Declaration of the International Mayors' Conference N-O-W in Athens 2016

Sharing the awareness we are all connected with each other, and believing that we have to listen attentively to each other Mayors, Members of the European Parliament, representatives of NGOs from Greece, Turkey, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and other European countries have held meetings for two days in Athens to exchange first-hand information about the situation in the region and the repercussions of the EU-Turkey Agreement.

What is presented to us in many European publics as „solution" does not work. It is in fact a non-solution which is being enforced on the backs of the refugees and to the detriment of entire regions.

Entire Aegean islands are at risk of mutating into internment zones for refugees from different countries, of which only Syrians stand a chance to be absorbed at some point – and this after a far too long bureaucratic procedure. We have developed a highly complex administrative system – with clearly dysfunctional bureaucracies.

At the present time the EU-Turkey Agreement's only purpose is to prevent human beings seeking refuge from continuing their journey to Central Europa. It is aimed at deterring refugees. The rights of human beings seeking refuge are being ignored, the toll, the costs and the ugly practical implementation are being rolled off onto Greece and Turkey. On the other hand no ways have been found to bring refugees from war zones and displaced persons from neighboring countries legally, safely und unbureaucratically to receiving countries in Europe. We have established a hard-hearted monster with one aim: deterrence. People flee from one anguish – only to face the next anguish.

We have to change this.

We do not have solutions for everything but we know that what is happening now is no solution. We need to give people seeking refuge a perspective of how to feel safe ground under their feet again. These human beings are not numbers, they are diverse individuals. We must not waste another hour if we want to achieve successful integration.

Elements of a solution must be:

We need safe corridors from the neighboring countries and resettlement programs for hundreds of thousands of men, women and children.

The objective cannot be to make detention camps a little more liveable. We do not want a Europe of camps, we want a Europe of freedom, doing justice to its values.

The Hotspots in EU border regions must not become long term substandard camps where people are cynically exposed to sheer hopelessness and no prospect other than survive the day: They have to be fully functional, they have to be humane. Each asylum request must be handled fast and humanely respecting human rights. For this we need qualified civil servants from all over Europe. At this early stage the skills and competences of the people seeking refuge should be documented – as well as their wishes and their dreams.

We want a Europe of citizens connected through shared endeavors and in which we can face this great chance hand in hand: integrate the newly arrived, invite them and support them to become our co-citizens in our European societies.

We want a Europe where we can achieve this together instead of acting against each other and to push problems around to and fro.

We are citizens of cities and communes, Mayors, representatives of NGOs and relief organizations, and many individuals – and absorption and integration take place precisely there, in the cities and communes. Our societies have made huge achievements in the past years and had the opportunity to learn a lot. We have been successful in providing housing, education and integration measures, the teachers in our schools have achieved great things – so that hundreds of thousands of people could take essential small and large steps towards a successful new life. Much has worked out well, some things less so.

We want to continue collecting and sharing these experiences and examples, for all these small steps and pieces of puzzle will eventually merge into a big, good overall picture.