

Without a coherent, modern migration policy we will be weaker as a community

For the second time within the space of months, Poland is faced with a challenge related with migrations: with the need to face the inflow of large groups of people fleeing from war, persecution, poverty, or worsening life conditions due to climate change.

Next to the enduring humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, we are now faced with the need to create scenarios and particular instruments which must be implemented immediately in the face of Russian aggression on Ukraine. We should be prepared for various scenarios, and at the same time prevent panic and unnecessary speculation. It is obvious today that years of neglect in the field of migration policy can have negative consequences for Poland and everybody living in our country in the case of a military conflict.

Ukraine has been proving for almost 8 years that it is a democratic, pro-Western country, which has to manage a conflict situation in its eastern territories every day. In 2014, due to the Russian aggression in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions and the annexation of Crimea, almost 1,8 million people moved within the country. Simplifying, this can be compared to a situation when almost all the inhabitants of the Lubelskie voivodship would have to find a new place to live in other parts of Poland within the space of several weeks. Ukraine managed with this challenge with little support from abroad. That is why we appeal for calm, but also for reflection on how to proceed. In the future, Ukraine may face much larger challenges.

The government and local authorities, as well as all Poles, should be prepared to offer the Ukrainians help in their own country. Already today, we should have an organised knowledge of the resources of aid we can offer, not only through specialised government agencies, but also all other social or local government entities whose cooperation will be necessary in the case of a crisis, and who can travel to Ukraine to support that society. We need knowledge about the numbers of experienced humanitarian workers, logisticians, psychologists, and paramedics. Constructing such knowledge requires intersectoral cooperation.

In case of a negative scenario, we must ensure shelter in our country for those fleeing the consequences of war. It is our human, European and Christian obligation. This would be a test whether we can turn our declarations of help, solidarity, and compassion into real actions. First, we must provide shelter, food, medical and psychological aid to people fleeing. We should also remain in close contact with our EU partners and consider together a mechanism of temporary protection, and how the EU could manifest solidarity with Poland. We should also remember that many Ukrainians will probably not want to receive aid for refugees but will rather prefer to legalize their stay in Poland.

We must be aware that we are facing a hybrid conflict, in which psychological instruments and other forms of aggression, for example cyber-attacks are also used. Also, Poland must not succumb to the temptation to use the difficult situation in Ukraine to attract workers to increase the shrinking labour force supply in our country.

Recently, the voivods asked local authorities to create an inventory of places where we could house refugees from Ukraine. This is a worthwhile initiative, but not enough.

The arrival of thousands of people would require a thought-through and prepared system of aid. The legal status of the people arriving would need to be decided, reception points at the border to process large groups of arrivals need to be created. Long-term support needs to be planned in case

the conflict is prolonged. We must guarantee social and medical help, and new legal solutions, including humanitarian visas and temporary protection which could be triggered if tens of even hundred of people fleeing from war would arrive in Poland. Certainly, many refugees could join their families living in Poland and in other countries of the EU.

Our actions cannot be feigned, and conditions for the people arriving cannot be prison-like. We must remember that refugees have the same dignity as all of us.

Due to the seriousness of the situation, we appeal for dialogue with social partners, experts, representatives of academia and civil society who have been dealing with migrations for many years. This is the time to return to talks, consultations, and working together on a common asylum policy which would respond to the challenges our country is facing right now and in the future.

Without a coherent, modern migration policy we will be weaker as a community. We will not use the opportunities we have, and we will not be able to face the challenges of the future. This migration policy should take into consideration the specificity of Poland as an emigration – immigration country, and a country which has a very short experience of inflows. It should consider the features of migration up to now (especially their mostly temporary character), but also contain a vision of development for the future. One of its key dimensions – which we are painfully lacking right now – should be an integration policy, which would facilitate the functioning of temporary migrants in Poland, as well as those who link their and their families' futures with our country.

If we do not properly address the challenges awaiting us and we are not prepared, a humanitarian catastrophe with unpredictable consequences will ensue. Catastrophes can be prevented but they cannot be managed. Afterwards, the only thing to do is count the victims and hold some responsible. We cannot allow it.

The signatories of this letter declare all their support for finding solutions for current and future challenges linked with migrations.

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