

33rd Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

Testimonies and debate on the reception of unaccompanied migrants in European cities

Strasbourg, France, 18 October 2017 –

On 18 October 2017, the Plenary Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe organised a debate following on from the one held last March. The reception of child migrants remains a major challenge for town councils and regions in Europe. Testimony by three young refugees confirmed that integration measures enabled them to continue their studies and fulfil their potential in the host countries (Germany, Sweden and France). During the debates, the members of the Congress all praised the personal courage and efforts made by these young people, who had travelled through several countries alone or accompanied by family members when still minors. They then pointed to the necessity of mobilising additional funding for the placement of children who were unaccompanied or separated from their family with foster families, preventing trafficking in minors, systematically providing referral guardians, establishing platforms for contact with residents in order to prevent a "parallel society" emerging, and guaranteeing respect for the rights of children.

They have names and faces. They have come to bear witness to their own experiences as child migrants on European soil. Maria addresses the gathering in perfect German. Yet, just three years ago, she was fleeing her native city of Latakia (Syria) in the middle of a civil war. Having stayed far behind, in Turkey, where the family has not been able to fully integrate, her parents managed to secure a passage for Maria to Greece, accompanied by her aunt and uncle. Fears of the boat sinking, being attacked or getting lost are still etched on her memory. After an epic journey beginning in Athens and crossing Macedonia, Serbia and Austria, they eventually reached Germany where they spent the first five months in a reception centre ill-suited for this purpose, before being transferred to a centre in Kehl where Maria began German lessons for foreigners. In three months, she learnt mathematics in German and then took preparatory classes to be able to join mainstream schooling. At the end of her secondary education, she would like to continue her studies in industrial design. Maria would like the obtaining of refugee status to be a less arduous process and is eagerly waiting to be reunited with her parents and her sister under the family reunion procedure.

Coming from Somalia, a country devastated by the chaos of an interminable war, Moustafe arrived in Sweden at the age of 16. Placed in a centre for unaccompanied children, he was able to study and integrate, and he now works in an NGO involved in the reception of migrant children. He emphasises that these distressed minors need care for the stress and trauma they have suffered, and this includes allowing them more contact with youngsters of their own age from the host country. He advocates the idea that "integration means a bringing together of cultures and not the submission of one culture to another".

The very moving testimony of Abdoulmalik points out that his vision of France was shattered the moment he set foot in a centre for minors housing not only migrants but also French

nationals in difficulty. Having fled Afghanistan in 2009 at the age of 15 and been left by people smugglers to fend for himself in Mulhouse, his only wish was to become integrated in a life of study and self-fulfilment. Even though, as a result of the reception centre not being suited to child migrants and the educators lacking training in this field, things were very difficult for him, he is still grateful for the support and assistance he received and hence his "complete and utter commitment" to the values of the French Republic. Abdoulmalik recommends that current reception procedures avoid isolating migrants even more and enable them to quickly learn the language of the host country and find work.

In the ensuing intense debate, many Congress members expressed their keen interest in these testimonies, which gave them a better grasp of the reality on the ground.

The positions adopted often followed general lines of debate on the migrant crisis: from the viewpoint of Turkey, Hasan Akgün (SOC) and Yüce Atilla Demirci (ECR) emphasised the inadequacy of international aid and the need to establish a joint action plan, while the Hungarian Peter Toth (NR) stressed the need to distinguish between war refugees and other migrants, particularly because of the risks linked to terrorism. One point universally agreed on was that there should be emphasis on staying with foster families to provide an environment conducive to integration and normalised life for traumatised children. Referring to a recent Italian law on guardians and foster families (no. 47 of 2017), Piero Fassino (SOC), Simona Manca (EPP) and Agnese Ugues (EPP) called for the introduction of a European campaign to generate more funding and promote this practice, which calls for solidarity from the population of the host country.

Once again, procedures and capacities for receiving child migrants stand out as a strategic issue for the Congress. And, as Yoomi Renström (Sweden, SOC) points out, while this year's statistics show a fall in the number of child migrants in Europe, this is only due to a tightening up of migrant filtering mechanisms.