

Impressions from the conference

“Europe’s refugees: Challenges, Opportunities and Human Rights”.

- organized by the European Parliament.

The 30th of October 2015 the European House (Europa-Huset), Gothersgade 115, Copenhagen.

- *by Lone Frederiksen who participated on behalf of “Genvej til Udvikling”*
- *translated from Danish to English by Mette Noer.*

A room packed with participants from a wide variety of organizations. Keynote speaker was **Morten Kjaerum (MK)** from the Raoul Wallenberg Institute in Sweden and former Director of the Danish Institute for Human Rights.

MK began by stressing that even if the flow of refugees currently seems overwhelming, it is not an insoluble problem, provided that the political willingness is there.

The World has changed in recent decades. In the late '70s it took the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) two weeks to ensure the resettlement of 250,000 Vietnamese refugees. In the '80s, it took three years to provide resettlement of 3,000 refugees from Iran. In the '90s Bosnia's neighboring countries closed the borders to the Bosnian refugees with terrible consequences for the people who were prevented from escaping. The established so called 'safe zones' would not be a solution, since they indirectly contributed to disasters such as Srebrenica. The Balkan War led to tightening up the visa rules and that the governments imposed sanctions for airlines that transported refugees illegally. Unfortunately these regulations were led by Denmark.

The Dublin Regulation, which states that refugees must be registered and apply for asylum in the first EU country they arrive in, replaced the former 'one route' principle where refugees within the EU had 2-3 weeks to travel to the country where they wished to apply for asylum. The Dublin Regulation is clearly a model that favors the North European (and wealthiest) countries.

The European Commission is very committed to find common solutions to the problems, but the political willingness of the Interior and the Justice Ministers might not be as strong. As proved by the UNHCR only one third of the necessary resources are being allocated and UN's World Food Programme has been forced to cut down on 300,000 people in their program due to lack of funds.

The discussion saying that you should solve the problems in the so called safe countries in the immediate neighborhood does not offer a viable possibility.

If we close the possibility for refugees to continue to Europe from countries such as Turkey and Lebanon there is a great risk that these neighboring countries close their borders to refugees with disastrous consequences.

It is important to find common solutions that ensure a fair re-allocation between the EU countries and legal ways to apply for asylum, for example, the opportunity to get a humanitarian visa at the embassies (which Raoul Wallenberg carried out in Nazi Germany). This would also prevent refugees from using the dangerous and costly illegal escape routes. One of the unfortunate consequences of the lack of opportunities for legal routes is the many refugees and immigrants who are staying illegally in the EU. They find disorganized work with salaries far below the common accord and often under conditions of virtual slavery.

The distribution of the 120,000 refugees agreed in the European Parliament, is an important step, but not without problems. What to do with the countries that refuse to abide the agreement? What to do with refugees who do not want to be where they have been allocated? In the end MK reminded us that a refugee is still a refugee, no matter how many countries he has passed through.

Laurs Nørlund from the European Commission pointed out that the refugee crisis is serious for the EU, partly because it comes from the outside and its scope therefore is out of our control and there are no easy solutions. Barbed wire and guards are no barriers to desperate refugees who will always find other ways.

The Commission is working on solutions, including common external border controls with better sorting of actual refugees and other migrants, combined with the establishment of legal pathways, agreements on distribution within the EU as well as increased dialogue with third countries (e.g. Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan). Politically speaking it will be hard to reach an agreement in the European Parliament, but there are no other acceptable options.

Thomas Bustrup from the Confederation of Danish Industry stressed that it is important not to confuse the refugee situation, which is a humanitarian crisis, with the demographic problems all the EU countries are going to be faced with - an aging population and fewer young citizens. The refugees must be helped with their needs and we must solve our labor needs independently. In some cases it might be combined, but today's reality is that only every third refugee in Denmark is working after the first three years of their stay.

If Schengen would have to renounce its open borders it will be problematic in regards to international business. Many people in business are positive towards including immigrants, however there are problems in the Danish system that will need to be solved first: The processing time for asylum cases is so long that the refugees' skills and energy fade while they are waiting and no one has the responsibility to clarify their skills.

The Danish politicians and members of the European Parliament **Margrete Auken** from the Socialist People's Party, **Christel Schaldemose** from the Danish Social Democrats and **Anders Vistisen** from the Danish People's Party participated in the final panel discussion.

Margrete Auken and Christel Schaldemose pointed out the problems in the parliament, where especially some of the 'new' East European countries (just like Denmark does) refuse to participate in the common distribution of the refugees. As a consequence they recommended considering depriving these countries some of the subsidies from the EU Structural Funds.

Other suggestions which Margrete Auken mentioned were to work on solving the Israel-Palestine conflict so that the West will have more credibility in the Arab countries, to do something about double taxation in regard to poor countries and focus more on the climate change.

Christel Schaldemose stressed the absurdity of cutting down on the development aid under the present conditions; it should rather be increased significantly.

Anders Vistisen suggested that the EU should pursue a less protectionist trade policy related to agricultural products from developing countries.

The conference was very well managed by the Danish Radio's Jens Ringberg and it was a very interesting morning that provided valuable insight and a number of constructive proposals.