

THE REFUGEE CRISIS: A EUROPEAN CALL FOR ACTION

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This Tribune is an open letter by the conveners of the [Vision Europe initiative](#) regarding the refugee crisis in Europe and the necessity to act now.

European leaders need to implement common European solutions to the refugee crisis. Only joint solutions can credibly and effectively reduce the growing human suffering and social and political turmoil.

The refugee crisis poses a serious challenge, both to the welfare of refugees and to European societies. In 2015, more than 1.5 million migrants crossed into the European Union. From Italy to Poland, and from Greece to Germany, countries face immense challenges in responding to requests for humanitarian aid, asylum, and integration. The associated integration challenges in housing, language, work and welfare are already formidable. Failing to manage them properly poses serious threats to social cohesion and political stability.

European countries have had sufficient time to analyse and assess the long-standing challenges which created the current crisis. Now it is time to act - not individually and at the expense of others, but jointly and in a spirit of European solidarity. This is why [Vision Europe](#) - a partnership between seven leading think tanks and foundations in Europe - will in 2016 focus its efforts on providing practical solutions to the current refugee crisis, and its root causes. We, the seven signatories, writing in an individual capacity, see an urgent need for a common European approach, to compliment local and national efforts.

At present, there is no consensus among member states on how to respond to the crisis, neither on the objectives to be achieved or the methods to be used. But disagreements on substance must be overcome now. Building on current discussions, we propose a comprehensive agenda at the EU level, with five major dimensions.

First, it is important to control the EU's external borders so that only refugees fleeing war and persecution, who have a legitimate right to seek asylum, can enter and potentially remain in the EU. The porous nature of the EU's external borders has meant an unacceptable loss of control in the eyes of many EU citizens and has raised false hopes for irregular migrants trying to enter the Union. The control of the borders of the Schengen Area should be a collective effort of the EU and all Member States, coordinated by European Institutions with professional staff and with financial support provided to Member States at the EU's periphery. Regaining control of the EU's external borders is essential to preserve open internal borders.

Second, beyond implementing the already agreed upon relocation of 160,000 refugees from Greece and Italy, the EU should develop a system which distributes a much larger number of refugees across the Union, directly from the hotspots in the EU and the neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon. Member States not willing to host refugees themselves could choose to make a primarily financial contribution to the system. A Migration Solidarity Fund should be created to manage this compensatory system. Turkey's efforts to reduce the crossings in the Aegean Sea should be matched by a willingness among EU Member States to take in refugees in an orderly manner. The Conclusions from the European Council seem to move in the right direction in this regard.

The third measure should be to improve, standardize and speed up the processes to determine asylum applications. The sooner refugees know whether they can stay, the more energy can be invested in their integration into host countries' societies and in family reunions. The sooner a decision is taken, the fairer and more feasible it is to send back those whose requests are refused in full respect of international law and human rights. And EU members cannot afford to have vastly different standards in granting asylum status. Under international law, there can be no limit set on the number of those eligible to request asylum.

As a fourth measure, we recommend expanding efforts at the EU level to improve the living conditions of refugees staying in countries close to their countries of origin. Many refugees want to return to their homes as soon as the situation becomes safe again. They should not be driven to start the hazardous journey to the European Union only because of unbearable conditions in the countries where they are currently sheltering.

Last but not least, the EU and its Member States should work vigorously towards ending the violent conflicts that are the principal causes of the crisis. Europe must invest heavily in the Syria peace process, in particular. The EU must also raise the ambition and resources of its Neighbourhood Policy, with a focus on helping to stabilise the region and on improving the living conditions and economic opportunities in the Southern neighbourhood.

But action is also required at the national level, especially in the EU countries where significant numbers of refugees have received or are expected to receive asylum. The distribution of refugees across municipalities and regions should be fair and should come with adequate support and resources from the national level, emphasising education and language training. The recognition of professional competences and support to enter the labour market should be available at a very early stage. Within our societies, we need a dialogue between refugees and the host society. It should be made clear that respect for human rights, democratic values and cultural norms is indispensable for a prolonged stay in the respective European host country.

Coming from seven European countries, with different national policies and approaches to the refugee crisis, the foundations and think tanks of Vision Europe are working together to advance new ideas, to frame an informed debate and to emphasize the benefits of common European solutions to Europe-wide problems. Europe is strong enough to manage the migration challenges, but only if political leaders act now, act responsibly and use the resources at their disposal, including support for civil society working in this area. We must not leave the public space to populists and nationalists offering false promises. Only a European solution will be workable and sustainable.

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