Antiracist Observatory of the University of the Aegean

The Refugees issue: Between "Fortress Europe" and Solidarity

In the summer of 2015 some of the Aegean Islands (mainly *Lesvos, Chios, Kos, Leros, Samos*) received a huge influx of refugees, which by far exceeded existing capabilities in reception and hospitality. Typically, only last July Lesvos received nearly 55,000 refugees/migrants, while the number of arrivals on the island in 2014 was almost 12,000 and in 2013 less than 4,000 refugees/migrants! (*http://www.astynomia.gr/images/stories/2014/statistics14/allod2014/statistics_all_2014_methorio.pdf*).

This summer we experienced a real humanitarian crisis, a situation that could have led to an unprecedented tragedy if hundreds of volunteers hadn't been mobilized and hadn't offered their unconditional and continuous solidarity to those who come from war zones across the Middle East, Central and Southern Asia and North Africa and were heading towards Europe.

Those rough summer days seem now to have passed for now, but the alarm has not yet to be stopped. Still, during the last few days we have had dozens of refugees drowned in the Aegean Sea. We are aware that hundreds of thousands of refugees of all ages are in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, waiting for the first opportunity to get into the European 'promised land'. Nevertheless, the painful events that have been unfolding in countries of the Balkan Peninsula and Central Europe, and the ensuing urgency for "handling" the great refugee flows to northern Europe, seem to have led the EU to a new strategy of "refugee management". This development does not bode anything good for the future. The main objective of this strategy is to dramatically decrease the refugee / migrant flows, and for this purpose the so-called "Fortress Europe" should be reinforced.

This goal is served by specific and centrally planned European policies that are to: (a) make a clear distinction between "refugees" and "migrants"; (b) strengthen FRONTEX, and the forces that deter sea travel as well as to "militarize" sea borders both in the Aegean and the wider Mediterranean Sea; (c) create "hotspots" on the Aegean islands and elsewhere, aiming at an administratively effective separation between refugees and migrants, with the latter being deported expeditiously; and (d) to appoint Turkey as the regional "policeman" so that deterrence policies are strengthened and crossing the waterways in the Aegean Sea can be discouraged. Thus, it becomes conspicuous that the EU, in the face of the huge humanitarian crisis with victims hundreds of thousands of refugees / migrants, has chosen to stick to the hard logic of previous years, that is, (a) the logic of a hermetically "sealed" fortress that allows a very small and targeted number of persecuted people from war-ridden countries in Africa and Asia to come to the European land; and (b) the logic of these people's assimilation and their direct incorporation into the cheap labour market (of Germany and other countries) as a "reserve army of labour". Characteristic of this logic is the decision to permit the migration of only 160,000 refugees in the EU, an outrageously small number, if the real needs are taken into consideration.

At the same time, drastic cuts in funding for food and health programmes by international organizations (e.g. the United Nations High Commission for Refugees) has worsened the already critical situation of refugees throughout the Middle East, and will

surely create even larger refugee flows into Europe (see *http://www.unhcr.gr/nea/artikel/cee62eadb22d1a47dda45b5a49f9bda7/ypati-armosteia-oie.html*).

Whereas it is clear that only a single European emergency response could effectively address this refugee crisis, European states continue adopting a *piecemeal approach*, being reluctant and having a mood of retrenchment, which undermines any efforts to rebuild *responsibility, solidarity and trust*; this very attitude causes chaos and despair to hundreds of thousands of refugees, women, men and children. So far, the problem has been dealt with in a conscious but sporadic and isolated way, as it is limited in multiple initiatives of intervention that fail, however, to be converted into a strong common European response based on European values, so that people's basic humanitarian and social needs are met when they arrive at their destination, or when they cross a country. This support is also necessary in countries that are not EU members but are rather transit zones of refugees and migrants.

At the same time, there is an urgent need for the adoption of measures so that the situation in the EU's neighbourhood becomes stabilized, including the provision of additional funding for humanitarian assistance and structural support to countries that host large refugee populations. This support can be implemented by endorsing institutional reforms that provide the refugees with increasing legal opportunities to enter European Union, including the permission to *entry for humanitarian reasons*, for *family reunification, for study* or for *humanitarian reasons*.

The emergency situation that Europe is facing nowadays (this year there have been over 500,000 new arrivals by sea) is primarily a refugee crisis; see *http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php.* The vast majority of those who arrive in Greece and wish to continue their journey come from conflict zones such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq; see *http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php*. Such a state of emergency can only be addressed through a holistic and integrated approach, during which all EU Member States can work together in a constructive way. The promotion of cooperation among EU Member States may also positively affect the citizens of the countries, by strengthening solidarity for refugee populations and by preventing racist and xenophobic phenomena.
However, this is not the case.

The "Antiracist Observatory of the University of the Aegean" believes that the core of the planned EU policies is the geopolitically arbitrary and politically unacceptable distinction of persecuted people between "eligible refugees" and "deportable economic migrants". The EU and its hegemonic Member States seem to have realized that their chosen policy of "fortification" should be consistent, even marginally, with the humanitarian legacy of the European political tradition. For this reason, and under the pressure of increasing signs of solidarity shown by ordinary European citizens towards the refugees, the decision to close the European borders to "outsiders" is accompanied with some "touches" of humanism, as is the decision to allow the migration of only 160,000 refugees into the EU (of 508 million inhabitants!). Within this context, the above distinction serves a double goal: on the one hand, it allows a substantial closing of European borders, and on the other hand, it gives the impression of a European leadership that cares for the most vulnerable people.

Nevertheless, the distinction between "refugees" and "migrants" has been proven completely groundless, since it is based on an outdated conception of geopolitical reality that ignores contemporary developments. Nowadays, wars have completely different characteristics compared to those in the 1950s, a period during which it was defined administratively what constitutes a "refugee" or a "migrant" at an international level. How can one classify (and handle) as "economic migrants" people who, under the burden of war and terrorist threats, experience the fear of persecution, starvation, extermination, or simply do not possess the necessary means to educate their children? By what criteria a person coming from Afghanistan or Iraq is not a "refugee", but only an "economic migrant"? Who defines the content and limits of an unbearable life? Does the guilt of the EU's leadership make it forget very easily how long-lasting are the consequences of wars and other conflicts that Europe itself had instigated? How can people's efforts to take refuge to other countries, hoping for a sustainable life, be divided between "documented avoidance of risking death or persecution", on the one hand, and "improving their living standards", on the other hand?

Who decides who will live and who will die, either within their countries or in the "civilized West"? Who holds the power of life and death over the persecuted of this planet? Shouldn't various clichés terms found in international law regarding the status of refugees, such as "well-founded fear of persecution" make us reflect on and try to define what "fear", "justified fear" and "persecution" mean for those who experience those extreme situations? Who gives the right to the EU to decide which *countries, nationalities* and *ethnic groups* may be excluded from the "refugee" status, implying that the members of the respective population groups are not entitled to feel unbearable conditions of life in the countries of origin? How can whole populations be collectively identified as "economic migrants" but not as "refugees", even when the existing refugee law prescribes that the procedures for recognition of a "refugee" status should take into account the special conditions of each individual (likelihood of persecution), and this recognition is, above all, a humanitarian act?

Nowadays, as far as the refugee issue is concerned, the European continent is confronted with a big dilemma, which entails two opposing perspectives. On the one end, we have the neoliberal alliance of *political* and *economic oligarchy* with *racism* and, sometimes, *fascism*. On the other end, we have the forces of *solidarity* to refugees: democratic citizens, ordinary people: the "underdogs" of Europe. Those of us who belong to the *solidarity* side need to fight to prevent the militarization of sea borders and the setting-up of "hotspots" that will decide, usually with unsubstantiated and arbitrary demarcation criteria, who will stay and who will return back to a situation of continuous risking of one's life (i.e. through the perpetuation of all the risks associated with the dangerous conditions of illegal travelling). At the same time, we are called for fighting both to open up legal and safe migration channels to Europe, and to immediately stop the wars and disasters that cause massive exodus of the civilian population.