

STATEMENT: ECRE ANNUAL GENERAL CONFERENCE

ESTONIA TALLINN, OCTOBER 2017

The ECRE Annual General Conference 2017 in Tallinn, brought together over 150 participants to discuss refugee rights in Europe. The AGC also hosts the UNHCR NGO consultation and participants include refugee advocates, NGOs, Estonian government and UNHCR. As an alliance of 96 organisations in 40 countries, ECRE discussed and reiterated its position on key issues.

ECRE calls for internal solidarity and global responsibility

Estonian Presidency facing an EU pushing for externalisation of refugee protection but still divided on internal responsibility sharing.

Estonia entered its Presidency of the European Council on a programme with two ambitions that directly affect refugees seeking protection in our region: *Reforming the Common European Asylum System* and *Protecting the EU's external borders*.

While acknowledging political constraints at EU and Member State level, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) nonetheless calls for an ambitious and responsible approach from the Estonian Presidency: it should work to ensure sustainable solidarity – sharing of responsibility - at EU level in combination with the establishment of safe and legal channels to reach protection. Tackling the root causes of forced displacement at the global level is another key issue.

“It is easy to agree that the political reality of Europe is complex and challenging at the moment, but it cannot be met with apathy. Rather than defiantly accept the consequences of a self-inflicted political crisis we must find the courage to take responsibility and act – Europe needs internal unity to take a global responsibility and the world needs Europe,” says Morten Kjaerum, Chair of the ECRE Board.

Sustainable responsibility sharing

Solidarity is indeed possible as Member States living to their obligations under the EU Relocation Scheme, among them Estonia, have shown. However, with just 28.500 people of an original target group of 160.000 relocated at the formal end of the Scheme on 26 September 2017, it is vital for all Member States to meet their quotas and continue and increase relocation efforts. There is no reason why they cannot continue, despite the date passing. At the same time, it is vital to push for coordinated and rights-based relocation as a tool for responsibility sharing in a Common European Asylum System (CEAS) to compensate for the dysfunctions and injustice of the Dublin system. Ultimately a permanent allocation system that is fair for all is needed.

“There are humanitarian as well as political reasons to invest in relocation and make sure it functions. The progress made in the first half of 2017 speeding up relocation processes and increasing the numbers of people relocated, some through the voluntary engagement of Schengen Associated States, proves that relocation can work,” says Catherine Woollard, ECRE Secretary General.

As the temporary relocation scheme for Italy and Greece has expired, ECRE calls on the Estonian Presidency to resume discussions at EU level on establishing a robust relocation mechanism pending the fundamental reform of the Dublin system. EU Member States should unite behind sustainable and visionary solutions to the global displacement crisis based on solidarity and responsibility sharing.

Safe and legal channels and fighting root causes

The patchwork of bilateral and EU sponsored deals with third countries with poor human rights records imposing its migration deterrence agenda, undermines the EU's credibility and its room for manoeuvre as an actor promoting respect for human rights across the globe. The response to the global displacement crises is not to seal off European borders at any cost and force asylum seekers to rely on human traffickers. The road to a more stable world is to take global responsibility, fighting the root causes of displacement through development assistance, and the creation of safe and legal channels for those who need protection, starting with the most vulnerable refugees. A massive expansion of resettlement into Europe could help offer protection and allow Europe to better manage the arrivals of people.

“ECRE calls on the Estonian Presidency to promote at EU level increased, structured and sustainable development efforts in refugee producing regions of the globe and the establishment of safe and legal access channels. The EU must urgently take on its fair share of responsibility for addressing the global displacement crisis and its future Union Resettlement Framework should reinforce not undercut existing resettlement frameworks and fully align with UNHCR priorities,” says Morten Kjaerum, Chair of the ECRE Board.