

Evento “How to protect former interpreters in conflict zones”

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Personally and on behalf of my colleagues that co-hosted this event, I would like to thank the contributions of all the speakers on the different panels and the testimonies, as well as the questions from the audience.

It was of much benefit to be able to hear from our honourable guests the dramatic situations reported here and the inertia in the response by allied countries to these professionals whose dignity and right to life are threatened daily.

It is a fact that in a globalized society, translators and interpreters are essential. More so, in war zones where they are builders of human relations between troops and local communities.

Translators and interpreters working in conflict zones place their lives at risk and in many instances are kidnapped, tortured and killed as traitors; prosecuted as spies.

Most of them are underpaid and made hollow promises. After their service for the allies, they are deceived, abandoned, and left behind to their luck. A report from UNHCR estimated that an interpreter was killed every 36 hours.

I firmly believe that this is just not mainly a “problem” of the United States. Most interpreters end up in Europe, in terrible conditions, such as detention centres or sleeping in parks and slum-houses. It is therefore an international problem, that needs to be tackled first and foremost at the international level. But the EU also needs to engage

more actively in addressing post-conflict situations. It is a question of human rights, it's a question that is at our door, at our borders.

I hope that we all can agree that as human beings, we have a moral obligation to protect those that have their life threatened and I think we all also agree that we, as Europeans, each and every Member-State, are legally obliged to protect those same people. The Geneva convention, which was initially drafted to protect Europeans fleeing the war, imposes such obligation.

In the European Union, in particular, we have not only approximated our laws on the recognition of status of refugee, we have also complemented that status by creating another one: Subsidiary protection. Moreover, we have developed a set of rules, the so-called Dublin System, to determine the responsibilities of each member state, therefore recognising we have no internal borders and are - *de facto* - a single territory. We have also an agency to provide support to Member States in this matter. We have agreed to call this complex web of instruments "Common European Asylum System".

However, the influx of asylum seekers in the past four years has demonstrated that this system is not working. I will spare you from long reflection about this topic, but allow me to give you an example I find most relevant in this context: in the third quarter of 2016, Italy was granting to 97% of Afghans the status of refugee or subsidiary protection, whereas in Bulgaria the recognition rate was of... zero! That is why we in the EP have been struggling for a true common European asylum system. One that works, but above all a Common European Asylum System that protects those that need protection.

There is, at the very least, substantial grounds for believing that former interpreters, if returned to their country of origin, would face a real risk of suffering serious harm or, owing to such risk, are unwilling to avail of the protection of their country. And this is precisely the definition of subsidiary protection.

But let us be clear: only Member States can decide to recognise asylum claims.

There is a European and international framework when it comes to asylum. However - and this is a very important however - only member states can make a decision.

As I said in the beginning, the international scene must be the first forum to address. As mentioned several times today, European Member States and all the European institutions should continue to push for this issue in all fora, but in particular in the United Nations.

Our competence in this context is much limited. But as Members of this house, we will continue to raise awareness, influence our own Member States and - surely - the other European Institutions. We need to bring the attentions of the world to this issue. I would therefore be most glad to follow-up on the many initiatives mentioned here today.

In any circumstance, the conditions to which interpreters are subject remain dramatic. It remains unfair that States profit from interpreters services to then leave them without protection.

At EU level, we could address several issues linked to the interpreters dramatic reality, such as the list of safe countries of origin, the lack of winterization or shelter at the countries of first line in Europe, or even the EU-turkey deal.

However, I believe the stories we have heard here today point to a much bigger, systemic, problem: Europe is reacting, not acting, in permanent crisis mode, without being able to protect properly those that need protection.

The European Parliament from the very beginning called for Member states to deploy all the much necessary means and for the CEAS to be reformed and quickly so. As negotiator for the European Asylum Agency, I am and will continue to push for Member States to unblock

this file and finally approve it. The same goes for every piece of legislation now under negotiation.

It is time Europe delivers.