

Executive Summary

International Mayors' Conference in Athens

21-23 July, 2016

The idea of N-O-W Conferences is to bring together those who deal with refugees in their communities, to share experiences of and ideas about their work. Therefore, Act.Now organized an International Mayor's Conference in Athens focussing on the EU-Turkey-Agreement and the effects and consequences of its implementation for local communities. During three panel discussions, nine working sessions and countless informal talks the ambitious aim was to generate recommendations and conclusions for future approaches and agreements concerning the refugee movement.

The participants looked at the repercussions of the EU-Turkey-Agreement with Mayors from Greece, Italy and Turkey (unfortunately all but one mayor from Turkey had to cancel their trips at the very last minute due to travel restrictions imposed after the military coup in Turkey) together with NGO-representatives, Members of the European Parliament, like Ms Katalin Piri (Rapporteur from Turkey to the EU) and Josef Weidenholzer, experts like Gerald Knaus, Head of European Stability Initiative (ESI), the think tank that has originally worked out the proposal for the EU-Turkey Agreement.

Hannes Swoboda, former leader of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament and board member of the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue curated the conference.

Key Findings & Policy Recommendations

As mentioned the purpose of the conference was to review the EU agreement on refugees with Turkey. However, most statements of the participants touched the current asylum and migration policy in general. Since the key findings go beyond a mere revision of the EU-Turkey-Agreement, the insights of the conference can give directions to further agreements on migration and asylum.

(1) Prerequisite of a Working Migration Policy in Europe

There are basic preconditions for a functional implementation of the EU-Turkey-Agreement, concerning also the European Migration Policy in general. First of all, the EU should conclude an agreement on a common and well defined approach to European migration in practice and in reality. Open, safe and legal migration routes are needed, so as to put human traffickers out of business. There are 65 million refugees worldwide, 1.3 million of which came to Europe since 2015, that is 2% of the world's refugees. *"People on the move are like water, trying to stop them is impossible."* For the EU-Turkey-Agreement Turkey as the receiving country must remain a safe third country by European standards. Whichever systems of migration and asylum are discussed, the basic rights of displaced people like education and information must be considered. For further agreements it is crucial to evaluate the EU-Turkey-Agreement, to determine exactly why the implementation of the agreement has failed up to date.

(2) Changes of System and Responsible Institutions for Asylum and Migration

During the N-O-W Conference the need for a real common European asylum system with proper instruments overriding national policies became obvious. This includes legal and sound reception structures at entry points in the EU, like the Italian Humanitarian Corridor. Also there needs to be a structure for legal economic migration as well as an agreement on an effective return policy. Special registration systems and procedures for unaccompanied minors are essential. Concerning the EU-Turkey-Agreement, it is necessary to mandate a high level person in the EU with a small team responsible for operating the agreement who is in daily contact with Greece, Italy, Turkey and the European Commission. Moreover a European Asylum Support Mission (including 400 asylum case workers), organized and payed for by Europe, under Greek management is required.

(3) Revise Current Processes and Create New Ones

The participants agreed on demanding sustainable programs, based on facts, figures, analysis and knowledge for granting admission, asylum, relocation, resettlement or return. New procedures for identification, education and asylum with a humanitarian approach should be designed. The Dublin Regulation is to be revised and concrete quotas for resettlement must be set for each EU member state, financed with European money. Especially concerning the EU-Turkey-Agreement there are a few processual deficiencies in making resettlement effective. The 1-for-1 mechanism whereby the EU accepts one Syrian refugee directly from Turkey for each Syrian boat refugee Ankara takes back from Greece should be dropped. Resettlement directly from Turkey to the EU must increase. The relocation rate must rise and the rate of asylum processing in Greece must grow 5 times higher within the next six months. The time refugees spend in Greece should not be wasted time. The 50.000 refugees stranded in Greece from before the deal but after the border closings must not be forgotten, and taken care of by creating new processes. Greece needs an equal distribution of refugees. A working European migration policy, humanitarian programs like providing foster families for unaccompanied minors should be established. Safety is an important issue. It is necessary to study, document and prevent crime in refugee camps and provide a sense of security to local communities.

(4) Need of Resources and Infrastructure

Considering the demands of these common objectives it's obvious that financial and other resources are required. Sustainable investments into the local communities; investments into local infrastructure (hospitals, schools, housing) to serve both the local and the refugee communities are a sustainable option instead of building up temporary infrastructure only for refugees. Other incentives for local communities like tax exemptions or infrastructure development grants are necessary. Existing facilities have to be upgraded in order to accommodate refugees humanely, for better living conditions, family life, privacy, etc. Defined standards for well-functioning refugee camps are necessary. Refugees should be housed close to the institutions administrating their status instead of in remote camps. Especially women need increased (financial) support, as access to IT, language courses, child care and education.

(5) Improve the Exchange on a Personal Level and in the Public Discourse

A key finding of the conference was that communication with the refugees, the local communities, between these two groups and of course with the public is essential to establish social cohesion between refugees and local communities. Regular contacts between politicians and refugees and connections of refugees with professionals for job opportunities are necessary. Reliable information about procedures, waiting times, opportunities and rights should be provided. The public debate needs to be transformed into narratives of opportunities highlighting the benefits of the integration of refugees. Additionally, security agendas should be separated from humanitarian response. It is an obligation for the European Union to communicate to 500 million European Union citizens that it is in

the interest of the European societies to have a controlled and safe way of temporary immigration and to motivate EU governments to each take their responsibility an share in humanitarian issues.

(6) Support Political Will and Participation

To make the EU-Turkey-Agreement work, the political will of the European leaders to implement large-scale resettlement is essential. Human rights-based integration needs participation of all parties involved. On the European level we urgently need a so-called “coalition of the willing” is. But not only the European leaders are called on participating. Young people should be motivated to work in refugee-related jobs (camps, education, etc.) as an alternative to military service. Best practice examples in Europe should connect the countries experienced with immigration with those that are not. Fellow countrymen who have more experience living in Europe should be involved in integration measures for refugees. The helpers on the frontline need support and the refugees of course must be involved taking part in the organisation of their daily life and needs (cooking, translation, medical care, education etc.).

(7) Indispensable Long Term Goals

The future of the EU-Turkey-Agreement in particular and the European migration policy in general can't be discussed without reflecting long term challenges. So the participants advocated for peace in the Middle East and Asia Minor regions and for fighting terrorism. With a long term perspective about climate and social changes we should all be prepared for possible future crises of this kind.

Insights and Prospect

In short the participants came to the conclusion that even though there is no Plan B - other than the current agreement - in sight, Plan A is not working out. At the present time the EU-Turkey Agreement's only purpose is to prevent human beings seeking refuge from continuing their journey to Central Europe. The rights of human beings seeking refuge are being ignored, the toll, the costs and the ugly practical implementation are being rolled off onto Greece and Turkey. On the other hand, no ways have been found to bring refugees from war zones and displaced persons from neighbouring countries legally, safely and non-bureaucratically to receiving countries in Europe. The only aim of this strategy is deterrence. People flee from one anguish – only to face the next anguish.

The mayors, NGO-representatives, experts and refugees agreed that what is happening now is no solution. “We want a Europe of citizens connected through shared endeavours and in which we can face this great chance hand in hand: integrate the newly arrived, invite them and support them to become our co-citizens in our European societies.”

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