

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our discussion today on migrants' integration policies and the need to enhance the role of migrants' communities and their involvement in the socioeconomic life of the cities comes at a time when the refugee crisis dominates the international agenda. Over the past few months, we have witnessed the largest movement of refugees on our continent since Second World War.

Early on in the year I highlighted the role of the cities, as the administration closest to citizens, to strengthen efforts to mend social cohesion, to integrate migrants and enhance the dialogue between different communities. Together with the Mayors of Paris and Rome, just before summer, we took an initiative in this direction, pleading for the need that European cities should be involved in the elaboration of the European Agenda on Migration.

However, the current refugee crisis goes far beyond any city-borders and brings us in front of new challenges. It is a global issue with direct and vivid local consequences.

Half a million refugees –so far this year - have crossed the greek borders to Europe. Nearly 2 more million are displaced and fled to neighboring countries (such as Turkey and Lebanon) and might also decide to come to Europe in the next months. 7.000 refugees per day came to Greece – only in September – while the UN estimates that these flows will continue. The numbers are indicative and demonstrate the gravity of the problem.

In a situation like this, one could ask “is it the right moment to talk about migrants' integration? Is it the right moment to highlight the economic potential of migrants' contribution to the cities and the significance of migrant-inclusive local planning? In view of this massive refugee's crisis, shouldn't we concentrate on how we will render our cities the least possible affected and protect our citizens everyday life”?

My answer is that we should not endeavor to differentiate the two procedures. Handling the refugees' large inflows and integrating migrants into our local communities are strongly interconnected and the timeless significance of the latter should not be set aside because of the current magnitude of the former.

Of course, at this stage, we cannot but concentrate our efforts to manage the unprecedented refugees' inflows. Especially when Europe and the wider international community, have been all found unprepared – for different reasons - to confront the arrival of such large numbers of refugees who are trying to avoid a devastating war and desperately seeking first to save their

lives and second to secure a better future in Europe.

But the real challenge will come at a second stage and is related with those people who will decide to stay in Europe and start a new life here. And this is the point where the refugee crisis meets migrants' integration necessity.

In the long-term, I believe that the distinction between migrants and refugees will tend to blur. People for various reasons will quit their countries affected not only by wars and armed conflicts but also poverty, climate change implications etc. Europe must set integrated policies to be able to deal with this effectively and with respect to the needs of those people as well as the stability in their own cities. It seems that we have not yet succeeded to conciliate the need for security and protection of our borders with our civic tradition which calls for respect for human rights and asylum rules.

Sooner rather than later we will be called as City Administrators to manage the integration of large communities of refugees. Cities have historically acted as melting pots of people, culture and civilisations. Today more than ever, we need to built on this trait. We are collectively responsible and together we need to find answers.

As we are speaking, in Athens, as well as in some of your own cities back home, the refugee-crisis is like a ticking-bomb. Our limited jurisdiction and resources prevent us from moving fast. Yet citizens and the civil society look to us as the responsible authority that should provide solutions. And our human rights culture and values demand that we do so. That is why it is important to build partnerships with each other and with community groups but also to secure direct access for cities to EU migration funds in order to be in a position to provide immediate solutions bypassing multiple layers of administration and lengthy processes.

Athens, as you already know, is at the frontline of this crisis – and unfortunately this is not the only major crisis the city has had to deal with over the last difficult years. Vast economic and social problems remain in the country and especially in its capital. Allow me only to say that the City of Athens Solidarity centre feeds more than 20.000 people on a daily basis. However, despite this situation, the City of Athens was the first to react within the country and provide solutions when the central authorities at least at the initial phase lacked a comprehensive strategy and did not secure the necessary coordination between all relevant stakeholders. We provided an organised camp for the refugees, we covered basic needs namely food & shelter, we tried hard not to let this situation affect everyday life in the City. And we used all political means necessary to put pressure towards all those involved (central and regional authorities) so that they assume their responsibility.

At the same time, I am happy to say that the reaction of the citizens of Athens is very positive and supportive demonstrating impressive solidarity. I can't say I'm surprised by this, as the Greeks have a long tradition of hospitality. To emphasize I have to add that is struck by major economic and social instability that contributed to the fact that the neo-nazi party is the third largest in the Parliament, we had no reactions to a situation that puts extra burden to our city.

The need to maintain open and safe societies comes at the forefront. And this applies to all, regardless of religion, nationality and life choices. This is our guiding principle.

And the cities have a major role to play in this direction. They need to be the good example and demonstrate to the world that they are generous and they are the ones that can provide solutions – at city and community level - when it comes to migrants integration and adaptation policies.

And to conclude, I would like to point out that migration can act as a driving force for development and growth. Noone denies the fact that European cities need young people, we need new skills, as our cities are ageing. Therefore, we have to see the migration crisis as an opportunity and acknowledge the positive contribution by migrants for reaching growth and sustainable development targets.

Targeted and organised integration and migration policies are absolutely essential, in this respect. But instead we are witnessing inaction which leads to insecurity and fear. We all know where that leads to.

This is something that needs to change. But it requires everyone's contribution.