

## Five minutes with Sweden's Minister for Migration and Asylum Policy, Tobias Billström: "Europe's relationship with North Africa when it comes to migration is something that we will have to continue to discuss."

Jun 1 2012

*Can migration be good for both migrants' home countries and for their destinations? In an interview with EUROPP editors Chris Gilson and Julian Kirchherr, Sweden's Minister for Migration and Asylum Policy, [Tobias Billström](#) argues that migrants remit far more than countries provide in development aid, and that they can be key in addressing skill shortages within the EU.*



### **What do you think the links are between migration and development, especially for countries in the European neighbourhood?**

I think that it is very important to remember that remittances, the money that migrants send back home to their country of origin, count for— up to today — a sum of up to \$US 350 billion per year. That is about three times the volume of official development aid (ODA) going to the same countries. So we are speaking about a tremendous mechanism in favor of development, not just for the individual recipients, but also for the society as a whole; it also stimulates consumption, and increases investment in social services such as education or healthcare.

So what we have to work through our decision-makers around the globe is to see to it that we can promote further efforts to ensure that remittances can achieve their full development potential.

### **The Swedish government supports the European Commission's plans for Common European Asylum System. Why do you think this is important?**

The whole presumption of the EU is that we have one common border, but within this one common border there is free movement. If this is going to work, then all the 27 member states have to agree upon the rules and the legislation on the movement across this outer border. This is in terms of asylum seekers, tourists, businessmen, students, etc. But asylum seekers are particularly important because asylum legislation is a question of international legislation, where all countries around the world that have agreed to sign the Geneva Convention, or the European Convention on Human Rights, are bound by this legislation.

Without having a common set of rules, and also the practical feasibility of officials in all 27 member states carrying out asylum procedures all in the same way, we are going to have a lot of trouble. This is counterproductive not only for the individual member states, but also ultimately for the individual asylum seekers, who will then face the situation where they won't have legal safety when they hand in their asylum applications. They will instead have an asylum lottery, based upon different interpretations of asylum legislation in each of the 27 member states, and that is bad.

### **Sweden has one of the oldest populations in Europe. Do you think that immigration can address Sweden's demographic challenge?**

Yes, certainly, up to a certain point. You will never be able to solve the entire demographic challenge that Sweden and other countries in the EU, as well as outside of the EU, are facing. That is simply not possible, because a) you won't be able to find enough migrants who are willing to migrate to Sweden in particular, and b) you simply don't have the option of amending your demography simply through labour migration. You have

to look at other things such as the retirement age, or the amount of time each person works. It's a very complicated matter.

So labour migration can never be the total answer to all the challenges of demography, but many things can be amended by labour migration, especially sectors in Sweden that are facing a huge labour deficit such as the mining industry, or the forest industry, or the health care industry, and the health care sector, the public sector. In all these sectors there are deficits; you will not find enough people to work in them, while at the same time the population in Sweden is growing more and more in age, meaning that they will live longer. You will have a double challenge. You will have many people who will live longer and need medical attention and healthcare, but at the same time you will not have enough people to deal with that situation. Labour migration is definitely an answer to many challenges, but not all.

**In recent years, we have seen the rise of an anti-immigrant discourse in Europe. Why do you think many people are against immigration?**

I believe that a lot of the anti-migration discussion is based on a lack of information. People misunderstand, and they don't see the reality that migrants actually do the jobs which people don't want to do themselves, in the cleaning industry or in the agriculture sector, for instance. And also the revenue that migrants bring in to the individual member state is many more times what they take out of the system.

We also have a problem with consumer perspectives; the fact that some people do not realize that if it weren't for migrant workers, then several of the more agriculturally based economies in Southern Europe like Italy, Spain or Greece would probably be in for a rough ride indeed, if they did not have seasonal, migrant workers, who at the same time are denied fundamental rights, like the ability to apply for permanent residency and citizenship in those countries. We are probably paying much less for a lemon, an orange or a bottle of wine than we would be if people received the right salaries according to their labour. This constitutes a huge part of the problem.

So the anti-migration discussion is in my opinion a multi-faceted one, it has also to do with the fact that people sometimes connect criminality with migration. But, those people who make that connection fail to realize that criminality in the ranks of migrants is more related to social challenges. People also fail to realize how many migrants have come to Europe in recent decades, and how much this meant to the economy of the individual countries. The Swedish economic boom in the 1950s and 1960s, could never have happened without a steady inflow of migrants from Italy and Yugoslavia. To understand this lesson is very important.

Europe's relationship with North Africa when it comes to migration is definitely something that we will have to continue to discuss. North Africa holds a lot of potential migrants, who could come to the EU, if we are lucky, and if we play our cards well, but if we don't do that they might very well go to the US, Australia or Canada. If that were to be the case we would be deprived of a potential workforce, which could otherwise help the EU in our quite dire situation in the years to come.

**Sweden is part of the Schengen Area. In recent months, both Germany and France have called for the EU to allow Schengen states to reimpose border controls for up to 30 days to prevent any major influx of illegal immigrants. Do you think that Schengen will survive in its current form for much longer?**

I hope so. If the opposite were to happen, if the Schengen system would be put really into question, we would have to go back and re-institute border controls. Then the EU itself would ultimately be threatened because not allowing the citizens of the EU the ability to move across borders would mean that the actual added value of being an EU citizen would be removed. The Schengen system simply has to survive, and it is our responsibility as decision-makers in the EU to see to it that it does.

We need to strengthen the Schengen system by constructing a functioning, proper European asylum system, and by ensuring that the global approach to migration that has been accepted by the EU's heads of government is used to tackle the challenges of migration in our relationships with the countries around the EU, in our close neighbourhood, and further away.

We now have a golden opportunity, now that some of the more despotic regimes of Northern Africa have

been moved out. We have new regimes that the EU can sit down with and discuss questions of migration. We have to seize this moment in time, and make the best of it, to see to it that we can develop a new attitude towards mobility and migration. That is the only way to avoid situations where member states instead, when they are given a non-managed inflow of migration, they will simply say “let’s talk about border controls”, and nothing else. We understand border controls. They are simple and very easy to communicate with the public. To construct migration and mobility instruments, with a partnership condition with North Africa, is the only way we can solve these important questions.

*Tobias Billström spoke at the LSE Event, How Can European Migration Policies Promote Development? on 23 May. [Podcast for the event.](#)*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## **About the Author**

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Tobias Billström is Swedish minister for migration and asylum policy. Swedish migration policy includes refugee and migration policy, voluntary return home and support to voluntary return migration. Billström, a member of the Moderate Party, has been a member of Parliament since 2002.



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