Common challenges need European answers: how to strengthen solidarity in the EU - Speech by Minister of State for Europe Michael Roth in Stockholm

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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is no coincidence that I am visiting Sweden today.

Talking about solidarity these days might seem challenging. One can really feel tired of constantly being in crisis mode, but we cannot allow ourselves to give up. After all, one characteristic of European integration is growing stronger after each crisis.

As a committed European, I am concerned that everybody understands solidarity in a different way. Some want solidarity on security matters, some on financial affairs and others on the migration issue. But solidarity cannot work if there is only cherry-picking.

As two countries that demonstrate strong partnership and solidarity, we are a good example of how working together can help to solve problems and create truly European solutions.

It will not come as a surprise to you that I am going to focus on one topic today, the refugee and migration issue, which is probably the toughest challenge we have ever faced in the

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Let me be very clear. If people die at an external border of the

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, it is not the duty of the Greeks, Hungarians or Poles to react, it is a duty of all Europeans! Europe as a whole shares responsibility for the large number of fatalities, but at least we have made progress on the highest priority of all. We have managed to save lives. Far fewer people are dying than was the case a few months ago. And this was possible thanks to joint European endeavours.

Sweden and Germany are among the countries in Europe with the highest number of refugees per capita.

On the one hand, this means that we are among the most affected countries.

On the other hand, we are also among the countries with valuable knowledge and expertise on immigration and integration, as we have long-standing experience of these matters.

We have learned our own lessons over the years. Even if immigration worked out well overall and enriched our societies, the path was not always smooth. Of course immigration and integration challenged us, and still do. And of course they require efforts from society as a whole and sometimes even courage. But we have learned and moved forward, and it was worth it.

The meetings and talks today were simply further proof that we do better if we work together. Our partnership has led to a best-practice exchange at political levels and among civil society from which we all benefit.

And we should help others to benefit from our experience. This is not only our duty, but is also expected by our partners in the

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. Every time I travel to countries that do not share this long history of immigration and integration I am asked how we deal with these issues.

As much as I push for a common approach and truly European measures, I am also happy to share our observations and experiences from Germany.

I am ready to accept that there are different perceptions and experiences of immigration and refugees. Social acceptance is not the same everywhere. But closing our eyes to the fact that we are a continent of immigration – a continent that actually needs immigration due to demographic change – is not an option for me.

There are two quotations which show that it also took us Germans some time and effort, too: “Germany is a country of immigration” and “Islam belongs to Germany.”

There is one thing I can hardly accept: excuses on cultural, religious or ethnic grounds. The European Union is first and foremost a Union of values – not a single market.

We all agreed on this common ground on fundamental values, which include being an open and diverse society that respects minorities and also protects the weakest. Humanity and dignity are not open to debate! This is actually what we are known and admired for – and I very much hope that we will not risk losing this respect over these questions.

And in this regard, Sweden is certainly a strong, close and indispensable partner.

In recent months, both German and Swedish civil society have shown the courage, openness, strength and willingness to deal with the crisis by supporting refugees arriving in our countries in many different ways.

I see this as a practical application of our fundamental values. It thus serves as an encouraging example for others.

Without the ever growing number of volunteers, we would not have been able to cope with the challenges.

To be clear, it is not the number of refugees as such that is a problem, but rather the rate at which they are arriving that makes it difficult to tackle registration, housing and asylum procedures.

In Germany, we have always admired the Swedish ability to solve problems by consensus. We thus have the greatest respect for Prime Minister Löfven's Sweden Together initiative, in which he reached out to more than 800 stakeholders who are willing to support him in the refugee crisis.

But the state and its authorities cannot, and indeed should not, eschew their tasks and duties by handing them over to civil society.

In each

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member state, the authorities and agencies must address the new challenges by providing decent shelter for the newcomers, speeding up asylum procedures and helping those granted the right to stay to build up a successful life in our societies.

The sheer number of refugees also shows that this crisis exceeds by far the resources and capacities of each individual member state. We thus will only be able to cope with the immense migration flows if we regard this as a European project.

This is a European crisis for which we need European solutions. We have to share the burden in a spirit of solidarity.

Most importantly, we need a fair distribution of refugees in Europe. The Dublin system is obviously not working the way it should and needs to be reformed.

We must agree on binding and objective criteria for refugee quotas for all member states, taking their respective economic and social capabilities into account. It is a matter of solidarity to agree on a mechanism for sharing the burden fairly. The temporary solidarity mechanism,

as I prefer to call it, was merely a first, albeit important, step. I welcome the European Commission's efforts to go further in this respect.

We also need

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-wide standards when refugees are received. Every member state must comply with these standards.

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-wide consensus on which nations we regard as safe countries of origin would also be helpful.

The envisaged establishment of "hot spots" in Greece and Italy must be implemented as soon as possible. We urgently need these centres to register the refugees.

We also need a common approach to managing our external European borders. FRONTEX must be strengthened, and all member states must support the member states at the external borders. We cannot leave them alone.

I would like to explain one other decision to you. As a committed European, it was very hard for me to accept the decision to introduce temporary border controls, even on legal grounds. Germany has always been and will remain firmly committed to the Schengen acquis.

But let me tell you that we had to take this decision, as our local authorities could not take in more refugees under the time constraints. Some local authorities had already decided to set up tents to house refugees, although this is no longer appropriate because the weather is getting colder.

Apart from these immediate responses, we will need to resolve the causes of migration in the countries of origin and transit in order to solve the crisis in the long run.

People are undertaking dangerous journeys to Europe because they are suffering from war and terror. The civil war in Syria has lasted for five years, claimed more than 250,000 lives, and made refugees of more than 10 million individuals.

Our diplomatic and political efforts have not yet brought about peace in Syria. It will need an international approach by the US and Russia, but also by Iran and Saudi Arabia, to resolve the situation. Realistically, this will take time.

In the meantime, we must support the neighbouring countries that are bearing the greatest burden of the migration flow. Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey have received the majority of refugees from Syria.

The numbers are enormous compared to those we are talking about in Europe, which has a population of over 500 million people. For example, Lebanon is currently home to about one million refugees from Syria, approximately a quarter of Lebanon’s total population.

Turkey has more than two million refugees from Syria. No other country has taken in so many Syrian refugees over the past few years. Turkey is also a major transit country for refugees on their way to the European Union. I therefore welcome all efforts to work on solutions with Turkey. The

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-Turkey Joint Action Plan, which was adopted by the European Council last week, is an important step towards enhanced cooperation.

We also need to step up cooperation with African countries. The Valletta Summit in November will be a venue to discuss migration matters with our key African partners.

The migration issue definitely requires joint efforts from states and civil society, as well as internal and external action, in order to be successful.

Let me just very briefly say a few words on another issue that still needs to be put on the agenda.

I am deliberately raising this topic here in Sweden today. I am aware that Sweden, like other non-euro countries, is concerned about a split in the

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when it comes to differentiated integration. I want to assure you that strengthening the eurozone will be a transparent and inclusive process.

But we definitely need to go ahead with the eurozone. Whether you are a member of it or not, a strong eurozone is in everybody’s interest. A weak eurozone with sluggish growth and instability cannot be in Sweden’s interest either.

We have had to acknowledge that the crisis has revealed structural weaknesses, particularly in the eurozone. The eurozone has a common monetary policy for its 19 member states, but each of these 19 countries has its own fiscal, economic, labour market and social policies. The result is imbalances within the eurozone that we have to work on to the benefit of all member states.

And now I am looking forward to your comments and questions and to our discussion.

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