

President's declaration in EESC Plenary: "We can no longer waste time to find a solution on migration"

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EESC President
Declaration by

Almost four years ago, on September 2 2015, the world woke up with the shocking photo of the helpless tiny body of little Aylan Kurdi on the banks of the Turkish city of Bodrum, opposite to the island of Kos.

The two-year-old Syrian boy drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, together with his mother Rehana and brother Ghalib, when making the journey to seek a better, more human and more dignified life in Europe.

The death of little Aylan shook consciences around the world and inspired countless reactions of indignation and protest. Aylan Kurdi has become a symbol of the Syrian crisis.

Four years after the tragedy, children continue to die in the Mediterranean. And not only.

The grim reality of the migration crisis affects the America's southern border as well. This has been captured in another shocking photo, showing the lifeless bodies of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and Valeria, a Salvadoran father and his daughter who drowned as they attempted to cross the Rio Grande into Texas to seek asylum.

The two toddlers both wore a red shirt. They shared the same dreams and love of life as all children.

Two weeks ago, an airstrike killed more than 44 people in a migrant detention center near Tripoli. Last week, 72 bodies were found from a ship packed with migrants that sank off the Tunisian coast.

The words of Enrico Letta, former Prime Minister of Italy come to my mind, and I quote.

If in a hundred years a marine biologist carried out research in the Mediterranean and found the skeletons of over 15,000 people, he would wonder what atrocious war took place between 2014 and 2019. In history books, he would find no war, but only a shameful lack of courage and an outrageous absence of political will.

According to the latest data from the UNHCR, two children a day drown on average in the Mediterranean.

Instead of sheltering them, we close our ports, fortify our borders and raise walls. Worse than that, we let the torturers free and we criminalize humanitarianism.

Saving lives is not a pastime, as those who point the finger at NGOs believe. Saving the lives of those who flee from atrocious wars is a human, moral obligation imposed by international rules and treaties.

Those who use migration and manipulate the despair of human beings as a tool of political struggle, as a weapon of destruction, must be irrevocably condemned for lack of humanity.

After years of debates and unfounded promises (remember the Lampedusa massacre of 3 October 2013, with almost 400 deaths and authorities across Europe who said "never again") it is time to find a way to manage migration in the Mediterranean to demand legal channels of entry, humanitarian corridors, and an orderly and shared migration management by all EU Member States.

Receiving and welcoming the migrants would lead to a real integration. We need to ensure that the desperate people, who run away from war, from hunger, from violence are not abandoned, locked up, threatened, raped, persecuted, driven back.

Being born in a prosperous and safe country is not a merit, but just lucky fact. We must remember this.

I therefore salute with great admiration the clear words of the opening statement of the President-elect Ursula von der Leyen, yesterday in Strasbourg and I quote.

"In the last five years, more than 17,000 people have drowned in the Mediterranean, which has become one of the deadliest borders in the world. At sea, there is the duty to save lives and in our Treaties and conventions there is the legal and moral duty to respect the dignity of every human being."

And the story she told us about her family welcoming a 19-year old refugee from Syria into her home may today become "*an inspiration for us all*". Ms von der Leyen also took specific commitments, among other things, for a New Pact on Migration and Asylum, including the relaunch of the reform of the Dublin system.

I am convinced that the first woman president of the EU commission, a doctor, a mother of 7 children, a German minister for over 15 years, will be able to make a difference on migration, as well as on the other policy areas she has announced.

And for this we congratulated with her and we remain fully committed to working together with her and with the European Commission.

We can no longer waste any of our time.

We want a responsible and supportive Europe, respectful of human rights.

We want a Europe that knows how to welcome diversity in an organised way and make it a truly enriching experiencing. Because on the banknotes we handle every day there are no walls but bridges, no closed ports but open doors and windows, symbolising the European spirit of openness and cooperation.

This is the Europe we want.

This is the Europe we want to fight for.

This is the Europe we want to leave to our children.