



*Europaforum Northern Sweden (EFNS) is a network of political representatives at the local and regional levels from Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Västernorrland and Jämtland. EFNS is a meeting place and knowledge arena where EU policies are analysed and discussed with regard to their impact on Northern Sweden. EFNS monitors European issues to influence EU legislation, EU strategies and action programmes, as well as the EU budget. The purpose of EFNS is to safeguard the interests of Northern Sweden in the European arena and with regard to the national level on issues with a clear European perspective.*

### **Joint and long-term sustainable refugee reception for all Europe**

In view of the current humanitarian crisis, Europaforum Northern Sweden (EFNS) calls for joint responsibility for the challenge set by the large numbers of refugees making their way to Europe. The shortcomings of Europe's refugee policy mean that it must be restructured to guarantee more permanent human rights and the right to asylum. Europaforum would like to contribute to that work with views from a Northern Swedish perspective.

The EU is a cooperation project between states, but ultimately the work done is local and regional. It is there that EU policy is implemented, and it is there that one must deal with the consequences of failure to agree on sound common principles at EU level. This is made abundantly clear in the ongoing refugee crisis. Nationalistic policy, that is in many places inhumane, is now pitting people, regions and nations against each other in a way that we have not seen since the Second World War. This is alarming.

The refugee issue has developed into one of the greatest challenges the EU has ever faced. The humanitarian crisis, afflicting people who are risking their lives to get to Europe, requires immediate action. The EU was created to ensure peace, security and economic development through cooperation and mutual dependence, based on conventions on human rights in the cross-border issues which can otherwise create conflicts, and which each state cannot deal with singly. The refugee question is such an issue, which cannot be considered for each state in isolation.

- **Northern Sweden is growing thanks to immigration, and this is creating growth for the whole of Sweden – a realisation which we want to share with more in a Europe whose population is shrinking.**

Sweden is today among the countries with the highest proportion of immigrant population, with approximately 15% of the population born abroad. At the same time, Sweden is among the EU states that are showing the fastest growth. Immigration in itself is not a problem – on the contrary, according to the latest Commission estimates, the influx of people brings an increase in economic growth which would not otherwise have been possible – something also supported by new Swedish research. This must be added to the humanitarian responsibility for fleeing people that is determined in international agreements. We in the north have a proud tradition of helping our neighbours in trouble in wilderness conditions.



For the sparsely populated regions in Northern Sweden, the demographic challenges are crucial to the future. Long distances, failing infrastructure and capsized age pyramids mean that from now on the skills supply constitutes one of the greatest obstacles to economic growth. Managing reorientation on the labour market demands continued free movement and migration.

The labour supply is one of the greatest challenges in the sparsely populated areas of Europe. New arrivals are a resource for both the private sector and the public sector. With swift, smart validation and training there are many examples of how the demand for workforce in care, social care, the engineering industry and forestry has been met in our region. There are also numerous examples of start-ups in different industries.

However, this is not unique to our region. It is a picture that is similar in most countries and regions in the EU. Supporting xenophobic tendencies means preventing development rather than affirming diversity and openness and making use of what immigrants and refugees can offer.

Civil society and voluntary organisations form an important resource for true integration. That is how together we build peace and freedom along with human and economic growth, and together we can withstand the forces that threaten our coexistence. Europe has a global responsibility and we are prepared to take that responsibility.

- **The EU must act for the Member States in Europe and the regions to take greater common responsibility for the large numbers of refugees who are making their way to Europe.**

The current acute situation is of course still extremely problematic. In some small communities in sparse areas the refugee groups now arriving to be accommodated in closed-down schools, tourist resorts and industrial premises, outnumber the residents and are dozens of kilometres from the nearest major community and community services. In many places they cannot be offered a roof over their heads, at the same time as there is a lack of resources to take care of and integrate people in society, something which our regions so far have managed to do.

Over the years, Sweden's local authorities and regions have taken a considerable responsibility for a refugee policy characterised by solidarity and humaneness. Refugee flows from countries such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Greece and Yugoslavia were received and integrated in Swedish society despite the major differences that existed in culture, religion and language. It was our obligation then, just as it is the obligation of all EU democracies today, to receive displaced persons.

We know also that regions located where refugees are entering the EU face enormous difficulties. It is a crisis right now, but de facto not beyond our handling it, if everyone stands up for a humane solution. Greater solidarity is therefore called for in all the European regions, including those that today are acting as transit regions and literally sending on the stream of refugees.

Through the Commission, the EU has submitted proposals aimed at a Europe that with decency and joint efforts deals with the challenges and opportunities that the refugee



situation brings, but so far individual countries and regions have not acted to fulfil them. We appeal therefore to everyone's responsibility for the Europe we believe in, which has learned from its history, when Europeans at one time fled for their lives in the wake of war and terror regimes. We challenge everyone to show that we are good Europeans who believe in an open, welcoming Europe, not a historic parenthesis that fruitlessly focuses on the desperate construction of higher barriers and digging deeper moats, into which they themselves ultimately fall.

- **The EU must strengthen its capacity for sustainable and responsible asylum reception in all Member States and regions of the EU.**

We urge the Commission to bring to bear all possible pressure for everyone to stand up for the basic principles of the EU and to a greater degree redistribute resources to those who actively contribute to taking responsibility for Europe's challenges. EFNS welcomes the proposals for a mandatory distribution model within the EU. EFNS also welcomes the Commission discussions that more funds, including the European Social Fund, should be available for improved refugee reception. In the current situation also the performance reserve not allocated to the regions can be redistributed for actions in regions which are being required to handle the considerable refugee reception.

In addition, EFNS urges the government in collaboration with the EU to re-orient the national regional funding programme so that it also to a higher degree supports regional actions for e.g. unaccompanied child refugees and, together with the Social Fund, to support those granted a residence permit in entering the labour market.

EFNS emphasises the need to include the local and regional level in dialogue so that funding shall in the best way reach those who need it most with regard to needs, challenges and opportunities. EFNS also wants to draw attention to the fact that the different instruments of the EU can promote increased cross-border cooperation between regions in Europe on functioning and humane reception and integration of people seeking refuge in Europe.

- **The EU needs to gather its strength to deal with the reasons why people flee, and safeguard the basic right to seek asylum, to give support where those in flight are to be found.**

It is of course important also to address the causes behind the current refugee flow. Promoting peace as well as combating famine and poverty must continue to receive priority. The EU must increase cooperation with the countries of origin and transit countries outside the EU, and open the way to more trade and aid. EFNS welcomes the Commission plan for cooperation to be built up on a strategy based on human rights.

EFNS welcomes the EU's increased support to aid organisations in the neighbouring area and the EU Member States that receive the greatest refugee flows. However, EFNS wishes to emphasise that it is important that support for reinforcing the outer borders of the EU should not hamper the opportunities for refugees to get to Europe to have their case heard. To an increasing extent, therefore, legal routes into Europe are needed for a more



organised and orderly asylum process, as well as functioning distribution principles between EU Member States and regions for asylum seekers.

Europe is facing major challenges, ranging from acute needs such as medical care, food and sleeping accommodation to more long-term needs in the form of rule-of-law asylum processes, permanent housing, access to education and the labour market. We are taking our responsibility, but we want to see more doing the same through a regional handshake for refugee collaboration all over the EU based on the EU's self-evident basic principles of all people's equal value.

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