

## **32<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe**

28.03.2017

### **Speaking notes for Co-Rapporteur Yoomi RENSTRÖM to present the report on “From reception to integration: the role of local authorities facing migration”**

Dear colleagues,

The reception and integration of refugees and migrants at the local level continues to be of crucial interest today for the public for various reasons.

It is all the more so for local and regional authorities because we are directly concerned with its repercussions and outcome.

Since 2012, millions of refugees have entered Council of Europe member States' frontiers. Local and regional governments continue to face and manage this crisis situation with limited means and guidance.

More than ever, our local and regional representatives need help and support from both their national governments and the European level to face this challenge in a coordinated, organized manner, based on principles of solidarity and respect for human rights.

#### **These are the starting points of our report:**

Firstly: We have to look at the issue from a local and regional point of view both because we are the first port of call when refugees arrive.

Secondly: We have to look at them from a respect for human rights point of view, because as a statutory body of the Council of Europe, our response must be rooted in its core values: in this case, it is the protection of human rights and human dignity.

#### **I would like to say a few words about the methodology we adopted when working on the report.**

After the Congress adopted the report's terms of reference in March 2016, we set up a reflection group which consisted of several Congress members who have shown interest in the discussion – and not only from our committee but also from the other Congress committees.

We had experts and NGO representatives to assist our discussions. We met twice during the course of the year and we also had written contributions. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all members of the Reflection Group for their contribution which allowed us to come up with a solid report that is rich in content, facts and examples of good practice.

We have also benefited from the very useful comments of experts from Council of Europe departments working on specific issues such as children's rights, health etc. And most importantly, we have had

feedback from the office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) on Migration Issues whose comments were very welcome.

In addition, we had the opportunity to visit reception sites and have first-hand experience of the situation on the ground. This was possible thanks to the invitations we had from the Mayor of Samos; Mr Michalis Angelopoulos, and the Regional Governor of Attica, Ms Irena Dourou, both member of the Greek delegation to the Congress. I would like to thank them for their initiatives and great support on this question.

Finally I would also like to thank the Italian delegation who gave our committee the opportunity to discuss the report in depth, by inviting the committee to an additional meeting at the beginning of March. I would like to express our gratitude to Mr Piero Fassino who facilitated this event.

**Colleagues, our report starts with an assessment of the situation** the on ground and the specific challenges that local and regional authorities in our member States are facing due to an increase in the number of refugees and migrants arriving in their communities.

We underline that the absence of a clear, coherent European response and contradicting policies and statements of national governments has led to a crisis of policy surrounding the refugee situation.

Local and regional governments have limited means and funds to fulfill their responsibility to provide newly-arrived migrants with access to key public services.

The crisis of policy and the absence of a clear leadership have also made it difficult to promote a positive view of what migrants can bring to host societies. We have witnessed the development of a negative narrative on refugees daily aired in all kinds of media and social media. Unfortunately, politicians at all levels of government in most member States have contributed to increasing the atmosphere of fear and rejection.

What we need is a positive message which explains and calms the fears of the host communities. Mayors and regional governors are high profile agents of communication who need to capitalize on this position. Anti-rumour campaigns and the promotion of Council of Europe's "No Hate Speech" campaign need to be of high priority.

There is also an urgent need for all levels of government to better cooperate and coordinate their response. It is only then that reception policies that ensure the respect of human rights for all refugees and migrants regardless of their status can be put in place.

Local and regional authorities should be seen in this regard as the cornerstone of efforts to effectively tackle the current refugee situation. What they need is clear a legal framework as well as logistic and financial support from both the national and international level.

Emergency-based solutions are important but the question of the reception of refugees and migrants also needs to be addressed from a strategic perspective.

Europe needs long-term policies to help integrate migrants and build inclusive societies. The recognition of vocational qualifications, the removal of practical barriers encountered by migrants who have the required status to access the labour market or the participation of foreigners in local affairs are examples of measures we are advocating for in this report.

**This is why we propose a resolution** that is divided into two subparts:

- a. One section on measures addressing specifically the reception of refugees,
- b. Another section addressing the measures that need to be taken for all migrants, whatever their status.
- c. I leave the floor to my co-rapporteur, Gyorgyi ILLES to present to you the resolution and the recommendation.

Thank you.