A Solution for the Refugee Crisis Should Be Sought on Both Governmental and Non-Governmental Level

Statement by the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

The Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum calls on the authorities of the European Union and the EU member countries to develop sound policies for short- and long-term reception of asylum seekers and to comply with their human rights obligations. We urge the related institutions to closer cooperate with local authorities, NGOs, bottom-up initiatives, and human rights defenders worldwide.

We appreciate efforts of civil society across Europe aimed at assisting the refugees. The Steering Committee also calls on the EU and other international actors, including the OSCE, to cooperate with such initiatives and active citizens. Germany has an important role in leading such support: It overtakes the OSCE presidency in 2016 and is one of the main final destinations for refugees. Latest efforts by the European Commission to relocate 120,000 refugees across all the EU member states and the decision of Switzerland to accept up to 5,000 individuals are steps in the right direction. However, it is only a temporary solution in the face of a daily arrival of thousands of people to Europe.

Simultaneously, single EU countries including Austria and Germany introduced border controls within the Schengen Area and discontinued railway transportation between EU states. These moves endanger one of the achievements of “big Europe” – free border traffic. Other crucial EU values – humanity and respect of human dignity – were put into question by states that principally oppose refugee quotas or have adopted stricter immigration laws, including deportation and prison terms for the refugees “entering the EU illegally.”

Within and outside of the EU, increasingly hostile rhetoric towards refugees, xenophobic pronouncements (as preferential treatment of non-Muslim refugees), human smuggling under

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1 See, eg. “Migration Aid” (Hungary, [http://www.migrationaid.net/english](http://www.migrationaid.net/english)) – assistance to refugees arriving in Hungary; humanitarian aid to refugees collected by citizens themselves like a caravan from Spain to Hungary ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/09/14/aid-caravan-madrid-budapest_n_8123228.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/09/14/aid-caravan-madrid-budapest_n_8123228.html)); initiatives aimed at providing guest families and own properties to refugees - “Citizen UK” (United Kingdom, [http://www.citizensuk.org/help_find_homes_for_syrian_refugees](http://www.citizensuk.org/help_find_homes_for_syrian_refugees)), “Flüchtlinge Willkommen” (Germany, [http://www.fluechtlinge-willkommen.de](http://www.fluechtlinge-willkommen.de)), etc.


exploitative and degrading conditions, and other human rights violations are specifically worrying. In the meantime, deathly tragedies persist on land and sea.

Under these circumstances, people often forget that the refugees flee their countries because of war conflicts (Syria) or dictators’ regimes (Eritrea) and vitally need a shelter. According to the UNHCR data\(^4\), only registered refugees from Syria in the neighbouring countries make up a shocking number of over 4 million with almost half of people stationed in Turkey, over 1 million in Lebanon, and over 600,000 in Jordan. It is an enormous burden countries can hardly cope with on their own, and the European Union, global community as a whole, and humanitarian organisations have to provide reasonable assistance.

Yet, refugees increasingly try to reach the European Union – in tens and hundreds of thousands. The European Union has to deal with their asylum applications according to rights-based principles. Moreover, the obsolete asylum system exemplified in the Dublin III Regulation should be adjusted to the new realities. This also concerns a norm that the first member state, where finger prints are stored or an asylum claim is lodged, – virtually the first country of entry – is responsible for a person’s asylum claim. Simultaneously, all kind of support should be provided to the member states committed to ensure humane and inclusive treatment of refugees. This includes integration policies at the new place of residence, where again civil society can play a crucial, positive role, if proper policies are developed.

The Forum invites interested organisations and individuals to join the new Working Group on migration to continue to search for a useful solution to this common acute problem.

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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, 148 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are member 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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