



EPSU/PSI statement to leaders of the EU and Western Balkans on the refugee crisis

Make Europe a safe haven for refugees now!

Brussels, 11 September 2015

At the occasion of the Extraordinary EU Justice and Interior affairs Council on 14 September, we, the European Public Service Unions, representing 8 million public service workers across Europe, and our sister global trade union federation, Public Services International, representing 20 million public service workers across the globe, reiterate our call for European solidarity, dignity and coherence on the refugee crisis.

The chaotic and, in some places, inhumane response to the ongoing refugee emergency across Europe threaten the common values on which the EU is founded.

Years of EU-coordinated austerity that led to massive job cuts in much needed public services, including those dealing with asylum requests, have clearly exacerbated a dramatic situation which could have been anticipated. Today's refugees come from Syria, for the main, Afghanistan, Eritrea or Kosovo; the situation in those countries is not new.

Many of our affiliates from southern, eastern and northern Europe have warned of the lack of administrative capacity to deal with the growing numbers of asylum requests and continuous budget cuts in healthcare (physical and mental) and social housing that prevent decent reception of refugees, let alone their integration in society.

Clearly the roots of the refugee crisis for which Europe has its share of responsibility must be tackled. But for now an emergency common response to a European as well as global issue must be taken on 14 September.

Last April, public service trade union leaders agreed a number of demands in a statement which remain as urgent and relevant today.

The statement advocated a fair sharing of resettlement of refugees across the EU supported by the necessary sufficiently staffed public services. We were much disappointed by the Council's cynical decision to take in only some 40.000 refugees who first arrived in Greece and Italy. More than 350 000 already arrived in the EU since the start of 2015; it is reminded that Turkey and Lebanon have taken in millions of refugees.

We support the recent call of UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres for the EU to implement a common strategy, based on responsibility, solidarity and trust. Mr Guterres stressed that the situation requires "a massive common effort that is not possible with the current fragmented approach". The High Commissioner indicated a potential need to increase relocation opportunities to as many as 200,000 places. He urged the EU to put in place immediate and adequate emergency reception, assistance and registration capacity and to mobilize the EU asylum and civil protection agencies and mechanisms for this purpose, including the resources of member states and with the support of UNHCR, IOM and civil society.

We also called for an immediate suspension of the Dublin regulation, the logical outcome of a common system of fair sharing of refugees.

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Following the right decision by the German government to suspend the Dublin rules for Syrian nationals, our view is that the suspension must apply to all nationals, without discrimination of any kind, who potentially qualify for refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol as well as the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Suspension of the Dublin rules will largely alleviate the current unfair and unpractical situation in border countries.

It is urgent to increase and pool EU resources with the support of Malta-based European Asylum Support Office as well as of the UNHCR to help process asylum claims and provide all the necessary support for asylum seekers in cooperation with civil society in EU border countries such as Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain, Hungary and Bulgaria. It is vital that local and regional governments and frontline agencies be equipped with adequate public resources and sufficient numbers of well-trained staff working in decent conditions.

The 2001 EU directive regarding temporary protection in case of mass arrivals of refugees, must immediately apply. The directive provides for harmonised rights for the beneficiaries of temporary protection, including a residence permit for the entire duration of the protection, appropriate information on temporary protection, access to employment, accommodation or housing, social welfare or means of subsistence, access to medical treatment, education for minors, family reunification and guarantees for access to asylum procedures. Why this mechanism of solidarity and balance between member states has not yet been triggered is beyond belief. It is high time to activate it.

We reiterate our call for a common system of legal channels for migration and of safe passages for asylum-seekers to prevent further deaths and curb the lucrative lethal industry of human trafficking.

Today, Europe, the world's second richest region holds the record of having the highest number of migrant deaths. According to the International Organization for Migration, 2.432 people died trying to reach Europe since the start of the year.

We reiterate our opposition to building of fences and walls or reintroduction of border controls within the Schengen area that will do nothing to solve the situation.

It is ineffective as it only diverts people who flee a desperate situation to other dangerous routes.

It is very costly when public money would be better used to finance decent reception of asylum seekers.

It is criminal as it is yet another measure that feeds into the smuggling industry.

Many individuals, through spontaneous actions or through their trade unions, community groups and sports clubs are showing you the solidarity way.

We urge you to follow suit and agree on a fair and equitable sharing of responsibility based on solidarity and cooperation, taking due account of the needs of refugees and of their preferences as to where they wish to go according to family, community, linguistic links.

In the longer term and in light of the above, we urge you to undertake a deep review of the EU neighbourhood policy, particularly in relation to the Mediterranean and Middle East countries, and of the bilateral economic agreements with authoritarian regimes.

Finally, we need to avoid the rhetoric of referring to refugees as a burden. They are human beings fleeing danger and persecution. We have the human rights and humanitarian obligation to receive them. Make Europe a safe haven for refugees. We cannot delay.