

Call to Europe IV Conference
"Building Solidarity in asylum policy"
(Brussels, 5th November 2014)

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Mr. President of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Distinguished Authorities, Dear Guests,

Allow me, first of all, to express my deepest appreciation for this conference on the key issues of strategic importance for the challenges that Europe is facing.

I would also like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the issues of asylum, a subject that - as Minister of the Interior and current President of the European Union in the area of Home Affairs, is very close to my heart and that - in our common interest - should be managed in a rational and sustainable way.

The most recent data provided by the UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees) indicate that the crisis in Syria, Iraq and the Horn of Africa have greatly increased the number of asylum seekers. A number of them are in Southern Mediterranean Countries and in Turkey, while others are trying to reach Europe.

For asylum seekers and migrants bound for Europe, the main gateway is currently the sea route of the Sicilian Channel, as the criminal networks of "people smugglers" benefit from the absence of law enforcement structures in Libya, due to the well-known vacuum of power currently existing in that country.

As to arrivals, the figure relating to 2011 - which was a year of strong increase in the number of migration flows in relation to the "Arab springs" - was about 62,700 arrivals. In 2012 there was a significant decline, with approximately 13,300 arrivals. In 2013 the number of arrivals was slightly under 43,000 units while in 2014 - or rather, in the period between January 1st and October 31st - over 153,324 arrivals were recorded.

As regards the areas of departure and to confirm what I have just pointed out, 85% of the landings in Italy come only from Libya, with more than 130,000 arrivals in the first 10 months of this year. Libya is followed by Egypt, with over 15,000 arrivals.

As regards the nationality declared upon landing, in 2011 and 2012 Tunisia was in the first place. Since 2013, the first and second were Syria and Eritrea respectively. These data, provided by my Department, were confirmed by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), which recently published its report on asylum trends in 2014. Well, this document shows that the largest groups of asylum seekers in the EU (plus Switzerland and Norway) are Syrians and Eritreans.

What do these data tell us about today's trans-Mediterranean migrations? Mainly three things, which are closely linked to one another:

- The first is that the trends of the flows are related to economic and geo-political variables outside Europe, which will not change in the medium term. This makes migration pressure on Europe a structural phenomenon that needs to be addressed as such, not through individual and emergency actions by single Member States;

- The second is that the flows to Europe are mixed, meaning that asylum seekers and economic migrants follow the same routes and use the same means, that is, at present, the sea route of the Sicilian Channel, which is controlled by criminal networks. And this mix, especially in the presence of continuous and massive arrivals by sea, objectively complicates the management of such flows.

So, the need arises that Europe as a whole must take on the responsibility for solving this problem, showing its high capacity of governance.

But I would also like to add that the very change of migrant's profile - in political rather than economic terms - must ensure that the issue of reception is addressed in long-term national and European policies, intended to change the approach to the phenomenon and the treatment of migrants themselves.

In this scenario, I cannot but emphasize that the real challenge confronting us is a deep revision of the European policy on asylum, based on the idea that addressing reception is a precise task to be performed by Europe as a political and institutional entity, and not by an individual country.

It's a new approach that takes into account the existing interdependence between the different systems and the resulting repercussions on the various Countries.

It is clear that, once successfully completed the process of the regulatory approval of the common European system, we must concentrate our efforts on the transposition and the effective implementation of the adopted measures in all Member States.

However, this cannot prevent us from considering the potential launch of new targeted initiatives, fully consistent with the objectives of the European Union and the migration scenarios where we are called upon to work.

We need to ensure that, in the future, the refugee will no longer be considered as such under the legal system of a single State, but can obtain the legal status of "European refugee".

In this regard, Italy has also put in place the proposal of mutual recognition of asylum decisions, which had already been drafted by the European Commission.

Where appropriate, we are ready to submit also other measures to the Union for consideration, such as the joint examination of asylum applications and the pooling of reception structures.

But we deem it important to revive the European sectoral policy especially in terms of external action and dialogue with Third countries.

Strengthening the capacity of asylum systems in transit Countries, developing appropriate Regional Protection Programmes in order to address emergency situations in the areas concerned, building structures for the sorting of migrants in the territories of transit areas in order to manage beforehand the situation of those who are entitled to international protection by consequently initiating resettlement operations.

These lines of action that should be pursued within the context of a European Agenda aimed at facing the new challenges in a sustainable and coherent way.

Now I wish to turn to Italy's extraordinary commitment to reorganize its national reception system in relation to the massive influx of refugees who are continuing to reach our shores.

First of all, at a Joint Conference, an agreement was reached between the Government, regional and local authorities, by defining an action programme on the reception system, which currently is a three-tier system. At the first level, there are facilities to house migrants as long as it is necessary to provide them with health care and then transfer them safely to the major centres. The second level, consisting of regional hubs and reception facilities, is the backbone of the system, the place where screening operations are performed. The third level is managed by the SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), which has been expanded and provided with adequate financial resources. This System is responsible for the full integration of refugees.

Moreover, we recently adopted a legislative measure envisaging:

- the strengthening of the technical bodies responsible for examining asylum applications. At present, there are 10 Territorial Commissions for the recognition of the refugee status, and also the relating sub-offices are 10. In order to speed up the procedure, the number of Territorial Commissions is increased up to 20 and that of the sub-offices to 30, with a total net increase equal to 250%;
- a drastic simplification and streamlining of the procedure for examining asylum applications which, by multiplying the operational capacity of the Commissions, will reduce waiting times, without prejudice to the rights and protection of refugees.

In addition, the draft Finance Act contains an appropriate solution to the long-standing problem of unaccompanied foreign minors present on the Italian territory, by envisaging that they will be housed in the SPRAR, even if they are not asylum seekers. This system is a real flagship of the national policies on the reception of refugees. At the same time, the Ministry of the Interior has established a fund for them.

All of these innovations improve the Italian reception system and bring it in line with European standards.

But, as I said before, we must overcome the logic of emergency and carry our structural reforms at supranational level.

To this end, in a broader perspective, we have also launched a number of initiatives aimed at ensuring an intense exchange of views with the major European capitals, both at political and technical level; we deem it important to re-launch the political dialogue with the Third Countries, in particular with the Countries of origin and transit of migration flows as well as to confirm a close interaction with the multilateral international organizations working in this field, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organisation for Migration.

The process relating to this strategy, which is linear in its means and clear in its objectives, is of course still ongoing, but Italy's efforts have already produced a first concrete result: in fact, we have obtained - and it was not a foregone conclusion - EU support to the launch - by the FRONTEX Agency - of an initiative of joint patrolling in a wide area of the Mediterranean at the external border of the European Union, with the desirable participation by the greatest number of EU Member States.

This result has a double meaning for the Italian Presidency: in fact, on the one hand, it gives substance to the principle of European solidarity; on the other, it gives a European dimension to the control of EU external borders.

The European strategy proposed by Italy is based on the awareness that the present international migrations have become such a complex phenomenon, so unstable and dependent on a wide range of global, local, social, economic and geo-political variables that it is very difficult to manage them and impossible to predict their evolution. However, our task is to recognize the current trends with clear mind and realism, starting with the facts, identify the precise objectives, and implement appropriate strategies to achieve them.

Only in this way can respond to the present challenges in an effective and flexible way, but also with great respect for migrants.

Thank you for your attention.