

# *Employers' Group*

Newsletter March 2016

## Refugees: Crisis? Challenge? Opportunity!



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The EESC organised going-local missions to Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, Poland, Croatia, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Malta, Bulgaria and Greece between December 2015 and February 2016 in order to get feedback from the grassroots on how civil society and NGOs are dealing with the large number of people seeking shelter in the EU.

The 11 EESC delegations took part in 109 meetings involving local authorities, the UNHCR, Frontex representatives, social partners and civil society organisations (CSOs).

While public opinion, politicians and media mainly complain about the large number of people arriving, visiting refugee camps reminded us that behind each of these numbers is a person with a story to tell - a story of fears, of losses of loved ones and of hope for a life in peace abroad. When speaking about the “refugee crisis” we often tend to forget that we are talking about human beings with the same rights, hopes and expectations as ours.

The commitment of NGOs and volunteers who supported refugees arriving in the second half of 2015 by providing them

with food, clothes and medical assistance proved that they saw the individuals behind the numbers.

From the discussions we had in the various Member States, similar messages emerged:

- The EU needs a properly functioning asylum system, with registration at the external borders, a uniform application procedure and a common list of safe third countries. The hotspots must be fully operational, around the clock, 7 days a week, and their number must be increased. The Dublin System, which provides for the country of first registration to be the country where an asylum application has to be filed, has clearly failed and must be revised. Asylum seekers preferred to go to just a few countries, like Germany, Sweden and Austria and quite a large number therefore refused registration in Greece or Italy in order to continue their journey to their country of destination. Countries of first arrival need additional financial and human resources support in order to handle registration and onward transport for the refugees. The relocation system must be made operational and all countries should take their share.

- Common EU criteria to determine whether someone is entitled to international protection should be reinforced and properly implemented.
- Tackling the root causes of the current migration wave by ending war in the countries of origin should become a priority in EU foreign policy.
- More support (financial and humanitarian) for countries bordering on Syria, which host the largest proportion of the Syrian population must be provided. Information campaigns in the refugee camps should be launched to counteract the rosy images painted by smugglers, in order to prevent more people from risking their lives by crossing the Mediterranean.
- A distinction has to be made between refugees according to the Geneva Convention and so-called “economic migrants” who claim asylum or a protected status on unjustified grounds. Economic migrants do not come from a war-zone, are not persecuted in their country of origin (which would give them a chance to get subsidiary protection) but are looking for a better life in Europe. If their cases are judged unfavourably, they must be sent back to their country of origin. As Europe does not have readmission agreements with some of the countries of origin (e.g. Morocco, Tunisia), such people often stay on irregularly in Europe. The conclusion of readmission agreements between those countries should become a priority for the EU. Moreover, it is necessary for the EU to work on a European legal migration system, which will reduce the current pressure on the asylum system.
- Civil society organisations together with volunteers played and continue to play an important role in welcoming and supporting refugees. They often fulfil tasks which are the responsibility of Member States without being properly compensated. In some countries, there is a lack of coordination between and among the CSOs and also a lack of communication between the CSOs and the respective national authorities. CSOs face a chronic lack of financial resources and are therefore calling for easier access to

European funding. It is felt that there could be more support from the European level for smaller scale projects in particular which mainly impact on the local level.

- Integrating huge numbers of people into our societies and our labour markets remains a challenge but is also an opportunity for our ageing societies. Integration is vital in order to avoid parallel societies, which may destabilise host



Christa Schweng during “going local” mission in Austria

countries. Integration measures, like language training, ideally combined with information on the values, rights and obligations of the host society, education and skills screening should start as soon as possible if there is to be a positive outcome to the asylum process. Housing is a major issue as long stays in camps hamper the integration process. Unaccompanied minors, often

traumatised, need special attention, should be settled into schools or, if above the school-age, should receive further training in order to acquire skills which are relevant to the labour market.

- However, the scale and the rapidity of the arrivals have created fear among the local population, given rise to xenophobic behaviour and even led to the closure of internal borders, thereby destroying European achievements in a matter of a few days. Media and public authorities have an important role to play in this respect. As integration is a complex two-way process, additional efforts for the local population must be undertaken. Refugees and locals alike should benefit from social investment according to their needs. Financing integration measures requires additional funding. This has to be seen as an investment, which will pay off in the long-term.

The lessons we are all currently learning the hard way will hopefully prepare us for the future: war, climate change and scarce resources will mean that influxes of refugees and waves of migration will continue. Purely national approaches cannot cope with these challenges - sustainable solutions will only be found at European level.



About the author:

**Christa Schweng**

Member of the Employers' Group  
Austrian Federal Economic Chamber



Migrants at the day care center Jules Ferry in Calais © The European Union, source: EP

# A journey

Immigration has always been one of the issues that is high on the Committee's agenda. Of course, as I come from Malta, immigration has from the very beginning been a topic of specific interest to me. My initial involvement with the issue was spurred on by national interests. Very simply, I wanted to contribute to finding solutions that would safeguard my country from the tremendous pressures it was facing. I could see and understand that, of course, this issue was not as much of a priority for a number of colleagues from Member States that were not really affected by this growing phenomenon. In 2009 and 2010, immigration was an issue which only a few Member States were grappling with, with Greece, Italy, Malta and (to some degree) Spain being the countries on the front line.

I was first appointed rapporteur in 2013, when, together with my Greek colleague Mr Gkofas, I was tasked with putting together the Committee's opinion on **"Irregular immigration by sea in the Euromed region"**. Whilst admittedly this was a very difficult subject to deal with, I must also confess that it was a very positive experience on a number of levels. Most importantly, we were given the opportunity to undertake a field mission in Greece to see first-hand the pressures being faced by the Greek people and authorities. We also had the fantastic opportunity of joining the Greek Coast Guard on a night patrol, an experience which highlighted the dedication of the people involved and the daily difficulties they face. What was, however, most enriching was the direct one-to-one conversations we had with the migrants themselves. This allowed me to understand better what motivates people to leave everything behind and undertake an unimaginably perilous journey in the hope of finding a better life. It also helped me understand better the individual hopes and fears of the fathers, mothers, sons and daughters who see Europe as a place of hope.

Unfortunately, this beacon of hope has very often turned into a death trap for thousands of migrants each year. Indeed, the presentation of the Gkofas-Mallia opinion took on a very disturbing twist as, just a few days previously, more than 300 immigrants had died just outside Lampedusa. It was during this October plenary session that I said that there was only one word that would describe Europe's lack of response – shame. Together, we had also warned that the phenomenon of mass immigration would not go away and that we would continue to witness more and more deaths on our doorstep unless all EU Member States faced up to their responsibilities.



Little did we know then how dramatically the situation would deteriorate to the situation we are in now. Immigration now impacts all EU Member States, and the number of people attempting to reach Europe has reached almost biblical proportions. In the meantime, in 2015, I was once again tasked with preparing another EESC opinion together with my colleague Mr Pîrvulescu, this time responding to the Commission's communication on **"A European Agenda on Migration"**. This also gave me the opportunity to undertake another country mission, this time in Sicily, where once again we witnessed first-hand the difficulties being faced by the local people and, most of all, the plight of the migrants and refugees who for one reason or another have fled their countries. From this mission, what clearly emerged was that, in spite of spending years and millions grappling with the immigration issue, Europe remains woefully unprepared to deal in an adequate manner with the incredibly complex dynamic. More regrettably, it became clear to me that people - mothers, fathers, sons and daughters - were risking their lives to escape misery only to often find themselves in another form of misery in the developed continent we all profess to be so proud of.

It is sad, unfortunate and downright shameful that national governments continue to bicker whilst people die. It is therefore of even greater relevance that our Committee, as a formal institution of the EU and as the formal voice of civil society, continues to speak out on the importance of saving lives and giving those who deserve protection a real chance to have a future.

In a peculiar way, I too have gone on a journey, starting from a point motivated by national interests to the point where I am today, where the relevance of nationality has been replaced by the importance of compassion for human life. It is a journey I intend to continue in the hope that, one day, as Europeans we can look back with pride rather than shame at the way we will respond today, tomorrow and the day after.

About the author:

**Stefano Mallia**

Member of the Employers' Group  
Malta Chamber of Commerce,  
Enterprise and Industry





# “Going local” missions on migration as seen by Members

In December, I went on a mission that I will never forget. I went with EESC colleagues to Lesbos, an island in the Aegean, and to Eidomeni, a little village on the northern border of Greece. This is the entry and exit route for thousands of refugees fleeing war and seeking a better future.

It was impressive to take stock of, see and feel the unprecedented numbers of refugees. In Lesbos alone, an average of 5000 to 6000 people are arriving every day on this island of 86000 inhabitants. It is a monumental task to welcome them, meet their primary needs, start the screening and registration process ... And from what everybody said, more people are expected to come as time goes by and the hope of returning to their home country vanishes.

We met with a lot of people working on the ground - the national and local authorities, with Frontex, with officials of the EU, UNCHR, IMO and local and international NGOs. They were all deeply involved, motivated and committed. From the in-depth and wide-ranging discussions we had, I believe that Europe has an enormous role to play. First, it is essential to create safe routes for refugees and migrants so that they are not exploited by smugglers, so that they do not lose their lives at sea. Secondly, we need to improve and strengthen the role of Frontex. These forces need to have the means and resources to save lives and help in the complex registration process. Thirdly, the Dublin II regulation has to be revised; the responsibility cannot be shouldered by just a few Member States. This has to be shared, and shared on a permanent basis.

But above all, I met refugees. I met people who had just crossed the sea the night before, a cold night during which 15 people had lost their lives. I met with refugees just before they crossed the borders or were denied passage on their way to Central Europe. I saw pain, sorrow and hope in their eyes! I saw the smiles on their faces! Let's not disappoint them!



**Irini Pari**  
Greek Member of the Employers' Group  
Participant of the mission to Lesbos, Greece



Waiting for the registration process ... 2 to 3 days. Lesbos, Greece



In the early days of January, there were still about 2000 refugees a day from Austria arriving in the town of Passau in Bavaria. This was what our mission team was witnessing in Passau on a single day. It was just a snapshot, but an impressive one, a real eye-opener. We learned how the situation had been earlier in 2015 - almost catastrophic – and we only could imagine how the situation would continue this year. However, the spirit among those involved was “Wir schaffen es!” – We’ll do it. And they will do it. But it was made clear to us in all our discussions in Passau, as well as later on in Munich, that the capacity limits had already been reached. It cannot go on like this.

We talked with many of the main actors: local authorities, police, social workers, representatives of civil society organisations, social partners and business representatives. In a federal state such as Germany, there are many actors on different levels dealing with the refugees. Coordination was a key word. And there was also a clear message for us: efficient coordination was an indispensable tool for managing a crisis. Coordination means that every actor should know their role and the roles of other actors: coordination between public authorities, between civil society organisations and private organisations; coordination between public authorities and other players.

The second key message was the urgent need for action at European level towards a common asylum policy. If there is anything like European solidarity, this is the time to show it. Joint action is needed to manage the current crisis, but joint action is also needed to build a solid foundation to manage future crises.

The third message to us was also clear: the process of receiving the refugees should be as simple and efficient as possible. There should be good prospects in terms of integration for those refugees who were likely to stay. This is where public authorities such as employment agencies and civil society organisations should work together in close cooperation with companies. Language learning, evaluation of skills and competences and apprenticeships, together with in-company training and seamless access to work are the basic steps required. It was reassuring to see that this was a priority in Bavaria.



**Jukka Ahtela**  
Finnish Member of the Employers' Group  
Participant of the mission to Bavaria, Germany

Slovenia and its authorities deserve praise for the action taken by Slovenian communities to support refugees transiting through their country. Conversely, I was extremely disturbed to hear repeated pleas from those we met, asking EU leaders to work together to find a long-term solution to the continuing problem because their inability to make decisions was increasing tensions between Member States for citizens and adding further insecurity for migrants.

The situation is extremely complex. Many people crossing the borders are economic migrants and no assessment of their situation or nationality is being made. The asylum process is lengthy, resource-intensive and complex, which deters Member States from encouraging people to register as asylum seekers. The challenge must be addressed now because this movement of people is bound to escalate. In winter, an average of one to two thousand people cross the Slovenian border every day. Last year, at the height of the influx, these numbers exceed ten thousand a day. This situation is expected to continue as the weather improves.

Although they are treated as humanely as possible, refugees are "processed" at facilities that cannot cope with the volume of people passing through them. In particular, the sanitary conditions were not ideal, with minimal washing facilities and cramped dining and sleeping conditions. While politicians continue talk in their "Brussels bubble", volunteers, NGOs and local communities continue to make the passage of migrants and refugees as welcoming as possible. However, the service of unpaid volunteers is not sustainable and a solution needs to be found.

The situation should never have come to this. As we were reminded on our visit: "The EU is founded on human dignity and respect for people." .



**Madi Sharma**  
British Member of the Employers' Group  
Participant of the mission to Slovenia



Madi Sharma at the press conference during going local mission to Slovenia

# Migration - from a Hungarian perspective

Europe's citizens have witnessed tough discussions during the recent Summit about how to manage the flow of war refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants coming to the EU, but we all know this problem remains one of the most burning issues, with serious implications for our future. A recent communique by the International Office of Migration warned that with a growing world population, increasing resource scarcity and rising global temperatures, the socio-economic and political factors driving migration are bound to amplify. (A large proportion of the world's population is expected to be in Africa with a predicted rise from the current 7.3bn people to 11.2bn by 2100.)

It is then clear that migration will be one of the most crucial issues during the coming decades. Let us now look at the current massive influx of refugees and other migrants, and ask some relevant questions. How should we deal with this flow, how should we proceed in the Member States and make the right decisions based on the rule of law, on our common European values and on the principles of humanity and solidarity?

Just like other European citizens I was shocked and saddened by the sight of the huge migration flow crossing my own home country, seeing crying children boarding buses and trains. We have indeed arrived at a historic crossroads in post WWII migration. The impact of military conflicts in our immediate neighbourhood - chiefly in the Middle East - has triggered this migration, aided by human traffickers and other criminals profiting from the misery of others. Before, we only heard of these conflicts from the media, and now, all of a sudden, we can see fleeing people on our doorsteps! The European Commission, the European Parliament and the

majority of Member State governments were unforgivably slow in taking meaningful action in this regard. Last August, the Hungarian government and National Assembly (Parliament) were the first in Europe to start discussing how to cope practically and curb the huge migration flows. Thanks to the on-line media all these measures and steps, including the construction of a fence to protect Hungary's borders, stopping migrants from entering the country without registration, were quickly shown world-wide. This triggered sharp political criticism of Hungary by the Commission and by the leaders of some neighbouring countries. Hungary was rebuked for its *“lack of solidarity and unwillingness to cooperate in the EU”*. However, as a result of the increasing migration pressure and mounting conflicts between refugees in camps or in public, a few weeks later the other *Visegrad-4 countries* (Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia) announced their active support for Hungary and urged others to undertake efforts to defend the EU's external borders in line with basic EU commitments.

The tragic terrorist attacks of 13 November 2015 in Paris, followed by the criminal acts against European – mainly German – women and harassment of youngsters by some migrants, have shown that the EU must quickly deal with this complex issue. European citizens have started raising questions such as: should we screen or check those who would like to enter the EU? Is there any kind of risk related to this major flow? Should we uphold or oppose the idea of a multicultural Europe? Should we require travel documents of those who want to stay with us for longer? Will we be able to preserve our own European identity, culture, languages and historic heritage? Should we take the road of helping to settle conflicts in our neighbourhood, so allow populations to stay at home? By asking these questions and finding the right answers, Europe will enable us to move towards a solution. We must show hospitality, of course, but we have to be careful, too. We must emphasise that yes, we honour and highly respect the values of other nations and their cultures. We appreciate all those learned men of the Orient like Avicenna and Algoritmi (al-Khwarizmi) from Persia, Albatenius, Averroes and other great Arab thinkers but we expect the same respect from other nations towards us. We must, of course, demonstrate great human solidarity and lend a helping hand to those who are in real need but in addition to our democratic and humanitarian commitments, we have to ask our visitors to accept our own values and our way of life.

Global competitiveness is often mentioned at the EESC as



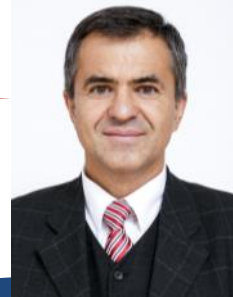


one of the most important targets for us to reach but to do so we must demonstrate joint political will, strong cooperation in Europe, a high level of economic and intellectual capacity and resources. If we are to shape a *Continent of the future* we must live in peace and true democracy! We, as Hungarians working at the EESC, will be happy and honoured to contribute to reaching these noble goals.

About the author:

**István Komoróczy**

Member of the Employers' Group  
COOP Federation



## Some remarks on the migration crisis

On 17 and 18 March another EU summit on the ongoing refugee crisis will take place. Optimists expect steps to be taken to substantially reduce the flow of refugees; realists, on the other hand, expect an unprecedented increase in the flow. Germany is putting a "European" solution on the table – in other words, a balanced distribution of refugees among all EU Member States and a reduction in the flow of migrants to be effected by Turkey on the EU's behalf. No alternative is being offered to this approach and it is to be binding for all Member States.

The commitment to take in refugees on the basis of pre-established binding and permanent quotas, without any final limit on how many are taken in amounts to a blank cheque that no responsible government can sign. As well as the familiar security, economic and social dimensions, there is another important aspect that must be considered: the attitude to immigration is also causing turmoil in our cultural values and social relations. This is taking place below the radar, but the long-term consequences will be to upset fundamental relations and values. The artificial nurturing of a "general feeling of guilt" will only result in society continuing to fall apart!

Some Member States have pondered what to do if this plan fails – as, by the way, all its predecessors have – and have tried to come up with a feasible alternative. For this, however, they have been showered with reproach and invective to the effect – bringing to mind a former French president – that they had "missed a good opportunity to keep quiet".

The unconditional basis for any further discussion of how to address the refugee crisis must be the reinstatement of controls at the Schengen area's external borders, a halt to the

flow of refugees and acceptance of applications for asylum or temporary international protection only in specified hotspots, both at the EU borders and in third countries.

Hotspots must have a bigger role than just registration and documentation. They must also have the proper detention capacity for cases where it is essential to check applicants and to identify migrants who have some claim to be granted one of the forms of international protection.

Where applicants are ineligible, swift and effective repatriation policy procedures – including the use of force – must be in place to return them to their countries of origin.

Stopping mass migration requires putting an end to ongoing armed conflicts and stabilising those countries where the institutions of the state have broken down or are tottering. The EU should play a far greater role here than it has done so far – in close collaboration, of course, with global and regional powers. This will not be an easy role – witness the incipient talks to end the conflict in Syria.

It is worth noting that the swelling flow of migration does not involve only Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan and that the ongoing conflicts and civil wars have been the trigger rather than the root cause. That cause is without doubt the long-term, unchecked population explosion, with a whole raft of countries in Africa and southeast Asia doubling their populations roughly every thirty years, resulting in potentially hundreds of millions of migrants who will find it ever more difficult even to feed themselves in their own countries. It goes without saying that this many potential migrants poses an extraordinary risk for Europe and puts its very existence in peril.

It is naive to think that the protection of the EU's borders can be transferred to Turkey or some other country. Europeans have to do this themselves. Even if it were possible, even so, to stem the flow of migrants in the Aegean region, it still needs to be said loud and clear that the unprecedented flow of migrants in 2015 started out from Libya and local smugglers are still geared up for their lucrative trade in human misery.

About the author:

**Vladimír Novotný**

Member of the Employers' Group  
Confederation of Industry  
of the Czech Republic



# Science influencing policy-making on migration

The French Institute for Demographic studies ran a EU-funded project, called MAFE, investigating migration between Africa and Europe. The project surveyed current migrants, returnees and non-migrants in Ghana, Senegal, the Democratic Republic of Congo and also in European countries in order to understand the factors that influence why some people return and some people do not.

The results from this project was launched at a Brussels-based conference called **Understanding and Tackling the Migration Challenge: The Role of Research**, on 4 and 5 February. A key finding is that legalising people's migration status makes them more rather than less likely to return to their country of origin.

Dr Cris Beauchemin, project leader made the point that "There is such a big gap between policy-making and researchers and my hope is that we are able to bridge the gap." This project demonstrates just one of the ways that science can contribute to the migration debate and guide policymakers in their long-term thinking.

The project also focused on return migration because EU has very little data on this as Member States collect data on the people who enter their country but they have very little data on those who leave.

What they found was that, as Europe's immigration restrictions have grown in the period since the 1970s, circular migration has been reduced, meaning fewer people are returning to their home countries.

Crucially, they found that gaining secure legal status in Europe increased people's propensity to return to Africa, indicating that the best way of promoting return migration is to provide legal status for migrants.

## Depoliticising debate

One way that research can contribute to the migration debate is to depoliticise the issue and counter misconceptions.

Research consistently shows that in almost all EU countries, people believe there are at least three times more migrants than there really are, that migrants are invading Europe and taking away citizen jobs. The evidence shows this not to be true. Using knowledge based on reliable research to make policy decisions can remove fear and reduce prejudice.

However, when debates become very political, politicians can feel under pressure to respond to those public concerns and negative media coverage. It is the role of organised civil society to raise the awareness of citizens and support politicians from making simplistic and polarised ways of looking at the problem using research to gradually shift the way concepts and ideas and policy problems are framed.



Operation Poseidon 2015 by Frontex in the Mediterranean © The European Union, source: Frontex



About the author:

**Brenda King**

Member of the Employers' Group  
Chief Executive  
African & Caribbean Diversity



## Address:

European Economic and Social Committee  
Employers' Group  
Rue Belliard 99  
1040 Brussels  
Belgium

**Telephone:** +32 (0) 2 546 82 07

**Fax:** +32 (0) 2 2 546 97 54

**E-mail:** [gr1@eesc.europa.eu](mailto:gr1@eesc.europa.eu)

[www.eesc.europa.eu/employers-group](http://www.eesc.europa.eu/employers-group)



@employers\_EESC



EmployersEESC