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Human flows and the world we share: can Europe tackle the refugee and migrant issue?

Critical questions and key indications on how to manage the flow of refugees in Europe - the subject of debate at the international conference hosted on the initiative of the Economic and Social Council of Greece (OKE)

The international conference on *Human flows and the world we share: can Europe tackle the refugee and migrant issue?*, organised by the **Economic and Social Council of Greece (OKE)**, in cooperation with the **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** and the **Representation of the European Commission in Greece**, was well-attended by representatives of the government, stakeholders and institutions, and by prominent public figures.

H.E. the President of the Hellenic Republic, Prokopios Pavlopoulos, opened the conference, which was held on Wednesday 20 April in the Old Parliament House.

Welcome addresses were given by **the representative of the Greek Parliament, Georgios Pallis, the Deputy Minister for Defence and head of the Refugee Crisis Coordination Centre, Dimitris Vitsas, H.E. the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Caspar Veldkamp, H.E. the Ambassador of the Turkish Republic, Kerim Uras, H.E. the Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany, Peter Schoof, H.E. the Ambassador of the French Republic, Christophe Chantepy, H.E. the Ambassador of the Italian Republic, Evisio Luigi Marras, and representatives of institutions and associations, including representatives of UNHCR and NGOs.**

Greetings were also received via video link from **the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, the Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, Dimitris Avramopoulos, the Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, Christos Stylianides, and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. In addition, significant contributions were made by representatives of the business sector.**

The event was also attended by **the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs with responsibility for European Affairs, Nikos Ksidakis, and the Chief of Defence, Evangelos Apostolakis, Admiral in the Greek Navy.**

In his opening address, the OKE president, Mr Vernicos, said that: "Europe, confronted with institutional weaknesses, appears ill-prepared for integrating such a large number of migrants and refugees into its society, with inevitable consequences for social cohesion and cultural identity. We are aware, however, that no country can address single-handed the social and economic impact of the refugee problem, and no policy can be implemented unless it is the fruit of dialogue and is accepted by society".

In his address to the conference, the president of the EESC, Mr Dassis, noted that: "Over the last two years, war, persecution and poverty have forced more than one million people to seek refuge in Europe, following dangerous routes and risking their lives for a better future. Without the assistance of civil society in the reception of these people and the management of the humanitarian crisis, the outcome could have been disastrous. The refusal on the part of some EU Member States to show the slightest solidarity with our fellow human beings is highly regrettable. Unfortunately, some people seem to think that only the peripheral countries directly affected, such as Greece, need to demonstrate solidarity. The EESC, with its long-standing experience in migration issues, is contributing to moulding a single European migration policy by proposing a set of new measures, outlined in its recently published synthesis report, including the revision of the Dublin Regulation, a proper common European asylum system and safe routes for refugees.

In his speech, the head of the Commission Representation to Greece, Mr Carvounis, stated: "To be effective, the management of the refugee crisis depends on coordinated efforts on the part of four essential partners: the individual EU Member States in their own right, the European Commission as the leading representative of the EU institutions, Greece, the country which is receiving the greatest numbers of refugees, and Turkey, the last country from which the flow of refugees stems. At this point in time, all players are called upon not only to shoulder their responsibilities, but also to act to ensure the success of the agreement between the EU and Turkey and, at the same time, to provide relief to the thousands of refugees currently in Greece. The challenges of the migration/refugee question can only be met by acting in concert, with solidarity, participation and consultation on the part of all the players involved, not through unilateral action. This will be as much to the benefit of Europe and as to our fellow human beings seeking refuge here. We have to learn from each other's experience in the process - and that is what we are doing today, at this important conference".

The conference sessions focused on **the challenges for the EU and the international community, Greek management and experience and the social partners' view. Speakers included Theodoros Fessas, chairman of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV), Giannis Panagopoulos, president of the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE), Vassilis Korkidis, president of the Hellenic Confederation of Commerce and Entrepreneurship (ESEE), Giorgos Kavathas, president of the Hellenic Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen and Merchants (GSEVEE) and John Retsos, vice president of the Association of Greek Tourism Enterprises (SETE). The last session of the conference was dedicated to a debate on the multicultural limits of Europe. There was an open exchange of views in which the following took part: Nikiforos Diamantouros, former European Ombudsman, Odysseas Voudouris, general secretary for Refugees First Reception and Identification, and Christian Pîrvulescu, president of the Permanent Study Group on Immigration and Integration (EESC).**

During the morning of the conference, two important meetings were held in the offices of the OKE to discuss the multifaceted aspects of the refugee question.

The first meeting was attended by 20 representatives of NGOs, interest groups and independent bodies and focused on ways of dealing with the refugee

issue. The following needs were identified:

- respect for human rights;
- more active participation by the state in managing the issue;
- medium-term policies to meet immediate basic needs (shelter, food and hygiene), together with long-term programmes to meet refugees' educational, cultural and religious needs;
- division of roles between central and local governments and civil society organisations;
- accurate and responsible information for refugees and local communities on their rights and obligations and on the asylum procedure;
- involvement of refugees in the running of reception centres.

The second meeting was held among **mayors from German cities with their Greek counterparts, in cooperation with the Greek-German Assembly and the Central Union of Municipalities of Greece (KEDE).**

The aim of the discussion was to exchange experience and formulate proposals for effective policies.

The meeting focused on measures to successfully integrate refugees staying in the host countries for prolonged periods. Special emphasis was placed on language learning and on including refugees in education and the labour market. Special mention was made of the leading role of volunteers as a bridge between the local community, the local authorities and the refugees. In this connection, it was stressed that good coordination was needed between the local authorities and the government in order to care for refugees, and it was noted that mayors did not have sufficient resources at their disposal.

The meeting ended with broad recognition that the task of dealing with the refugee crisis must be a common European one, and could be addressed only through dialogue, cooperation and consultation among the countries of Europe. The conference conclusions would serve as the basis for the study to be conducted by the committee of experts set up by the OKE.

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A brief description of the Greek OKE:

The Economic and Social Council of Greece (OKE) was established on 1994 on the model of the European Union's Economic and Social Committee (EESC). It is based on a tripartite structure, with the representatives divided into three groups: employers, workers (in the private and public sectors) and other interest groups. The latter include farmers, the liberal professions, consumer groups, environmental protection groups, people with disabilities, advocates of gender equality and local authorities.

Since May 2001, the Economic and Social Council of Greece has been an institution provided for by the Constitution of the Greek State. According to Article 82, paragraph 3, of the Constitution, "Matters relating to the establishment, functioning and competences of the Economic and Social Council whose mission is to conduct social dialogue for the overall policy of the country and, especially, for the orientation of economic and social policy, as well as to formulate opinions on bills and law proposals referred to it, shall be specified by law".

The purpose of the OKE is promote social dialogue and, by this means, build common positions where possible on matters of interest to society in its broadest sense or to specific sectors within society. It does not seek to reconcile differences in ideological or political standpoints, but rather to outline the various arguments and proposals as components of a collective social stance, where this exists or can be developed.

Furthermore, through its proposals and opinions, it endeavours to maximise benefits to society and minimise potentially adverse effects arising from individual decisions taken by the executive and legislative powers.

A brief description of the EESC:

The EESC is a consultative body of the European Union. Established in 1957, it provides expert advice to the major EU institutions (European Commission, European Council and European Parliament) by delivering opinions on proposed EU legislation. It also issues own-initiative opinions on matters that in its view call for further study. One of the key tasks of the EESC is to act as a bridge between the EU institutions and civil society. It promotes participatory democracy in the EU and helps to strengthen the role of civil society organisations through **structured dialogue** with these groups in the EU Member States and in third countries.

In their home countries, the members of the EESC represent a broad range of national economic, social and cultural interests. Members are divided into three groups: Employers, Workers and Other Interests (including agriculture, consumer affairs, the environment, the family and non-governmental organisations). In this way, the EESC's members build a bridge connecting the European Union with civil society organisations in the Member States.

The Representation of the European Commission in Greece:

The Representation is the European Commission's local office in Greece. It represents the European Commission in the country and is a key channel of communication between Greece and the Commission and its centralised departments. In other words, in addition to being the mouthpiece of the European Commission in Greece, the Representation also informs the European Commission in Brussels of significant political, economic and social developments in the country.

The Representation thus helps to explain EU policies and their impact on Greece and its citizens, to inform the government and other bodies and stakeholders of European matters and to provide information on developments in European policy to representatives of the press and media in Greece, etc.

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