the first generation of Greeks who served Greece from Brussels. That's what ignited my commitment to building an academic and professional career that would eventually take me there.

As for migration, that came later. When I served as the Commission's Chief Spokesperson during the Juncker Commission, it was precisely at the time when migratory flows exploded—first with the collapse of Libya, and then with the war in Syria. We faced mass movements of desperate people toward Europe.

It was a crisis unfolding day by day, and I had to communicate the Commission's response to the public. That made me deeply involved in the EU's efforts to manage migration. And, as fate would have it, during the next Commission I became Vice President and assumed direct responsibility for this portfolio.

So, in a way, my experience evolved from observing and managing communications to directly shaping Europe's response. That's the background that brings me here today to discuss these issues.

Emmanuel Comte: So, the key turning points were Greece's accession to the European Communities in 1981, which gave you a sense of belonging to the European project, and then the developments during the Juncker Commission.

What about intermediary events like the end of the Cold War and the Balkan wars? Did they influence your work, particularly in relation to migration policy?

Margaritis Schinas: Yes, absolutely. I spoke earlier about what first sparked my interest in Europe, but the actual beginning of my career in the European institutions came just a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

That was a moment of European rebirth. We were finalizing the single market for 1992 and laying the foundations for a unified continent through trans-European networks.

Later came the Balkan wars. At that time, I was working in the offices of the commissioner focused on energy and transport.

So, my early civil service career was not directly related to migration, but it was shaped by these major external shocks. All of them had something in common: they tested Europe's cohesion. Yet, at the end of each process, Europe emerged stronger by managing to provide meaningful and coordinated responses.

Europe's Fragmented Migration Framework

Emmanuel Comte: Given your long career at the Commission during these pivotal moments, how do you reflect on the gradual formation of European migration policy prior to the Syrian crisis? In particular, I'd like your perspective on the Dublin system and its successive reforms. How were these policies adapted to address the pressures on southern Europe—especially Greece, Cyprus, and Italy, which became a major gateway during those decades?

Margaritis Schinas: Let us be very frank and not mince our words about that period. There was simply no comprehensive migration policy. Europe had to manage migration through a patchwork of regulatory solutions—mostly international conventions and, in a few cases, some European legal texts. But there was no coherent, EU-wide policy on migration. That was the root of the problem.

For many years—decades, even—we struggled to create such a policy framework. I remember efforts already underway before the Syrian crisis. I recall Antonio Vitorino, one of the early champions of such efforts. The pattern was always the same: a crisis would erupt, there would be attempts to formulate a European response, but they would inevitably fail due to a lack of agreement. There was no common ground—neither in the Council nor in the European Parliament. Even after the Syrian war, when the flames reached Europe directly, every effort by the Juncker Commission to produce a common European migration policy failed. Member states would not agree, and the European Parliament would not commit. That lack of agreement left us with a series of policy failures over many years.

Emmanuel Comte: The member states could not reach an agreement. From your vantage point, what did you observe? What was the nature of the disagreement among member states—particularly between countries like France and Germany and frontline countries like Greece?

Margaritis Schinas: The answer is both obvious and simple. The most toxic element in the debate was the burden-sharing dynamic. The frontline states—Greece, Malta, Italy, Spain—felt they were left alone to handle pressures imposed by geography. They wanted the others to share the responsibility.

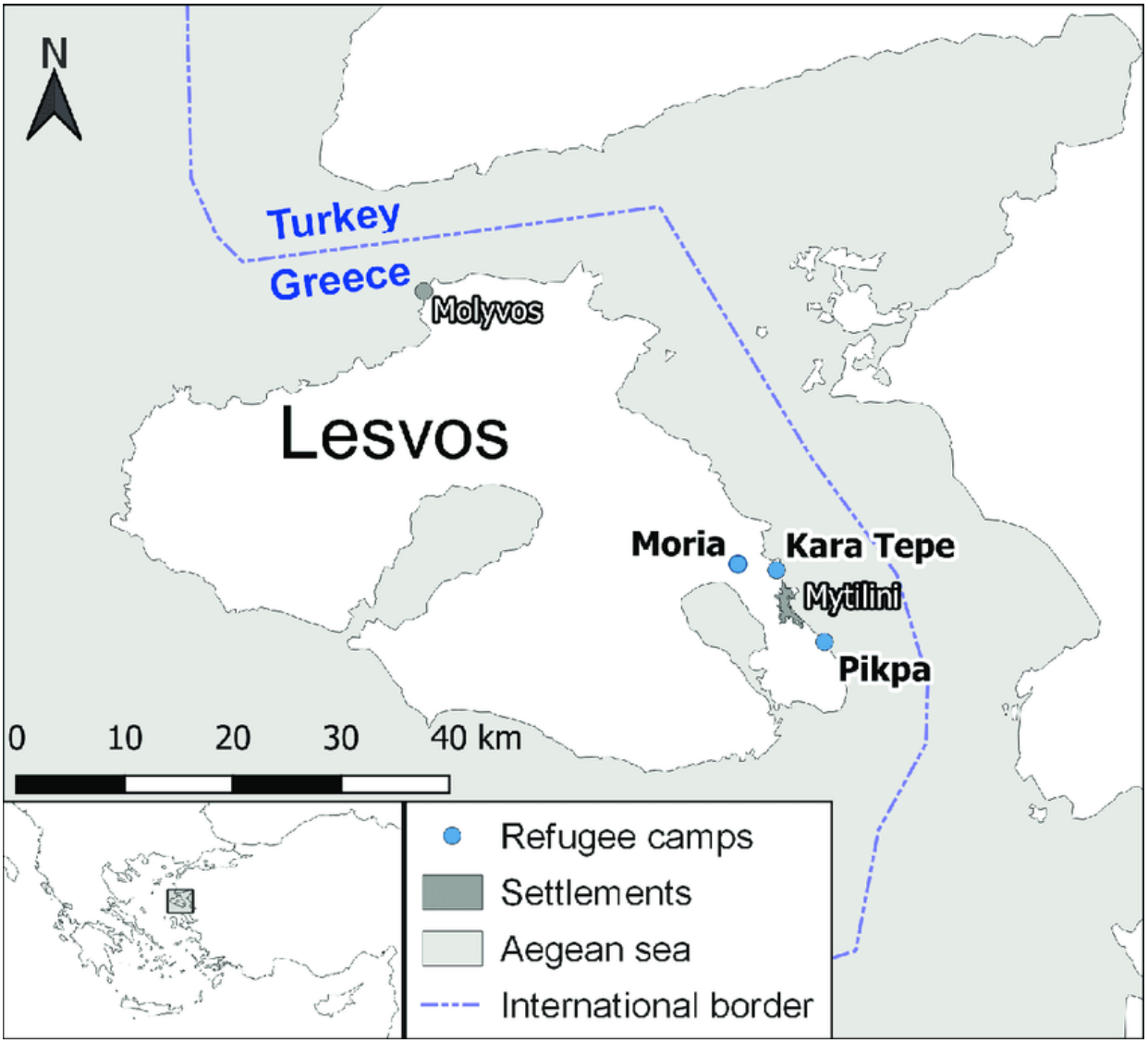
At the same time, the destination countries in the north and west also felt they were bearing a disproportionate burden. They were expected to provide for those arriving, often without any prior control or coordination.

If you're asking for the root cause: this imbalance, and the absence of a shared understanding of responsibility, was at the heart of the problem. For years, even decades, Europe failed to find common ground. Member states clung to their red lines rather than working toward a shared landing zone on which a genuine European migration policy could be built.

The 2015 Migration Crisis

Emmanuel Comte: You were not Vice-President of the Commission yet in 2015–2016, but you were deeply involved in the European Commission at the time. How did you feel—personally—when the migration crisis erupted? I remember the peak was around September 2015, but it had started earlier. What was it like for you?

Margaritis Schinas: Without a doubt, 2015 was the most difficult year of my professional life. It was a perfect storm. That year, we had the ongoing Greek debt crisis, and—as you rightly said—the migratory explosion, especially during September and October. I have very vivid memories of that time. There wasn't a single day when we had positive news on migration. Every day brought new problems. It felt like a collective failure. The events in the Greek islands—especially Moria—were terrible.



Let us not forget that some of the perpetrators of the Paris terrorist attacks passed through the Greek islands during that period. It was truly awful. It was a relentless sequence of bad news, which only reinforced the belief that a European solution was desperately needed but sorely lacking.

Despite the Juncker Commission's efforts, that solution did not materialize. The only positive outcome during that period was the Luxembourg Presidency's decision—by qualified majority—to adopt a relocation system to support Greece and Italy. That allowed for the relocation of a number of Syrian refugees. However, even that came at a cost. While it did alleviate pressure on frontline states, it created significant political backlash. Decisions made by qualified majority are always contentious. If you ask how I felt at the time, the answer is: miserable. It was extremely difficult and emotionally taxing. As the Commission's Chief Spokesperson, I was constantly on the frontlines. It was an immensely challenging role.

From Spokesperson to Vice-President

Emmanuel Comte: Did you feel a calling to address this issue more directly? Is that how you ended up with the migration portfolio in 2019, or was that unrelated?

Margaritis Schinas: During the Juncker period, the regulatory solution—the regulatory agreement—did not materialize. But we were collecting pieces of the puzzle that would become essential in the next institutional cycle.

It was a big surprise for me to become Vice President of the European Commission and a member of the College, and also to be entrusted with the coordination of migration policy. I believe it was a wise choice at the time to appoint a center-right Vice President from a frontline country, and to pair that role with a Commissioner for Home Affairs from a reception country, Sweden, and from the Socialist political family.

So, we formed a team that brought together significant political and technical expertise on the issue. That helped enormously. What also gave us a strong starting point was the fact that by December 2019, the situation had become untenable. Moria was hosting 20,000 people in a camp designed for only 3,000. Lampedusa was overwhelmed. We had massive migratory pressure on the Canary Islands. In short, all entry routes were under pressure.

This is what we found when we arrived—on top of the traumatic legacy of 2014–2015, whose wounds were still open. So, the Commission's starting point was dramatic. But in a way, that was a blessing in disguise. With the starting point being so low, it gave us the opportunity to act quickly.

The Evros Border Showdown and Turkey's Deep State

Emmanuel Comte: You had a rough start indeed. And not only because of the situation in December 2019. In February 2020, a new crisis erupted involving Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus. You reacted very rapidly at that time. What exactly happened?

Margaritis Schinas: It was an unprecedented situation—a historic first in Europe. In my view, it was the cost of non-Europe. The absence of a coherent EU migration policy made it easy for autocratic leaders to instrumentalize migration—to weaponize it as a means of harming Europe.

The first time we saw this clearly was in Evros, in February 2020. About 10,000 to 25,000 desperate Syrian refugees were loaded onto buses in Istanbul and sent to the Greek-Turkish border, under the false promise that the borders were open and that by tomorrow they would be in Munich, Stuttgart, or Vienna.

This was not a migratory phenomenon—it was a hybrid attack. It was coordinated, well-resourced, and well-timed. It took place over a long weekend—on a Saturday and Sunday leading into Clean Monday in Greece. It was clearly a test for Europe. We had the obligation to respond, to make clear that no one can intimidate or harass Europe.

Even though we lacked a full policy, we were not defenseless. We quickly mobilized a significant number of Frontex officers. In an unprecedented move, the Presidents of the three main EU institutions went to the ground, accompanied by the Croatian Prime Minister, who was then President of the Council. We stood on the front line of defense.

It was a Rubicon moment. Evros marked the point where Europe demonstrated its determination to respond differently under the new Commission.

Emmanuel Comte: To what extent do you believe this operation was politically coordinated at the highest levels in Turkey? Was it more of a bureaucratic response—perhaps by the police or other agencies—or did it come directly from the top, from President Erdoğan himself?

Margaritis Schinas: I believe it was an impulsive decision taken by Turkey's deep state—a structure that includes military, political, and intelligence actors. It followed the dramatic loss of around fifteen Turkish soldiers in Syria. The deep state seemed to interpret these losses as a result of Europe asking Turkey to do the dirty work.

Their answer, it seems, was to send 25,000 refugees to the border. But it was a miscalculation. The move had the opposite effect of what they intended. And we saw a similar scenario later, at the Belarus–Poland–Lithuania border in 2021.

In both cases, Europe proved far more resilient and capable of defending itself than the perpetrators of these hybrid attacks had expected.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you would consider it more a reactive action by top officials in the Turkish police or military, rather than part of a broader geopolitical strategy—let's name it—by President Erdoğan and other high-ranking ministers?

Margaritis Schinas: I don't know, actually. I was not involved, so I cannot say how the decision was made on the Turkish side. But the sequence of events—the killing of Turkish soldiers in Syria, which I believe happened on a Friday, followed by the organized attempt to breach the border less than a day later—clearly suggests an impulsive move. While it may not have been geopolitical in intent, it certainly had major geopolitical consequences.

Cyprus and the Green Line

Emmanuel Comte: And it seemed there was a clear setting for the drama—the Evros River—with the confrontation taking place at the Greek border there. Interestingly, I was recently speaking with the Cypriot Minister of the Interior at the time, Mr. Nikos Nouris. He explained to me that a very similar situation unfolded in Cyprus at the exact same time, in February 2020. The key difference was that there were no Cypriot police forces positioned along the Green Line to stop the flow.

Do you think there was also a coordinated effort, as you described in Greece, directed simultaneously at both Greece and Cyprus?

Margaritis Schinas: No, I don't think the situation we faced in Cyprus—which I was also asked to help manage in cooperation with the Cypriot authorities—was the same. In Cyprus, we were not dealing with a case of an organized attack orchestrated by the deep Turkish state. Rather, it was a chain of interests—smugglers, universities in Northern Cyprus, and some individuals in the northern part of the island where the Republic of Cyprus does not exercise effective control. These actors saw an opportunity to profit.

The core issue was, as you pointed out, the particular status of the Green Line. Technically, it is not the external border of the European Union and cannot be treated as one. Due to Cyprus's constitutional setup and the terms of its EU accession, police enforcement cannot take place directly on the Green Line.

This institutional, legal, and political weakness created a loophole that some people exploited—at the expense, of course, of the vulnerable individuals who were brought to Cyprus under false pretenses, often as supposed students, and then led to believe they could freely cross into the EU.

It was a very challenging situation, but also one in which the EU was able to support Cyprus effectively.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you would say the situation in Cyprus was perhaps less political than in Greece, more driven by smugglers taking advantage of a large pool of asylum seekers in Turkey, and using the Green Line as a route to the EU—to collect fees for their passage?

Margaritis Schinas: Yes, exactly. The Evros case was clearly a deliberately organized hybrid attack. In contrast, the Green Line situation was an organized network combining different interests—smuggling, commercial, political, and academic—which functioned for a time. But we were able to stop it.

As you may know, there are now virtually zero arrivals via the Green Line. We supported the Cypriot government with a number of very effective measures.

First, I personally contacted the Turkish airlines that were flying these individuals via Istanbul to the occupied north of Cyprus. I made it very clear that they bore a responsibility: these were not ordinary tourists, but individuals intending to cross the Green Line illegally into the European Union. I urged the airlines to strengthen checks—passports, documents, visas—and I believe that had a strong impact.

Second, we addressed the role of the universities in the northern part of Cyprus. They were clearly instructed to be more restrictive in issuing invitations, not only to so-called students but also to their supposed family members.

In short, we worked on the supply side and significantly reduced the inflow.

On the demand side, we supported Cyprus in cooperating with other Member States to return many of the irregular arrivals to their countries of origin. I can say with a certain pride that Cyprus is now the EU's undisputed leader in returns, having achieved the highest number of returns of irregular migrants.

So, while both cases fall under the same policy area, the dynamics were very different.

The Triangle Turkey, Greece, Cyprus

Emmanuel Comte: You mentioned European funding for returning migrants, and you also implied that you were able to influence certain actors—for example, at Istanbul Airport, and perhaps also in the northern occupied part of Cyprus, where some universities were bringing in students. But in fact, these were individuals who were simply trying to migrate toward the EU.

How do you see the prospects for cooperation within this triangle—Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus? On one extreme, some would argue that there is no cooperation and no trust. On the other, you seem to suggest that cooperation among these three countries on migration flows is possible. What is your assessment?

Margaritis Schinas: Broadly speaking, there can be no effective European migration policy without enhanced cooperation with countries of origin and transit. It's as simple as that. We will never be able to manage migration internally unless we also manage it externally.

This external dimension is a fundamental pillar of what we are trying to achieve. Over the last five years, we have significantly consolidated this external approach. We now have agreements with nearly all major countries of origin and transit—from Bangladesh and Pakistan to Turkey, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and the countries of West Africa. We've reinforced our cooperation with all of them because, clearly, we need these third countries.

In this context, Turkey is a key actor. While it is not a country of origin, it is a major country of transit. It borders many countries that are central to the main migratory routes from the East.
I believe the EU should assist Turkey in strengthening its border controls on its eastern frontier. This would benefit both Turkey and the European Union—especially Greece and Cyprus. The more effective Turkey's controls are on that border, the more functional the EU-Turkey relationship on migration will become.

We are already spending considerable resources to support Turkey—not only in hosting refugee communities on its territory but also in providing equipment and training for better border management.

Personally, I do not subscribe to the view that we can manage migration without Turkey. We absolutely need Turkey as an interlocutor—if not a partner, at least someone actively engaged in the process.

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum

Emmanuel Comte: You suggest that the situation has improved in terms of the EU's and its member states' capacity to manage migration flows at the external border—partly thanks to cooperation with transit and origin countries. What are your thoughts on the future? Do you think the current arrangement is solid, or is there still a need for a more sustainable policy?

Margaritis Schinas: I am quite hopeful and optimistic about the future, for several reasons. First, since December 2024, Europe has finally reached a broad consensus on migration. We now have a proper regulatory framework—a holistic one—known as the *EU Pact on Migration and Asylum*. It was adopted with majority support in both the European Parliament and the Council, marking the end of decades of trial and error. This new system will enter into force on 1 January 2026.

This framework includes comprehensive border management, clearly defined responsibilities, partnerships with countries of origin and transit, harmonized procedures across the EU, and genuine solidarity among member states.

It's a coherent and integrated policy structure, firmly rooted in EU law and backed by EU funding. In fact, we recently secured an additional €2 billion specifically for migration policy.

For the first time, Europe is not sleepwalking through this issue. We're not improvising anymore. We have a structured policy—and it's already delivering results.

Second, across all migration routes, we've observed a general improvement. Smuggling networks are being dismantled because the gaps they previously exploited have been closed. Smugglers now realize that Europe has a working system—one that prioritizes legitimate asylum seekers and promptly returns those who are not eligible.

That's why I'm optimistic. This framework answers the questions we've been asking for decades. Of course, the challenge now is implementation. But I believe it will succeed, because every member state has a shared interest in making it work.

Countries at the external borders will gain immediate solidarity, and reception states will benefit from greater predictability and planning—no longer facing unregulated inflows of people. So yes, I believe the outlook is promising.

The Economics of Smuggling

Emmanuel Comte: Is €10,000 to €12,000 the current price to cross the EU's external border?

Margaritis Schinas: During the Belarus crisis, which echoed the Evros situation, that was roughly the amount the Belarusian authorities were charging migrants. They would ask for this sum with a promise of access to the European Union via Belarusian territory.

Smuggling is a major business—an entire industry—in this country, in Greece. I was recently told that more than 20% of the prison population here is made up of individuals connected to smuggling activities. It's a significant operation, and we must break the business model, obviously.

Emmanuel Comte: Do you think some of the people who make the journey receive loans from smugglers? I'm wondering how many can actually pay these amounts. Perhaps they don't pay upfront but become indebted to the smugglers and repay the debt later. How can they afford such high costs?

Margaritis Schinas: I believe there's a known but largely hidden ecosystem at work, one we do not fully understand. In many cases—particularly in Africa—there are crowdfunding efforts. Those who succeed in reaching Europe can, in turn, help finance others from their communities.

Another phenomenon we've observed, especially along illegal migration routes from Africa, is that those trying to enter the EU are not always the most vulnerable. Many come from middle-class backgrounds seeking better lives in Europe. So, this is a multidimensional phenomenon that requires nuanced responses.

Emmanuel Comte: That's interesting. So, there are remittances from those who succeed, which fund further departures?

Margaritis Schinas: Yes, all kinds of these mechanisms are in play. There is also, if I may put it this way, a concept of "life accomplishment" in certain regions. Making it to the EU through irregular migration is seen as a mark of success—something to be admired and imitated.

In my many visits to countries of origin and transit—I've traveled widely—one of my key messages to the public has always been: don't undertake these journeys. They are not as promising as they seem. Don't place your life in the hands of smugglers. There are legal pathways to Europe—viable, open, and worth pursuing. I urge people to choose these legal routes rather than risking everything.

Challenges Ahead: Cyprus and Geopolitical Instability

Emmanuel Comte: I have two final questions before concluding. The first relates to feedback I've heard from the Cypriot side. There still seem to be concerns regarding the new migration framework. Specifically, some feel dissatisfied with the provision offering €20,000 to countries per asylum seeker they accommodate. They would have preferred to transfer those individuals to other EU states rather than receive money. Do you see possible solutions to this unresolved issue, or was this simply the best compromise possible among member states?

Margaritis Schinas: Two things on that. First, Cyprus voted in favor of the pact, and I'm very grateful to Cyprus—as I am to Greece—for fully backing our proposals.

Second, the €20,000 payment clause was not part of the original Commission proposal. We did not propose it. It emerged during Council negotiations as part of the broader compromise. I hope it won't be necessary to apply this provision in every case, because the whole idea of the pact is that solidarity mechanisms will be triggered as needed.

Whoever requires solidarity, and activates the framework provided by the pact, will receive it. There should be no need to invent parallel mechanisms. The pact is designed to ensure that every member state gets what it needs when it needs it.

Emmanuel Comte: And the last question before concluding: Do you think that geopolitical instability on the periphery of Europe could once again challenge the current situation? We know that the periphery of Europe remains unstable. There is an ongoing war in Gaza, tensions around Iran, and the war in Ukraine is not over. How do you think possible geopolitical developments might disrupt the status quo?

Margaritis Schinas: We do not live in a sterilized world. We don't produce policy in laboratory conditions. The European Union stands at the crossroads of geopolitics—everything affects us. Everything happening on our periphery impacts us directly, and indeed, a great deal is happening

at our borders. We must remain constantly aware and alert. We need to follow world affairs with diligence and be prepared to act in order to prevent and deter, rather than simply react. That said, I believe that despite the turbulence surrounding us, we have not experienced new waves of uncontrolled migration, contrary to many analyses and expectations. For instance, the conflict in the Middle East has remained contained in terms of migratory flows. We did not witness a mass exodus of displaced persons toward Europe. Similarly, earlier fears that the return of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan would trigger major population movements have not materialized. Of course, the war in Ukraine continues, but we have the special temporary protection status, which allows many Ukrainian refugees to come legally to the European Union. I think that system has worked well. It has helped us, and it has helped them. Overall, we are operating in a more controlled environment. Personally, I believe Africa will remain a key challenge in the coming years, especially as the situation in Western Africa is still far from stable. We need to pay close attention to countries such as Senegal and the broader Sahel region. We should do everything we can to support their stabilization through partnership agreements. So yes, geopolitical alertness is essential. But at this moment, I don't perceive any imminent risk.

Conclusion: Reflections and Future Plans

Emmanuel Comte: Thank you very much for answering my question. So, Mr. Schinas, what is next for you? What are your current projects in the field of European and migration affairs?

Margaritis Schinas: I am in a phase where I remain deeply connected to public life. I've accumulated a wealth of experience and knowledge, which I am now sharing—just as I'm doing here with you. I plan to continue contributing to these debates, not only as a former member of the Commission but also as an engaged citizen. It's a particularly privileged position to be in, because one can speak with the benefit of firsthand experience, yet without the constraints that came with holding office. I'm looking forward to this new chapter.

Emmanuel Comte: I would like to thank you very much for being so open and willing to engage in this conversation. It has been a great honor to speak with you, and I'm truly grateful for your participation in this research. Your insights have been extremely valuable. Once again—thank you, thank you very much.