

Speech by the Ombudsman to the Plenary Assembly of the National Conference of the Regional Parliaments (Italy) on how ombudsmen can ensure refugees are getting the help they need

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Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today.

You come together almost five months since Russia invaded Ukraine and brought Europe back to a time that we had thought consigned to history, when great powers used military force in pursuit of irredentist dreams.

Even in 2022, one sovereign state can still invade another, Europeans can still be forced to flee their homes, and peace on our continent cannot be taken for granted.

But by forcing us out of complacency, the war has also awoken a renewed understanding of the need for solidarity at European level, not just to protect and defend our own democracies but to give hope and inspiration to those outside of our borders who struggle against forces bent on undermining democratic norms and democratic institutions.

Those who have in recent days watched the streamed investigation, happening now in Washington DC, into the January 6th 2021 Capitol Hill riot will realise that over time even the strongest democracies are made fragile if they are not constantly monitored and protected.

The response at every level of European society to assisting Ukrainian refugees, from ordinary families to civil society, to governments at every level has been remarkable.

Citizens literally welcomed them into their homes with open arms.

At European level, the crisis saw the EU use its Temporary Protection Directive for the very first time. This guarantees Ukrainian refugees the right to healthcare, education, accommodation, the EU labour market, and more. But activating the Directive is but a first step. Granting people rights does not automatically mean that they will know how to take advantage of them or even that they will have their rights fully respected.

This is where ombudsmen can play a crucial role. We can help to ensure that refugees are able to take full advantage of the rights available to them. We can provide them with a place to turn



to when they are not being treated fairly.

My Office recently organised the annual European Network of Ombudsman conference in Strasbourg, with over 100 Ombudsmen from around Europe, where we shared experiences and best practices in relation to helping Ukrainian refugees.

The Polish Deputy Commissioner for Human Rights and other Ombudsmen stressed the need to have a visible Ombudsman presence at shelters and reception centres. Ombudsmen can then intervene promptly when problems come up, provide vulnerable people with legal advice and information, and inform refugees how they can file a complaint regarding a potential violation of fundamental rights.

It is also very important that the authorities register refugees arriving to the EU. European Commissioner for Home Affairs Johansson stressed this in her speech at the conference. Registration can help ensure that refugees have access to the support they need and so prevent problems later on.

Commissioner Johansson also said that the Commission was also setting up an EU platform where Member States could check whether someone has already been registered in another EU country. Multiple conference participants also brought up the issue of psychological support for refugees.

Many have seen their homes destroyed, loved ones killed, their families split up. Others had been tortured or raped before they fled. It is crucial that they receive the support they need, support that may not always be easy to provide—there are not that many Ukrainian-speaking psychologists in the EU. Nevertheless, we cannot afford to see psychological and social support as a luxury item; it must be a central element in our support for people fleeing the horrors of war.

But refugees also face dangers in the EU itself. The risk of human trafficking, whether for sexual exploitation or for labour, is real. Ukrainians were among the top five nationalities trafficked in the EU before the war and Commissioner Johansson told us that she has already received informal reports of the trafficking of refugees since the conflict began.

As ombudsmen, we must remain alert to this danger and ensure that the authorities are doing all they can to protect vulnerable people.

Employment is another important topic. The Ombudsman for the German state of Baden-Württemberg brought up the need to ensure the smooth mutual recognition of qualifications so that skilled refugees can quickly find suitable work. The European Commission has also said it is working on an EU 'talent pool' for refugees that would help match those looking for a job in a specific sector with those looking to employ them. We know that some refugees have already returned to Ukraine and that some are hoping to do so in the near future, but others will probably remain in the EU for a long time. Being able to take advantage of their ability to work can help them integrate into our societies. It can also enable refugees to help



each other, for instance by matching Ukrainian-speaking teachers with schools desperately in need of them.

Finally, some conference participants contrasted the extraordinary efforts the EU has made to accommodate people from Ukraine with its unwillingness to provide similar support to those fleeing other conflicts.

In some cases, this has even created tension between Ukrainian refugees and those from other countries.

Right now, national, regional, and local ombudsmen are carrying out the bulk of the work, but my office is also ready to help with queries into issues such as how the EU Temporary Protection Directive should be applied. In the future, my office may also be called upon to look into systemic issues concerning the functioning of the Directive or to examine the role of the responsible EU agencies and institutions. We are, of course, ready to help in any way we can.

Nobody here knows when this terrible war will end or how many more people will lose their homes, their loved ones, or even their own lives before the guns finally fall silent. But as the conflict drags on, the work of ombudsmen is likely only to grow in importance. Even if media attention wanes and 'war fatigue' begins to set in among the population, we must continue to do all that we can for those in need.

It is, after all, the bread and butter work of ombudsmen to help people. By working together and working in co-operation with authorities at all levels, I hope we can set a very high bar when it comes to support for refugees, both in this crisis and in any future crises.

Thank you.