

Joint statement related to the European Council Meeting of December 15th 2016

A Call for Solidarity and the Willingness to Share Responsibility

As a group of committed NGOs along the so-called Balkan route, we are convinced that the reform of the European asylum system that was on the agenda of the European Council's meeting of European leaders on December 15th 2016, does not contribute to a system of shared solidarity without strong commitment to the protection of refugees in the respective member states and the fundamental reconsideration of the Dublin System, it will not develop ways and solutions acceptable for refugees, nor does it abide by moral standards and humane treatment of those in need.

Following the European Commission's press release of December 8th 2016 setting out the process for the resumption of Dublin transfers to Greece from March 2017 onwards, European leaders met in Brussels on December 15th to discuss "migration and security issues", including the progress on and ongoing commitment to the EU-Turkey deal, the reform of the European asylum system, solidarity as such, the issue of sharing responsibility and the role of origin and transit countries.

We, "Balkan Refugee Trail" partners, carrying the slogan "A Pathway for European Solidarity", which aims at strengthening European solidarity and trans-border cooperation, are highly concerned about the increasing tendencies of people being stripped of their human rights, as well as of people being pushed over European borders and the lack of European solidarity, when it comes to sharing responsibility. We are convinced that measures of the European Commission will further exacerbate the already deteriorating human rights situation, especially for those people already detained as well as newly-arriving refugees in Greece.

According to recent reports of different human rights and refugee NGOs, the situation of refugees in Greece does not meet human rights standards, thereby the insistence on Dublin-returns indicates a high risk for human rights violations.

Following the EU-Turkey deal, thousands of refugees have been trapped on Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos, despite island sites collectively exceeding the capacity to accommodate 7,450 people. In November the UNHCR¹ appealed for urgent action in Greece, addressing "the severe deterioration of the living conditions of refugees and migrants on Samos island [...]. The overcrowding at the Vathy Reception and Identification Centre (RIC), which recently combined with bad weather, have left several hundreds of persons in a dire living situation, particularly affecting persons with

¹ UNHCR (13/11/2016): UNHCR calls for urgent action to meet the humanitarian needs of refugees and migrants on Samos. URL: http://www.unhcr.gr/nea/artikel/4657340ac05b5ea078463286b2b57808/unhcr-calls-for-urgent-action-to-mee.html?utm_source=ECRE+Press+Review&utm_campaign=f75940eb6f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2016_11_14&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1a5cfac4e4-f75940eb6f-422295713 [14/11/2016]



specific needs, for example those with disabilities and pregnant women. More worryingly, there is a grave concern for the safety of unaccompanied minors, boys and girls who see no other option to provide for themselves and their families than to get involved in sex trade, and other precarious activities. We, as a group of NGOs on the Western Balkan route, are extremely worried of the consequences that may arise from instituting Dublin-returns, since the unrelenting and more increasing refugee human rights violations in Greece may be further exacerbated by such an EU decision.

Consequently, one instrument to enhance the capacities of the countries of first entry into the EU, the relocation mechanism that was agreed upon by the member-states, proved to be a mere theoretical solution. The relocation mechanism is slow and difficult to navigate, causing Member States' to be behind their relocation targets. Though the mechanism expires in September 2017, only 8,162 refugees have been relocated thus far out of the 160,000 assigned spots – less than 8% – of the agreed target. The system suffers from serious design flaws, including that it excludes many refugees because relocation is only open to those nationalities that have an EU-wide recognition rate of at least 75%.

Due to the abovementioned concerns, we – “Balkan refugee trail” partners – are calling on European leaders as well as upon the member states to take immediate action: prioritize the immediate transfer of people from overcrowded sites on the islands to open facilities on the mainland that meet European law standards for reception, rather than pressuring Greek authorities to keep people on islands in substandard and destitute dire conditions. In that regard, the member states should provide protection and security to those who had not yet the chance to be welcomed in one of the EU member states by enabling swift and efficient access to family reunification, relocation and a secure right of entry for people seeking refugee status. We hope that our concerns are met with great consideration, and that the international community hears our plea and acts upon values of humanity and solidarity, rather than on fear and prejudice.

Yours sincerely,

The undersigned organizations:

Asylkoordination Austria

Centre for Peace Studies (CPS), Zagreb

Interkulturelles Zentrum (IZ), Vienna

Legal-informational centre for nongovernmental organisations (PIC), Ljubljana

Legis, Skopje

