

41st Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities - Strasbourg, France, 26 to-28 October 2021

Speech by **Eirini DOUROU**, Greece (R, SOC/G/PD), Rapporteur on migration issues

Check against delivery

Debate on Migration: continuing challenges for cities and regions

26 October 2021

Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The reception and integration of refugees and migrants at the local and regional level continues to be of crucial interest today for all stakeholders. **It is all the more so for local and regional authorities because we are directly concerned with its repercussions and outcome.**

Looking at the migrant's issue from a human rights point of view, our response must be rooted in the **Council's core values, in this case, the protection of human rights and human dignity.**

In our sessions over the past five years, we heard **first-hand testimonies** from mayors, regional councillors and young refugees explaining the difficulties they face.

As a result, we made recommendations to the governments and developed guidelines on how to manage migration at the local and regional level. Among these were development of an integration-centered approach to migration, a clear distribution **of competences** between the national, regional and local levels, **protection of unaccompanied children** and other vulnerable groups. We also called for solidarity and cross-border cooperation between border regions facing migration.

These recommendations were made 3 years ago. **Has the situation changed since then?** My perception is that **the main issues remain unchanged.**

1. **Migration is a systemic issue, with long-term consequences.** It is not a passing crisis but a phenomenon that needs long term vision and solutions. The rise of extremism, racism and xenophobia is evidence of this.
2. **Early integration is essential** to help migrants and refugees but also to get host country citizens into contact with migrants and to develop a mutual understanding. Mediating such contact helps local authorities to develop action plans. Building inclusive societies is both in our Congress Priorities and also in line with the UN SDGs, in particular Goal 16.
3. **Children and other vulnerable groups are particularly at risk.** Special solutions must be developed at local level, in cooperation with the government and NGOs to alleviate the risks.

The outcome of recent wars in Syria and Afghanistan have added to the existing issues. Climate change will bring in more refugees as the situation aggravates.

Europe had gone through the first wave of migration as a crisis for which we were not prepared. **Are we prepared now? And if we are, is it in the right direction?**

In my own country, Greece, over the last two years, the government has toughened its migration policy and border policing. Migrants and refugees in camps are not being treated according to international law standards. Unaccompanied children are still not protected enough by receiving states.

We have seen, just a month ago, the passage at the Council of Europe **of Little Amal, the puppet representing the journey of a Syrian girl to find her mother in the UK.** She was given a copy of the European Convention of Human Rights containing the rights that would protect her during her journey. But does she have any guarantee that her rights WILL be respected? Let us reflect upon that.

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. We need be coordinated and organized, and to base our actions on principles of solidarity and respect for human rights. And we also need a clear and coherent European-wide legislative framework.

Let's face it. How we engage with refugees and migrants reflects our commitment to safeguarding the core mandate of the Council of Europe: the protection of human rights and democratic values. **It is about our common responsibility, and the collective drive that underpins this system.**

At this point I feel compelled to say that the strategic use of migrant flows by some member States is really not helping the issue and is morally questionable from the standpoint of this organisation's values.

Colleagues, we as local and regional authorities have an important role to play. First, because we have the power to take decisions in our towns and regions. Second, because we are at the frontline of the reception and integration of migrants and refugees. **We are in a position to take concrete action. And we have a duty to do so.**

Let me end by saying how interesting it will be to see what other issues may have arisen since our last debate. What challenges will our towns and regions face, in addition to the ones I have mentioned today?

I am very eager to listen to what Ambassador Stefanek will share with us on this matter.

Thank you.