

## **Refugees and the autonomous communities**

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It is frequently said that the refugee crisis is the biggest humanitarian tragedy suffered in Europe since World War II. The causes of this crisis are well identified. Firstly, the inexistence of a common asylum policy in the European Union, which was started but never finished. The Dublin Regulation tried to put into practice this policy but it has proved to be dysfunctional for both asylum seekers and border countries and been left aside. According to this Regulation, the country responsible for the examination of the asylum application is the one where the asylum seeker arrives in the first place and, if positively responded, where he or she will stay. It is understandable that this solution pleases neither the refugees aiming to reach other EU countries where their relatives or acquaintances are, nor countries such as Greece and Italy, who have received hundreds of thousands of people.

There is however a more serious issue than the deficiencies and infringements of the European asylum system: the fracture of solidarity amongst EU Member States. The European Commission had tried to launch a refugee resettlement plan by virtue of which each country had a refugee quota. This plan failed due to the rejection of most of the EU Member States. In some occasions, refusals have been explicit and shaped as a threat to the EU – that is the case of the Visegrad Group (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary). In other cases, they have been channeled through the silent unfulfillment of the resettlement duties alleging logistical or coordination problems with the receiving country – Spain is a good example of this case. The Mediterranean country should receive up to 15,000 persons until September 2017 but at the end of 2016 only some 300 people had reached this country.

At national stage, the refugee crisis has proved that the autonomous communities have limited participation in EU affairs. Although asylum is a competence of the central state, people who have been granted asylum have to be integrated in the host society thus affecting the regional and local stages. These two layers are responsible for introducing them into the educational, health, social assistance or employment systems and even for providing accommodation. All of this requires strong collaboration between public authorities but this has not taken place.

It is remarkable that, faced with the attitude of the national government, many autonomous communities and municipalities have expressed their interest in cooperating ever since the seriousness of the refugee crisis was detected, particularly after the EU Commission's resettlement plan. During the 2015 Sectoral Conference on Migration, several autonomous communities expressed their willingness to host 5,000 refugees and criticized the lack of coordination. However, although some regions launched welcoming protocols the national government –just like most of the EU Member States– has failed to comply with the

compromise on the resettlement of these people. Following this, some regions have required a more active role of the state. The Humanitarian pact on regional cooperation for Syrian refugees was signed by Andalusia, Extremadura, Cantabria, Castilla la Mancha, the Balearic Islands, Asturias and Valencia. This pact influenced the Council of Ministers of 7 July 2016, who consequently decided to distribute 1.75 million euros amongst the autonomous communities aiming to complement the health services of the refugees arriving through the EU relocation and resettlement and in accordance with the criteria laid down by the Cross-territorial Council of the National Health System. It is the only step taken so far.

In purity, the refugee crisis management reflects the situation in the field of migration. This matter requires strong cooperation between public authorities because both national and regional competences come into play. But the national government has left migration in all its dimensions out of the political agenda. The latest National Migration Plan concluded in 2014 and its substitution has not even been considered. The inexistence of a specific fund for actions in the field of migrant social integration allocated at regional stage is also determinant. This fund was suspended in 2012 due to the global crisis but has not been implemented again.

The massive demonstration in Barcelona last week to defend the arrival of new refugees should remind us all that the problem is still out there. The EU Member States can collaborate more actively to face this situation. Most of the autonomous communities and big municipalities in Spain have already demanded this.