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Refugees – a progressive and humanitarian response PES Presidency Declaration

Europe is facing the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. More than half of those who have reached Europe this year were from Syria, the Horn of Africa and Afghanistan. These are countries and regions torn apart by war, oppression, persecution, instability, poverty or religious extremism – and, in case of Syria, Afghanistan and Libya, all of these come together. The responsibility for which partially lies on the whole international community, including Europe. So long as this situation continues, more people will risk their lives and the lives of their children in perilous journeys.

In order to find comprehensive solutions for the refugee crisis, we should also – and primarily - address its causes, including war, poverty and a sharp rise in inequality. Europe has a pivotal role to play in its neighbourhood. A strong cooperation with key partners in the region, such as the Arab League and the African Union will be key to developing a holistic strategy to deal with the multi-faceted challenges triggering these massive migratory flows.

This is a crisis for Europe. A crisis of solidarity and lack of burden sharing. But above all, it is a humanitarian emergency, with a vast majority of women and children among them, who are seeking peace, stability, security and help from us.

Europe is losing sight of its moral duty and its international legal obligation to protect these refugees under international, humanitarian law and its own rules. Asylum seekers are not illegal immigrants, but legal migrants forced to cross our borders by irregular means. The European Union must live up to its fundamental values of solidarity, humanism, and respect for fundamental rights that have made it a model of peace and stability. Any lasting solution will require the mobilization of all levels of society, at European, national, regional and local level, including civil society, humanitarian organisations, as well as official authorities.

The lack of a coordinated, common European response to these mass arrivals shows that the current asylum system is not up to standards. The Schengen Agreement, one of the EU pillars, has been challenged. The creation of a single area without borders, where goods, people and service could move freely is a great achievement. But it is now put at risk and creating divisions in Europe. The collapse of the Dublin system, which has proven dysfunctional, unfair and inhumane and lacking in responsibility and burden sharing and which was caused by its tight legal interpretation and the voluntary character of a number of its provisions, is now clear.

We call on the Council and the Parliament to swiftly reach an agreement on a fair and long lasting solution for a crisis relocation mechanism which has been proposed by the Commission in its revision of the Dublin Regulation. The further harmonization and acceleration of asylum rules and decision processes is urgent. The sacrosanct right to asylum and protection is fundamental and should continue to be their cornerstone. The presumption of equivalent conditions on which the



Dublin regulation is based must better be upheld and the European Commission must be equipped with effective means to supervise and enforce the compliance with the minimum standards.

Europe is built on the binding principles of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility as stated in Art.80 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Finding solutions through dialogue and compromise is in our common interest. This is the way to overcome divisions between East and West, North and South. But we also need to show solidarity beyond Europe, with Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Yemen, countries hosting a dramatically larger number of refugees. Urgently we need to invest more efforts in ending the conflicts and finding long lasting solution for peace and stability in the region.

Refugees are fleeing violence, oppression and wars, Europe is obliged to offer them protection and to find a solution for the issue of unaccompanied minors. According to UN data, 75% of Syrian Refugees are women and children, and 13% of refugees arriving to Europe are women. Trying to fence people out is not only immoral, or going against international laws, it's dangerous as well. It exposes them to risk and very precarious situations, longer and more challenging routes and drives them in the hands of unscrupulous traffickers, smugglers or situations of harassment and prostitution.

Instead of building walls, we need to provide safe and legal avenues (humanitarian corridors, by strengthening the provision of humanitarian visas in the Visa Code, family reunification, private sponsorship schemes, flexible visa arrangements and a permanent EU-wide system of resettlement) to reach European soil. European border control mechanisms need to be adapted in order to effectively save lives and make sure not to practically impede the right to seek asylum in Europe. Building walls, xenophobia and hate speech are not solutions to this crisis but dialogue, solidarity and responsibility sharing. Migration is a much needed opportunity for Europe's future and not a threat.

The efforts made by the European Commission and the External Action Service, and more particularly HR/VP Federica Mogherini, who put forward the European agenda on migration and their recent priority actions, represent a valuable step towards a common European approach to address the refugee crisis and a more long-term EU migration policy.

We welcome the decision of the European Commission to increase the EU budget of specific funds, such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and the request to Member States to allocate their national funds to implement asylum measures. This is an important issue because refugees already in Europe and those who will come must benefit from our protection for as long as it is required.

As social democrats, we must put the battle for the respect of human dignity and fundamental rights at the top of our agenda, through the proposal of effective integration policies, which provide access to basic rights, such as education, healthcare, social housing, access to the labour market and guarantees for a decent standard of living. These policies must be developed in close cooperation between national, regional and local authorities which deal with these issues on a daily basis. Education in particular is one of the cornerstones for the integration of children and their families in our societies and we must foster it. Health care and medical assistance, in particular for pregnant women or women victims of sexual exploitation and violence, should be an integral part of provided aid.

Solidarity with migrants needs to be coupled with solidarity between Member States. By relocating 160,000 people in need of international protection and many more in the future, Europe can show unity. This is an important step in solidarity, but we must continue this effort. We must speed up the discussion on binding permanent resettlement and relocation mechanisms. We need a balanced combination of European and national funds to support reception and integration policies. We need to ensure that specific reasons for persecution, particularly gender, sexual orientation and gender



identity, are addressed appropriately throughout applications examination, even from countries on the EU safe countries of origin list, as well as in the context of resettlement and relocation. Returns should go hand-in-hand with the respect of the procedures and standards that allow Europe to ensure a humane and dignified treatment of returnees, in line with the principle of non-refoulement; recalls that voluntary returns should be prioritised over forced returns.

Solidarity must also extend outside the EU borders. Decisions to increase funding for EU agencies helping those Member States most affected and for UN agencies providing humanitarian assistance in refugee camps outside EU is a good start. We welcome the Trust Fund for Africa, proposed by the Commission, to support the origin and transit countries and call on EU member states to make their contributions. We believe a donors' conference to immediately release funds aiming at tackling the root causes of migration is necessary. The biggest challenge will be the diplomatic work to be done and intensifying cooperation with key third countries of origin and transit. The Valletta Conference, which will be organized in Malta in November, can be a first step towards a more holistic approach in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, aiming at a global Conference to be organised in Paris next year.

The PES family should lead the debate on the future of Europe, a Europe where refugees are treated in a humane way, with dignity and respect of their fundamental rights. We are founders of the European idea and need to protect its values and the legal norms in which they have been enshrined. The far and populist right in Europe has no solution other than the promotion of fear and xenophobic language. Their narrative of fear does not correspond to our values. Compassion, understanding and practical solutions are the only way forward.

European values are not a theoretical concept. We have seen them put into practice with tens of thousands European citizens mobilizing to lend refugees a helping hand. The amount of voluntary help provided is massive, especially of the civil society groups and individuals all over Europe, and we should be proud of this happening. This can however never be allowed to justify inaction by public actors, who have the ultimate responsibility. We welcome the fact that Governments and institutions have taken the first important steps in the right direction. The PES will continue to push for a long-lasting, humane, fair and sustainable solution.

