

Round table »Refugee Crisis – challenges and consequences« and LADDER - SEE Geographical Path meeting

Report

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Global migration patterns have since become increasingly complex, involving not just refugees, but also millions of economic migrants. But refugees and migrants, even if they often travel in the same way, are fundamentally different, and for that reason are treated very differently under modern international law. On global level, protecting refugees was made the core mandate of both the UN and its refugee agency, which was set up to look after refugees, specifically those waiting to return home at the end of World War II. Thus, the international protection of the majority of the world's refugees has traditionally been the domain of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). But the issue is increasingly present in European media which regularly reports of migrants/refugees when travelling northwards through Western Balkan (WB) corridor, while EU member states seem mainly concerned about how to make their border controls more effective and how to engage non-member states in these efforts.

The round table have focused on Schengen vs. non-Schengen regime implications for migrants ("tragedy of Schengen") and increased influx of refugees to Serbia and Macedonia; and on exchange of best practices and strengthening mutual cooperation in assuring refugees rights from the whole WB corridor. Aim of the round table was to open regional discourse about migration flows, their perception and their legitimization. Within the discussion we have opened the question of human rights, existing legal norms through the aspect of European solidarity. Can the EU, partner countries together with local authorities and civil society as well as with other relevant actors find solutions that will comprehensively address these issues and move from state security approach towards guaranteeing human security of everyone involved?

The roundtable was also organized under the European year for development slogan »Our world, our dignity, our future« which aim is to inform citizens about international development cooperation and to underline concrete results and thus shed the light on the relevance of international development cooperation in the inter-dependent world.

The main outputs that the Panel were focused on the following:

- exchange of experiences and practices from WB migration corridor,
- identification of policy issues the LGAs and NGOs have to address in the region,
- identification of emergency measures on local and regional level, procedures and methods, considering all local competences and issues to be addressed in such emergency situations,
- enabling opportunities for donor support, and regional coordination and cooperation,
- creation of basis for the future joint NGOs and LGAs actions.

Based on the event focus, the group have prepared the following **recommendations**:

I. General recommendations

- All migrants transition countries within the Western Balkan corridor should endeavor to respect European values, principle of solidarity and specifically human rights
- Considering that Western Balkan route is likely to remain the main route for migration flow in the future, the joint action at international, regional , national and local level needs to take place.
- Countries in the region need to prepare for the return of economic migrants to their original countries (in Western Balkan), in terms of reintegration.
- All countries affected by migrant crisis from the region should rethink their international cooperation strategies and strengthen regional cooperation.

II. Cooperation, coordination, legislation and institutional set-up

- * Joint Planning, strong cooperation and coordination between the countries on Balkan Route is crucial when dealing with the migrants, including establishing trust and synergy of partners, support in policy making and standardization of the legislation for data gathering as well as unification of the systems for migrants for countries on Western Balkan route (Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia etc.).
- * Local governments in Western Balkan countries should upgrade their existing mechanisms of coordination – both horizontal (between municipalities within a country and over the borders) and vertical (with national authorities, as well as with the civil society and the media) - in order to connect and involve all stakeholders in a coordinated effort.
- * Improve vertical communication and cooperation (national–local level) and horizontal level (local level-NGOs – other actors). Also, constant communication with general public is needed in order to prevent major population unrest against organized people passing through, while putting great emphasis on specific communication with local authorities.
- * Local Operational Plans for dealing with migrants need to be prepared on local municipal level; (especially local government where hot spots are) to prepare place and infrastructure. Contribution of migrants with approved long-term staying permissions should be taken into consideration when planning development strategies of local societies.
- * Communication between local municipalities needs to be improved and strengthened.
- * Assure more efficient screening system on the borders where migrants transit (especially in Italy and Greece hot-spots) and establish channels for sharing information. Registration processes in all the countries that migrants are passing through should be respected in order to prevent human trafficking and smuggling. Civil society organizations should be included in the process of monitoring the registration for which the governments are responsible for.
- * Increase exchange of lessons learned between actors on local level in the hot-spots on the Western Balkan Route.

III. Funding, Resources and Skills

- Joint planning for timely securing of the funds for all relevant needs (including earmarked grants for the affected municipalities etc.) needs to be in place in close cooperation with multilateral and bilateral donors as well as with humanitarian organizations present in affected countries.

- A quick-response mechanism is needed to help the local governments facing the influx of refugees. Therefore, the EU and other multilateral and bilateral donors should consider simplifying the procedures for providing funds to national and local governments affected by the refugee crisis, since the procedures are too complex, and the situation regarding the provision of funds needed for managing the refugee crisis dictates instant assistance.
- The EU should consider opening some of the funding mechanisms that are currently available only to member states – also to the candidate countries, affected by migrant flows.
- The EU should start a dialogue with national authorities in non-EU countries with the purpose of having them understand the necessity to take into account the needs of the affected municipalities when applying for funds related to the refugee crisis.
- Involve the local governments in programming of EU and other donor funds for addressing the refugee crisis, since only the national governments are eligible to receive such funds.

IV. Integration of migrants and readmission of economic migrants from WB countries

- Raise public awareness about positive contributions of migrants and refugees to society, including by providing support to civil society to organise evidence-based public campaigns.
- Share accurate facts and figures about migration and its benefits, and improve public understanding of forced displacement and international protection. Civil society organisations and local governments should be included in the development of post-crisis strategies.
- Ensure that humanitarian and development aid are used to save lives and eradicate poverty (to prevent people immigrate for economic reasons). Special attention should be put to unaccompanied minors.
- Empower civil society actors and create conditions that enable them to play an active role in readmission, integration and protection of human rights, to combat racism and xenophobia especially in the frame of formal and informal education.
- Ensure that return policies prioritise assisted voluntary return and reintegration. When forced return takes place after due consideration of an asylum claim in fair procedures, ensure that it is carried out in a safe and dignified manner in line with international human rights obligations.
- Ensure that future negotiations on readmission agreements do not cover third country nationals as a rule, and in accordance with the European Commission's evaluation of EU Readmission Agreements.
- Make all agreements on migration control, including readmission agreements, public and transparent.

Conclusion

Despite the portrayal of the EU as a flagship of progressive approach towards the issues of development cooperation the EU has been often described as a 'fortress Europe', while alarmingly huge number of people in search of a safer/better life end up helpless on the shores of this fortress. Today majority of Western Balkan countries are struggling to co-ordinate their response to the large influx of refugees and more and more are building walls to physically prevent migrants/refugees from entering their countries. Furthermore EU and non-EU countries from that region tend to be ending up hosting numbers of refugees/migrants, without having proper legal mechanisms and financial resources to manage this ever-growing pressure, that will not stop soon.

The roundtable was very good time placed to strengthen regional cooperation between different civil society organizations with local authorities.