



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

Is It a Fortress Europe? A Call for a Humane Treatment of Refugees and Solidarity

Statement by the Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum is deeply concerned about the situation of the refugees trying to reach the European Union and those already living in camps on the Greek islands¹. We strongly condemn attacks on human rights defenders who are providing refugees with health care, food and schooling, as well as multiple cases of an inhumane treatment of newcomers at the EU border².

The refugee situation has deteriorated this year because of heavy bombings targeted at civilians in the Idlib Province in Syria by the Assad regime, which has been backed by Russian troops³. Besides, Turkey chose to open its border to the European Union breaking the 2016 EU-Turkey deal. Subsequently, thousands of people have been trying to cross the Turkish-Greek land border or arrive to the Greek islands by boat in an attempt to seek a safe shelter in the European Union.

The response of the government in Athens and the European Union leadership has been shocking and not in line with the principles of humanity and solidarity the Union has been built upon. The Greek police fired teargas and plastic bullets at migrants and refugees. Vigilante groups intimidated people at the border, with residents on the island of Lesbos reportedly blocking the disembarkation of a dinghy full of people travelling from Turkey, including a pregnant woman and children. This only added to an already very undignified situation that has persisted in the camps on some islands for several years now. In the past weeks, several NGOs and volunteers have reported attacks and threats, and many of them are now withdrawing from the camps in fear of their lives. Furthermore, there is an obvious danger that the coronavirus will appear in the camps⁴.

On 1 March 2020, the Greek government announced it would suspend asylum applications for one month, whilst EU leaders openly supported Greece's actions and pledged € 700 million in aid to the authorities. Luckily, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and Portugal agreed to take children from the camps – and we thank these states for this important humanitarian step that was stimulated by municipalities in a number of countries offering capacity and accompaniment for these children⁵.

¹ Read more at www.unhcr.org/europe-emergency.html

² See <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/17/greece-violence-against-asylum-seekers-border>, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/greece-turkey-refugees-explainer, <https://helprefugees.org/news/eu-turkey-deal-explained>

³ See www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14132.doc.htm and www.msf.org/horrific-day-indiscriminate-attacks-idlib-syria

⁴ See www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-greece-migrants/msf-urges-greece-to-evacuate-migrant-camps-due-to-coronavirus-risk-idUSKBN2102M1

⁵ See www.infomigrants.net/en/post/23468/who-will-be-on-the-list-of-1-600-refugees-relocated-from-greece

This step, however, is, like the 2016 EU-Turkey deal, a provisional and partial solution only. Besides, several other states rejected to act on the willingness of municipalities to join the initiative⁶.

The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum calls on the EU leadership to show strength towards its member states and request countries to follow all provisions of the Refugee Convention⁷ and equally participate in the relocation of refugees. We demand from the European Union to urgently find a solution for a change in inhumane living conditions of migrants and refugees in the camps and for the protection of and an end to the criminalisation of the people working to help them. The people in the camps and those living in precarious conditions along the EU's borders should be included in the special measures to protect vulnerable groups from the coronavirus.

Furthermore, the Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum demands from all parties of the conflict, specifically the government of the Russian Federation, to stop war actions in Syria that violate international humanitarian law and to refuse to use refugees for their political purposes.

Finally, we call for a humane treatment of refugees and solidarity, both within the European Union and beyond.

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The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform. At the moment, 180 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are members or supporters of the Forum. It aims at development of cooperation of civil society organisations from Russia and EU and greater participation of NGOs in the EU-Russia dialogue. The Forum has been actively involved, inter alia, in the questions of facilitation of visa regime, development of civic participation, protection of the environment and human rights, dealing with history and civic education.

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⁶ See, e.g., <https://dutchreview.com/news/dutch/leiden-ready-to-shelter-orphaned-refugee-children-from-greece>

⁷ See the Convention text at www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html