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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, Efsio 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-handedly 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.