

DON'T LET HUMANITY DROWN

The year of 2018 has been a turning point concerning the understanding and the proper implementation of the human rights protective framework by the European member states. Xenophobic forces that are hostile to human rights shaped politics regardless of the fact of winning or losing at the ballot box, while European governments seemed to be determined on keeping migrants away at all costs, by practising illegal push-backs, closing the ports and violating the International Law at land and sea borders. According to the official UNHCR numbers, in 2018 more than 2,275 people have either died or gone missing at sea attempting to reach Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, due to the reduction of the search and rescue operations and the current boat-by-boat approach and lack of regional arrangements. Also, only during the first month of 2019, another 207 people lost their lives in the Mediterranean.

During 2018 more than 300 volunteers, activists and human rights defenders, coming from four countries at the Southern European border (Spain, Italy, Greece and Croatia) met under the umbrella of the project "The Routes of Solidarity" supported by the "Europe for citizens" programme. We met in Lesbos, Thessaloniki, Ceuta, Sevilla, Palermo, Rome, Zagreb and Pula, witnessing directly the situation at the European borders, exchanging practices and experiences of solidarity, as well as discussing European migration policies.

We all share the great concern that fundamental values on which the European Union is founded and that are enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, namely respect for human dignity, equality, democracy, and respect for human rights are worryingly at risk.

Looking at the next European elections we call all the current members and candidates of the European Parliament to rearrange the priorities of their agenda focusing on the respect, the defence and the guarantee of human rights for every human being and not only for European citizens. We believe there are five (5) action points that need seriously to be addressed by the Member States and the European decision makers:

1. Stop the deaths in the Mediterranean sea, the violence at the borders and along the routes

The Mediterranean has been for several years the world's deadliest sea route for refugees and migrants. It is unacceptable that this continues to happen in front of the European Union shores, the same European Union that only a few years before, in 2012, was awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize for having contributed for over six decades to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe.

It is a historical responsibility of the European Union to urgently find solutions and political agreements to stop the deaths in the Mediterranean sea by:

- ✓ Guaranteeing effective search and rescue activities.
- ✓ Find political arrangements to relocate people rescued at sea by reforming the context of the

Dublin III Regulation,

- ✓ Apply to all African countries equally the same visa policy that Europe has with the majority of the countries worldwide, in order to stop human trafficking, smuggling and deaths on the African route.

At the same time, the European Union and its Member States need to immediately stop the policy of externalization of the border. Any agreements with Libya, Morocco, Turkey and other countries that have led to the systematic violation of human rights, including torture, sexual violence and human trafficking, have to be abolished immediately.

In order to decrease the deaths, the European Union must provide legitimate ways of entrance into its territory. We consider the possibility to provide Humanitarian Visas as a potentially positive improvement for people at risk. In any case, this can be the first step in the right direction, but obviously it is not a permanent solution. The freedom of movement must be guaranteed.

2. Stop the criminalization of solidarity.

Only a few years ago, when the idea of “Solidarity routes” project came up, the “refugee crisis” in Europe triggered a wave of solidarity actions, both by civil society organisations and ordinary citizens. From Lesbos to the Baltic sea, many European citizens took action to support the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees. Just a few years later, those same activists are treated as criminals and humanitarian search and rescue missions are criminalised.

Today, solidarity with migrants is considered to be a crime. Save people from drowning in cold waters and you are a human trafficker. Shelter stranded people in an abandoned train station and you are a trespasser. Providing food to the hungry is a threat to hygiene standards. Criticize rough detentions by the police and your behaviour is insulting. Open free showers and you are infringing upon urban law. Protest against a forced deportation on a plane and you are obstructing public transportation. Watch an illegal expulsion from a squat and you are detained. Oppose repressive laws and you are a terrorist.

Numerous cases of legal persecution have been recorded in different countries, such as *Jugend Rettet e. V. Pro activa. Open Arms and Sea watch*, the NGOs active in SAR, have been investigated by the Italian persecutors as human traffickers, but all allegations ended with no charges. Proe aid Sevillan firemen have been trailed in Lesbos for rescuing a dinghy, Helena Maleno a Spanish activist living in Morocco has been trailed for launching SOS to distress boats, Cedric Herrou the French farmer and activist has been arrested several times and judged by French justice for helping migrants at the border with Italy, Domenico Lucano, the mayor of Riace, a small village in the south of Italy, is currently under investigation for his international recognised model of integration.

Solidarity is a fundamental value of the European Union that cannot be related to terrorism in any way. Indeed, this value is actually in crisis and a strong cultural and political initiative is urgently needed to revert this situation.

All the organizations attacked by politicians, prosecutors and haters faced the consequences in their fundraising and in particular, they had undergone a huge decrease in donations by private donors that were affected by this narrative. For this reason, they should be compensated for such significant

damages caused to their reputations, since the investigation ultimately concluded with no charges. In the same way, all activists and volunteers in solidarity with the people on the move should receive compensations for the trials that they had to face due solely to their solidarity.

3. Counteract hate speech by enforcing a positive narrative of coexistence

The normalisation of the hate speech against minority groups has become a great danger in the last few years, growing also due to the misuse of social media. Migrants especially have been constantly targeted, not only by right wing individuals, but also by populist politicians that use xenophobia to seed hate, divisions and intolerance into society. This unacceptable public narrative puts the social cohesion of the European local communities at risk, justifying and increasing racists attacks.

We believe that all European institutions need to strengthen their efforts to eliminate all forms of hate speech and enforce a positive narrative. We call on all European democratic forces to reject and actively fight hate speech, instead of being influenced by these messages. We also call on European candidates to oppose and denounce hate speech and the xenophobic narrative in the forthcoming European electoral campaign, focusing instead on the positive contributions of migrants to local societies.

4. Eliminate hotspots, make homes

At the moment, the European hotspots consist of places of detention where tension, violence and diseases are on the rise. Those places, either in the Greek islands or in the south of Italy, are the symbols of the so called Fortress Europe. At these centres the migrants are deprived of their freedom, and life conditions are often inhuman, unacceptable, and do not respect human dignity.

The same money used for running those centres could be used to include migrants in the European society, giving dignity to them and to Europe. Today, there are several examples of good practices that show that an alternative system of reception and integration would bring positive effects to both migrants and the hosting communities: the model of the Riace village in Italy, the inclusive project taking place in Kilikis, projects that are based on a decentralized way of hosting and the active participation of citizens in the reception and integration processes. Those experiences are often self-organized by CSOs or citizens, and sometimes opposed by right wing and populist governments in Member States.

We call on European institutions to cooperate and to support the CSOs and supportive citizens in order to build an open, inclusive and respectful European society. We call for the closure of the hotspots and the creation of homes and work opportunities able to provide migrants and the hosting communities with dignity.

5. Stop deportations and illegal push backs

Article 13 of the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states the following: "Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country". According to this

principle, no one can be forced to leave a country, especially if that person will face undignified conditions or even a threat to her life in the country she will be deported to.

The common practice of the European Member States is to deport people to their country of origin, to the so called “safe third countries,” or often also to the first country of entry into the European Union territory. This practice makes people on the move vulnerable and worsens their psychological and health conditions. To avoid deportation, a lot of people end up in grey zones, where they themselves or their work force can be easily exploited by human traffickers and criminal organizations, or where they become part of the black labour market.

In addition, one of the angular stone principles of the Geneva Convention from 1951 is the principle of non-refoulement (art. 33). Multiple reports from different organizations in various European states indicate that illegal and violent push backs are happening on a large scale in Europe. According to these reports, migrants suffer undignified treatment by the police – i.e. destroying their properties and legal documents or experiencing violent behaviour, and are prevented from seeking asylum. The alleged practice of illegal push backs from EU member states should be investigated by a committee of the European Parliament and other National and European Institutions, as well as to be brought to justice before the national courts.

The ‘Route of Solidarity’ is a small example of the founding European values. The same values should be defended and respected by the people who represent us! We are thus calling for a change of the European migration policies in a way that will respect the fundamental European values!

Seville, 12th of February of 2019