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Statement by Ambassador Erdoğan İŞCAN
Chairman of the GR-C
“Language Support for Adult Refugees: a Council of Europe toolkit”
(22 November 2017 – Palais de l'Europe)

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me, in my capacity as Chairman of the Rapporteur Group on Education, Culture, Sport, Youth and Environment of the Ministers' Deputies. It is a privilege for me to be able to contribute to the launching event of the Council of Europe toolkit “Language Support for Adult refugees”.

This initiative is particularly important and topical, in view of the current situation of international migration and the flow of refugees arriving in Europe; so many people uprooted under the pressure of conflicts and violations of human rights in their countries of origin.

Background

Allow me first to share some background information on the issue of refugees, both from political as well as legal perspectives.

First, the refugee crisis is generated mainly by politico-military conflicts. It is thus essential to address the root causes of those conflicts in order to stop the humanitarian consequences. Meanwhile, we cannot fail to respond to the ongoing refugee crisis.

Second, we have long-standing norms setting our legal and humanitarian obligations in respect of the treatment of refugees. The members of the international community have jointly developed these norms. The process started even before the Second World War, under the League of Nations. Later, in the aftermath of the War, the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention) was adopted at a conference in Geneva. The 1951 Convention was amended by the 1967 Protocol. These documents clearly regulate the rights of refugees for legal protection, other assistance and social rights.

The cornerstone of the 1951 Convention is the principle of *non-refoulement*. A refugee should not be returned to a country where he or she faces serious threats to life or freedom.

It is imperative for the members of the international community to uphold international law without any discrimination. It is a prerequisite of sustaining international peace, security and stability. All must respect and comply with all norms of international law.

The question of refugees is essentially a matter for the international humanitarian and refugee law. But it is also a matter for international human rights law. Consequently, it is absolutely relevant for the Council of Europe, the leading human rights organisation, to remain seized of this question. This is basically why we are here today. The Council of Europe has come up with a set of norms, and a publication including extracts from conventions, recommendations, resolutions and reports by the Council of Europe bodies (namely the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities) is available to all participants, just outside this room.

As a final remark on the background information, in order to see the picture more clearly, let me remind some figures on the recent refugee movements, with a focus on the Syrian crisis.

We all know that we are witnessing an unprecedentedly high refugee movement in a global scale with tremendous impact on the recipient countries, obviously far greater responsibility and burden on the neighbouring countries to the conflict regions.

It is natural that the frontline states have to face the preliminary spillover effects. Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of the fact that the frontline states do their parts on behalf of the international community. Thus, responsibility and burden sharing will continue to be a fundamental component of the international law.

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As for the Syrian crisis, more than half of the population have been displaced. Around five million have fled Syria, creating the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. Lebanon, a country with a population of six million, has nearly 1.5 million Syrians. Turkey has over three million, trying to do its best to provide those with shelter, health, education as well as social and psychological support. The number of children at school age is close to one million. Around 600 thousand of them are provided with education. Efforts to raise this figure are underway. All these are done with no substantial support from the international community. We hope that the international community will come forward to scale up its efforts towards enhancing responsibility and burden sharing.

I shared this brief background, with a view to underlying the importance of the project, Language Support for Adult Refugees, developed by the Council of Europe.

Now, I wish to say a few words on the toolkit.

Political context of the toolkit

Refugees arriving in a host country have been through very difficult experiences. They often feel distressed and helpless. They are, among other difficulties, confronted to the heavy asylum procedures and to the language barrier.

We all know that mastery of the language of the host country is a major challenge for refugees, as it is a condition for access to training, employment and housing.

Only a fortnight ago I had the honour to co-chair the annual Council of Europe Exchange on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue. The Committee of Ministers organised this event on the theme “Migrants and refugees: challenges and opportunities – What role for religious and non-religious groups?”

The Exchange brought together representatives of religious and non-religious groups, civil society actors and academics, governmental representatives and, this year, several refugees who testified of their personal experience. The debates gave us a multifocal view on issues linked to migration policies, the role and engagement of civil society, including religious and non-religious groups, and on how refugees and migrants perceive them. Several speakers underlined that the integration of refugees rests on the promotion of mutual respect and knowledge of host communities and migrants.

In this connection, language skills are essential.

The Council of Europe is already active in this field through the larger project on Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (LIAM). This project offers support to policy makers and practitioners who are working to facilitate migrants' integration into civil society.

With the new toolkit we are introducing today, the Council of Europe takes a further initiative to facilitate social cohesion and enhance the dignity of refugees. It offers them a way of becoming autonomous by getting means to learn the language of the host country.

Background information on the toolkit

I understand that four of our main international partners, namely the European Union; the IOM; the OECD and the UNHCR have offered their support and contribution to the development and implementation of the toolkit. I welcome the coordinated approach of the initiative, which gives due credit to the fact that, so far, it is unique of its kind.

It is available online for free and accessible to everybody without conditions. It is provided in seven languages, English and French, but also Dutch, German, Greek, Italian and Turkish so as to be used in the main “receiving” countries. It is designed to assist organisations that provide language support for refugees, and especially the volunteers working for them.

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Council of Europe legal framework

Migrants' acquisition of competence in the language(s) of the host country has been a focus for political debate and policy initiatives in a growing number of Council of Europe member States.

Over the years, the Council of Europe has established a substantial legal framework:

- The European Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers and the revised European Social Charter aim to defend the migrant workers' rights, including their social rights and rights to language education.
- The Committee of Ministers has addressed several Recommendations to member States with regard to migrants' education, the most recent ones on the issues of the validation of migrants' skills and ensuring quality education (Recommendation CM/Rec (2011) 2 on validating migrants' skills and Recommendation (2012)13 on ensuring quality education).

Conclusion

The Committee of Ministers attaches high importance to the fact that integration policies be based on the Council of Europe's fundamental values, that they ensure due respect of each individual migrant or refugee's identity and human dignity and that they help refugees to develop their potential and their ability to participate actively in the life of the host country.

This new Council of Europe toolkit on Language Support for Adult Refugees is drawing on over five decades of Council of Europe programmes and projects. Based on this solid framework, it is an instrument fully in line with Council of Europe values.

I thank you for your attention and continuing interest in this important subject.