

Hearing Visa Code and Humanitarian Visa – EP 10-7-2018 -

“The project of the Humanitarian Corridors”

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Ladies and gentlemen

I thank the organizers for having the Community of Sant’Egidio at this reflection on Humanitarian Visa and for the invitation to take the floor during this hearing.

Let me go straight to the point. While we are discussing, here in the European Parliament, the reform of the Visa Code – and it is not the first time - there is a real humanitarian emergency taking place out there. The ongoing wars in Syria, in Iraq, in Libya, in Afghanistan and elsewhere have forced many millions to flee their homes, with the impossibility of returning in the foreseeable future. Most are living as refugees in their own country (IDP’s) or in neighbouring countries. We all know that a country such as Turkey hosts three million Syrian refugees – and is paid with significant amounts of EU money to keep them there – and that a small country like Lebanon hosts one million refugees, which is 25 percent of its population. Other refugees are stuck in countries such as Libya or elsewhere, often in very desperate conditions.

In recent years many of those refugees have tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea in order to reach a safe European country. Besides the many push factors, geographic proximity has been the main pull factor. “Many” are still relative numbers, compared to the millions of refugees who do not want to come to Europe or who consider the journey too far or too dangerous. Yet, it is a fact that many of these refugees are eligible for the right of protection in EU Countries, according to the Geneva Convention, but in order to have that right, they need to put foot on European soil.

This is an important aspect of what recently has been called the ‘migrant crisis’. European countries such as Greece, Italy, and Malta have received the bulk of these refugees and migrants. The policy has moved from a welcoming one, at least for the refugees eligible for asylum, to a policy that has closed the borders more and more: the deal with Turkey has cut off the Egean Sea and the Balkan route; the obscure deals with obscure Libyan militias have reduced the influx of refugees and migrants across the Mediterranean.

Recent political changes in Italy, Austria, Germany and elsewhere in Europe have even hardened the closure of the external borders of the European Union, especially in the Mediterranean. Rescue vessels of non-governmental organizations increasingly have been denied access to European ports, while more and more the rescue has been outsourced to Libyan coast guards. One of the results has been an enormous increase in the number of people who have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in the past weeks: according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), this year more than 1000 people have drowned in the Mediterranean, sailing from Libya to Europe, with a surge in the past few days.

Facing this complex situation – and it *is* complex, given the role of criminal human traffickers, the mix of economic migrants and refugees, the weary publics in European countries – the European countries and the European Union as a whole have the historic and daunting task to create a viable policy, without losing its sense of solidarity and humanity, core values of the European project.

The Community of Sant’Egidio, in Rome and elsewhere in Italy and Europe, has been addressing this humanitarian crises, with many of its volunteers active in welcoming migrants on the shores of Lampedusa and Sicily, and committed to the integration of newcomers in major European cities. It was absurd, in our eyes, that people who already had fled wars, now had to risk their lives and sell their last belongings to pay dubious human traffickers to get to Europe to claim asylum. This is how the idea of ‘Humanitarian Corridors’ came about. Like many good ideas, it is a simple one: as my 12-year-old son asked one day, while watching the boats loaded with refugees on the news: ‘Dad, why don’t we just send planes to get these people?’ – this is exactly what the Humanitarian Corridors aim to do: identify the most vulnerable refugees, eligible to receive international protection, in camps or transit countries such as Lebanon, Turkey and Ethiopia, and provide them with a humanitarian visa and an airline ticket to Europe. In this model, safety is key: safety for vulnerable refugees, as they are no longer compelled to prolong their stay in often very difficult conditions or to risk their lives and the lives of their loved ones, on the sea, in the hands of human traffickers; but also safety for the welcoming countries, as State authorities provide a security check and thus know in advance exactly who is coming to their country. This very model also proved able to reassure an anxious public.

Humanitarian Corridors, as ‘safe and legal pathways’, have been realized over the past two years with Italy, France and Belgium, helping over 3,000 refugees, mostly Syrians living in Lebanon and Eritreans living in Ethiopia.

Remarkably, Sant'Egidio has found both center-left and center-right governments interested in implementing this model: in France, for instance, the agreement was signed in the Élysée Palace by President Hollande, but the current president, Macron, is ready to continue and indeed expand the undertaking. Even some micro-states, such as San Marino and Andorra, have adopted the model for some families, and we are hopeful that we can expand the project to other countries, EU Member states and others.

There is a second aspect of the Humanitarian Corridors that makes it innovative and attractive for governments: it is privately sponsored. Indeed, the Community of Sant'Egidio together with its partners – mainly Catholic bishops conferences and Protestant churches, but in Belgium also the Jewish and Muslim communities – pay for the airline tickets, the handling fees for the visa, and the accommodation for the families. The Community and the partners also follow-up with the integration of the families. The grassroots support of parishes and communities across the entire territory of the countries in question is vital to the success of the project.

It has been demonstrated – and also acknowledged by the European Commission and the European Parliament - that these and other forms of private sponsorship enhance the chances for the successful social integration of newcomers, without scaring the public. We believe that it is very much in the interest of States to promote and broaden these forms of efficient solidarity, which entail a kind of public-private collaboration and do not lay the whole burden on the State, and which at the same time diminish the number of potential victims of human trafficking.

As for the technical aspect of the humanitarian visa, which is the main point of our conversation this afternoon, as legal reference we utilised the possibility provided by the Schengen Visa Code for governments to issue visas on humanitarian grounds. In some cases, we used article 25 of the Visa Code, which permits Member States to issue visas with limited territorial validity “on humanitarian grounds”.

This, though, is not a frequent procedure, and it conserves a certain degree of exceptionality.

As Sant'Egidio we are grateful to those governments that were ready for collaboration to set up the ‘Humanitarian Corridors’. We believe that, given the good results (including the good social integration of the refugees and the use of solidarity networks that are present in European societies), the project should be expanded to a higher numbers of refugees and to more EU Member States.

As for the visa procedures, we propose a new legal framework for the Humanitarian Corridors, with the following characteristics:

- authorization to enter for humanitarian reasons should no longer be exceptional but regular, by which authorized subjects (individuals with adequately controlled requirements and accredited organizations) can sponsor people eligible for humanitarian protection;**
- vulnerable people with sponsors who guarantee adequate reception conditions should be allowed protected entry;**

To conclude: we firmly believe that a more trusting policy regarding humanitarian corridors, and therefore regarding sponsorship promoted by families and civil society organizations, will help to achieve a better, more secure and legal immigration in the near future.

I thank you for your kind attention