

Comment

Europe is the answer

Only through closer cooperation can we secure the safety and prosperity of our citizens

José Luis Zapatero

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At the borders of Ceuta and Melilla - the Spanish cities that share a frontier with Morocco - and at our international ports and airports, the 12 gold stars on a blue background fly side by side with the Spanish flag. The tourists, workers, students and immigrants who arrive in Málaga, Barcelona, Bilbao or the Canary Islands are not arriving just in Spain. They are entering the largest area of freedom, democracy and social progress that exists anywhere in the world today: the European Union. This area, with a population of 453 million and 30% of the world's GDP, has some of the most powerful economies in the world and the greatest representation of western culture, tradition and history.

This area is a daily reality for the people of Europe. However, for hundreds of thousands of the world's population, it remains a goal. In many cases, a goal from which they are physically separated only by a fence or a few miles of sea. This is why tens of thousands of people from across the world, seeking to leave behind abject poverty, war or repression, are knocking at the gates of the EU. Regulating the conditions for entry cannot be the exclusive responsibility of those who are near the gate.

The recent tragic events at Spain's borders with Morocco have shown the urgency of the challenge. The border between Spain and Morocco is the scene of the greatest difference in per-capita income between neighbouring countries in the world, a proportion of 15 to one. Morocco has calculated that its territory hosts about 40,000 people from sub-Saharan Africa who are trying to enter the EU. We are not facing a merely Spanish problem but a global one.

So we are seeking a common policy to control immigration, redouble our efforts in the fight against illegality, foster solidarity with transit countries such as Morocco, and regulate development aid to the countries of origin. That is why Spain is promoting a Euro-African ministerial conference on immigration, about which I shall inform colleagues at tomorrow's Hampton Court meeting.

The EU is also facing two other big challenges: our prosperity and our safety. I believe firmly in the Lisbon strategy, the series of measures agreed five years ago to make the EU the most dynamic and competitive economy in the world by the end of the decade. Globalisation has made it essential to promote common policies aimed at narrowing the technological gap between member states and promoting investment.

We also need closer cooperation to fight more effectively against terrorism. The sharing of information, joint police action and judicial collaboration must be more coordinated and effective, both among EU member states and with other countries. Nevertheless, the fight against terrorism cannot be limited to repressive action. A challenge such as this requires a global and strategic response that eliminates the breeding ground of this plague. That is why I proposed an alliance of civilisations for dialogue, which has since been adopted by the UN. Democrats must win the battle of hearts and minds.

After last spring's political storms, the EU is going through a difficult moment. The time has come to act again. In the difficult times of its construction, the EU was always able to move forward, and tomorrow's meeting at Hampton Court could be a good time to start.

Europe is the answer - the realistic answer of those who refuse to give in to pessimism or fear, and who redouble their efforts in times of difficulty.

· José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero is prime minister of Spain