



Solidarity Now: Addressing the European Parliament - calls for the investigation of the use of EU funds for the refugee crisis

"It is our duty to call Europe to responsibility"

By Epaminondas Farmakis, General Director of SolidarityNow

On behalf of SolidarityNow association which has been established and operates in Greece since 2012, I want to thank you for our participation in today's event, which makes me personally very happy as this is my 20th year at the service of the Civil Society and nowadays cooperation and teamwork are even more crucial in our field. I would like to thank Eleni Takou from our Advocacy department who coordinated the efforts with all the present organizations to make this date possible.

The EU-Turkey agreement is legally stale as well as a disaster from the humanitarian point of view. Equally important is the question concerning the funding for the implementation of both the agreement and of the European policy on refugees altogether.

Refugees, economic migrants, mobile populations have become mere bureaucratic connotations among EU Member States – these connotations however bear an essence of life and death for these people.

On Monday (3/13/2017) -- a few days ago -- SolidarityNow filed a petition to the European Parliament, requesting the investigation of the use of EU funds. It is imperative that both the European Parliament and other European institutions investigate why the colossal amount of over 1 billion euros provided has not produced even barely decent living conditions for the majority of this population currently in Greece -- many of them and even children are being held in detention-like settings. Is the EU agreeing to pay for people to drown in the Mediterranean and to die in the camps of Greece? It is nevertheless a matter of dignity, transparency and accountability as well as of respect for human rights.

As (civil society) organizations we were the first to ask -- for months now -- for a rational planning by the government, in order to allow for the resources that we have received to be used in the best possible way. Despite our appeals, and despite the continuous accusations towards the (civil society) organizations by government officials, to this date -- two years after the beginning of the crisis and one year after the agreement -- no such planning has been presented.

At the same time, and notwithstanding our constant calls to evacuate the islands and settlements, we witness a continuous waste of resources. The evidence we have from our own accommodation structures document without any doubt that small structures within the urban composition have multiple benefits: they have lower costs, they facilitate the integration of their populations, yielding hope and security to them as well as direct access to health, education, legal assistance, social and psychological services, interpretation, work and commuting.

It has been shown worldwide that migrant populations strengthen the local economies and elude the isolation otherwise seen in settlements thus improving social integration. With camps, the local communities are not bolstered up and millions are lost in producing structures and equipment for places that will soon no longer be needed. The 30,000 people in camps and islands (the other 20,000 are in premises within urban complexes) do not legitimize their (the camps') existence. They (the camps) also reinforce xenophobia, hate crimes and racism as well as the rise of Nazi formations such as the Golden Dawn. Unfortunately, the Ministry in charge still insists on camps, where the only real beneficiaries are contractors and large suppliers.

A typical example is food catering, where in most camps every month there is a "negotiation without the publication of a call for tender", *i.e.* some direct agreements with lack of transparency and absence of information. It is a misapplication of provision 4368/16 for supplies, which would by no means qualify for "unforeseen and urgent" as for what concerns national security and public order, especially after such a lengthy time span and so little inflow (of refugees). These are processes that sustain and nurture confusion and mismanagement, whereas the amount spent is astronomical in contrast to the miserable quality of food offered.

At SolidarityNow we believe that the local rumors about the (mis)use of EU funds are detrimental to the (non-governmental) organizations and to civil society, as well as to the reputation of our country. This motivated us to take the initiative and file a petition to the European Parliament in an attempt to urge the EU into taking a stand and stop beating about the bush but also to provide monitoring, planning and a new implementation framework for Greece.

The inability of the government and the lack of transparency is not going to change in a near future. Our proposal is to close the camps right away – who would benefit with their permanence? Certainly, not the people who are trapped inside them.

We call for the (Greek) Financial Control Committee to perform the necessary checks and send their pertinent findings to the General Secretariat for the Fight against Corruption of the Ministry of Justice (and) where fraud is suspected, to the European Commission and the European Court of Auditors.

One might wonder then: "oh well, with so many reports, aren't the European authorities aware of all this?" And here lies the real issue: not only do they know, but the situation actually suits them. With a peculiar and well-known doublespeak, the European Commission can commit hundreds of millions to Greece, at the same as it says "do not bother us with Greece, we have given them some good millions".

It (the E.C.) takes advantage of the administrative chaos and the inhuman conditions prevailing in the islands to convey the message to refugees and immigrants abroad "do not come because it will make your life hell" -- and at the same time it argues that it has allocated

enough funds within Europe for the asylum system to be relatively functional for putting up with the Dublin returns.

Not only does Europe know, but it also finds it convenient. That is why it is the duty of civil society to inconvenience the EU and ask them to be responsible with human lives and the funding allocated from European taxpayers.