Policy dialogue: European response(s) to the refugee, migrant and humanitarian crisis: will the EU and Member States succeed? - Speech by Minister of State for Europe Michael Roth at the European Policy Centre in Brussels

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Crisis seems to be the new normal in Europe. The

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is moving from one crisis to the other, from one special summit to the next one. The last few days and weeks have been dramatic for Europe: the influx of refugees continues to be immense. Whole families are leaving everything behind in their search for shelter in Europe, sometimes placing their lives at great risk. Desperation seems to simply outweigh the risks.

Why do these people come to Europe? They seek shelter from war, terrorism and oppression. And they come because Europe stands for peace, freedom, human dignity and prosperity. Of course we are ready to help those who come to us in need of protection. Germany alone has already received more than 500,000 refugees this year. To those who have criticised us for being too accommodating, I say this: we will definitely not apologise for it.

We think it is our duty to live up to our European values and provide shelter and refuge to those in need. Isn’t this what lies at the heart of the European project? The

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is much more than a single market. First and foremost it is a unique community of shared values. Europe is known for its value-based model of an open, tolerant and diverse society. We Europeans are multireligious, multiethnic and multicultural. Let me be very clear: we are bound together not by any given faith but by our common values!

Ladies and gentlemen,

I don’t want to deny that some Member States are under enormous pressure trying to manage the influx of refugees. The Member States most affected by the crisis, including those on the external borders of the

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– such as Italy, Greece, Hungary and Croatia – need our solidarity. But we have to go much further than that to cope with the current crisis. This is what I want to talk about today.

I would like to stress four points. The first seems to be a very obvious one, but nevertheless needs to be stated clearly: the current refugee situation is not a Greek, Italian or Hungarian problem – it is clearly a European problem. This crisis affects all Member States and therefore we have to find common answers. Last week’s European Council acknowledged this. The Council stated that “this challenge can only be managed by working together, in a spirit of solidarity and responsibility”. In fact, I would like to add that this is a crisis that calls for joint European solutions and, ultimately, for bold reforms at the European level.

My second message follows directly from this starting point. If we agree that we are facing a common challenge, we need to move ahead together to tackle it.

The decision taken by the

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interior ministers at the Home Affairs Council on 22 September, to relocate 120,000 refugees across the continent over the next twelve months, is a step in the right direction. I would like to thank the European Commission for its tireless efforts in the run-up to the meeting.

Certainly, we would have preferred a unanimous vote on this issue, as it is a sensitive matter for some Member States. This turned out not to be possible. However, the treaties did not call for a consensus, but merely a qualified majority. It is not the first time that the Council has taken a decision with a qualified majority, against the vote of some Member States; such votes have sometimes gone against my own country in the past. This is how democracy works, both at the European and the national level.

Therefore, I strongly disagree with public statements showing disrespect for the Council decision. Statements of this kind not only disregard the dimension of the problem we are facing, but also show a fundamental lack of respect for the rules of decision-making at the European level. Let me be very clear: in the end, a decision taken by majority vote is still better than no decision at all.

The decision to relocate 120,000 refugees was necessary and urgent, but it will not solve the problem. Nor will it relieve the most exposed Member States from the pressure they are

currently facing. This is why I say the decision was a step in the right direction, but it was only the first small step on a long way.

This takes me to my third point. What we need is a fundamental reform of our common asylum and refugee policy – and that means we need more integration. Only in this way can we preserve the benefits of the Schengen system and, at the same time, keep up our level of readiness to accept refugees in need of asylum.

The Dublin system is obviously not working and needs to be reformed. It should not matter in which Member State a refugee seeking asylum arrives – neither for the Member State nor for the refugee. Asylum should be granted based on joint European standards and procedures – possibly even by a European authority.

Refugees should be distributed across Europe according to a key which takes into account the size of Member States and their capacity to integrate refugees. This distribution mechanism should not only apply in crisis situations – it should become a general rule and be binding for all Member States.

I know that for various reasons this might be more difficult to accept in some Member States. But Europe is a continent of immigration and closing our eyes to this fact is not an option. My country has had its own experience of immigration and integration, which has not always been easy. But I am convinced that cultural diversity is not a threat but an opportunity.

It enriches our society in many ways. Thus, Germany has a lot to offer when it comes to best practice or advice, and we are ready to take responsibility in the search for a common European solution.

In fact, much of what I have just said has already been presented by the European Commission, specifically in its Migration Agenda published in May and additional follow-up documents. I would like to encourage the Commission to keep up its efforts to convince Member States to get on board.

What additional steps should we take?

We need more harmonisation of standards in the field of asylum and integration, so that the humanitarian conditions for refugees are similar across Europe.

We need to come to an

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-wide understanding as to which nations we consider safe countries of origin.

We need a common and effective approach to managing

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borders, which cannot be restricted to securing our frontiers. Why not create a truly European Border and Coast Guard Corps?

We should also think about expanding the options for legal migration. This might not solve our problem, but it will take some of the pressure off the asylum system. And we should be honest: our economies do need more qualified people, not least in view of the demographic change we are facing in many Member States.

My fourth point – last but not least – is that we have to reinforce our joint European efforts to work on the root causes of migration and flight. This includes addressing the causes of conflict and human rights violations in countries of origin and transit in a more strategic and focused manner. Otherwise, we are unlikely to provide long-lasting solutions to the migration issue.

Above all, we need a new diplomatic push on the conflict in Syria. The situation has been catastrophic for five years now. We welcome the fresh diplomatic efforts being led by

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special envoy Staffan de Mistura. The regime and opposition forces are called upon to start a national dialogue.

But this process will only be successful if it is supported by the international community. This is why Germany's Foreign Minister Steinmeier is calling for an international contact group. We hope that the outcome of this process will set the stage for a Syrian agreement to end the conflict. Of course, we also need to provide more help for the people in Syria as well as in neighbouring states. To this end, Germany and France will organise a second refugee conference with a focus on Syria by the end of this year.

Besides Syria, our focus should be on a better management of migration routes. Turkey is definitely a key country in this regard, and we should maintain a close dialogue with this partner. Turkey has received up to two million refugees from Syria alone. The efforts Turkey has undertaken deserve our recognition, and we should support them financially and logistically. Financial support should be made available through the European Madad Fund for all countries along the Western Balkans route.

With regard to migration from Africa, it is essential that we work more closely with our African partners. We should base this cooperation on the "more for more" principle: the more African countries are willing to cooperate with us on these issues, the more they can expect from us. The Valletta summit in November will be the venue for raising these issues with our key

African partners. The summit must produce ambitious results to be quickly implemented on the ground.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me finish by answering the question which you chose as the title for my speech here today: “Will the

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and Member States succeed?”. My reply to this question is a clear one and will not come as a surprise to you: Yes, we can – if we work together! It depends on ourselves whether we are ready to take the necessary steps ahead. Like it or not, more Europe is the answer.

I hope that this crisis will turn out to be the reality check that makes us realise how connected we actually are. It has become obvious how much it matters what “national” measures are taken in various policy areas, which government is elected, but also what the public thinks. And now I am very much interested in hearing what you think and curious for your views and questions.

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