

The High Level Conference on Migration Management at the EU Parliament

On the 21st of June I attended together with Elena Schigirev (also a member of Issues Without Borders) the “*High Level Conference on Migration Management*” organized by the EU Parliament.

The conference was aimed at finding solutions to the migration crisis and deliver on the expectations of EU citizens.

The participants at the conference were: political leaders, policymakers, stakeholders and practitioners.

The speakers included important figures such as : Antonio Tajani (President of the European Parliament); Jean-Claude Juncker (President of the European Commission); Federica Mogherini (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission); Dario Scannapieco (Vice-president of the European Investment Bank); Markku Markkula (President of the European Committee of the Regions); Dimitris Avramopoulos (European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship); Julian King (European Commissioner for Security Union); Johannes Hahn (European Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations); Louise Arbour (United Nations Special Representative for International Migration); William Lacy Swing (Director General of the International Organisation for Migration).

The discussions were around strengthening the EU`s internal security, discussing on the root causes of migration and ensuring a stable social and economic environment in non-EU countries as well.

The conference was divided in the following way:

There was first an introduction section, furthermore there were two round tables at the same time, the participants could choose the one that they wanted to attend:

The first round table was on *“Managing asylum and migration”* , with included presentations related to: *“Better sharing responsibility for asylum seekers, accelerating asylum procedure”*; *Addressing legal migration gaps*; *Promoting integration*; *Addressing irregular migration*; *Implementing return decisions*; *„Ensuring coherence with the Union’s human rights policy”*.

The second round table which took place in parallel was on *“Promoting stability and prosperity in third countries”* which included presentations related to : *“Fostering economic and cultural diplomacy to ensure prosperity, tackling root causes”*; *„Addressing humanitarian needs”*; *„Helping partners prevent or manage crises on their own”*; *„Enhancing third countries’ capacity building in border management and asylum”*; *„Ensuring coherence with the Union’s human rights policy*; *Ensuring democratic scrutiny of international cooperation tools”*.

I chose to attend the first round table because it was more related to the work Issues Without Borders is conducting now, while Elena attended the second one because it is more related to her job. This was anyway a wise decision since we spent time after the conference and shared our thoughts from both rounds tables.

The conference continued with another round table *“Strengthening the EU internal security”* and lastly there was a closing session with the leaders of the political groups.

Even though there were many interesting and viable solutions raised, they have no binding force. So there are some solutions to the problem but without a political will, without consensus change is very hard to implement.

Even so, I was very happy to attend this conference, because I heard many important figures discuss about a topic that I am highly interesting in, I got the chance to exchange ideas with some of the NGOs that were given the opportunity to offer their opinion at the conference and I spend a great day in the European Parliament, an amazing building, with an amazing history.

Hopefully if next year there will be another conference on migration

management Issues Without Borders will also be given the opportunity to make its voice heard and offer its expertise on this topic.



IWB present at the World Refugee Day

Last month, members of IWB were able to attend several events the World Refugee Day, held every year on June 20. In Barcelona, the Catalan Commission for Refugee Aid (Comissió Catalana d'Ajuda al Refugiat/CCAR) and the Asil Cat network organized diverse activities to raise awareness of the need to protect and respect human rights, especially of the increasing number of refugees around the world. A cultural event, held on June 19, counted on the

participation of several refugee testimonies and the reading of a manifest, signed by numerous non-governmental organizations, as ACATHI, ACCEM, CAPI-BPI, CC00 Barcelonès, Centre EXIL, CCAR, the Catalan Commission of the UNHCR, Fundació ACSAR, Fundació Casa del Tibet, the Bar Association of Barcelona, the Human Rights Institute of Catalonia and PEN Català.



The manifest reinforced the idea that no one should be suffering from discrimination based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or social origin and that urgent actions should be taken to resolve the tragic situation of the more than 50 million of displaced people worldwide (UNHCR). The manifest made reference to the refugee quotas proposed by the European Union for its member States and the worrying lack of commitment of the latter to take responsibilities, criticizing the Europe's indifference and "fortification" through new walls that only increase the risk of losing their lives when refugees try to reach European ground. The Mediterranean Sea already counts with a shamefully high number of lost lives that shouldn't be allowed to grow. The international

community also cannot stay silent in front of the inhumane treatment received by those trying to cross the borders, especially regarding the situation at the fence in Ceuta or Melilla.



But in spite of the increasing numbers, during 2014, only 5.947 people applied for asylum in Spain, 786 in Catalonia. Out of these, 2.029, almost a 40%, were denied it. Catalonia, supported by the International Protection Plan in Catalonia (PPIC), approved by beginning of 2014, is working hard to improve the situation and grant aid to those in need, although, as often mentioned by Catalan authorities, the refugees and asylum matters are *unfortunately* not a competency of the Government of Catalonia (Generalitat de Catalunya), but of the Spanish government.

Erfan's story (p.1): the three best years

Before the Netherlands. Life at home, in Iran

Erfan is 24 years old. He is from Iran. He likes music and football. He wants to be a successful architectural planner. This is Erfan now. But 18 months ago he would have said something completely different about himself. He would have simply stated: "I am a refugee."

I met Erfan at a Dutch language course. All refugees that get the approval to stay in the Netherlands must follow Dutch courses and pass the national language exam within a period of 3 years. In my class, there were five or six Europeans, one Chinese girl and the rest of the people (twelve) were refugees from Iran, Irak, Syria and Eritrea.

Luckily, in a world where so many people speak English, we found a way to communicate from day one, mixing words and gestures. So here we were, a Romanian and an Iranian, both foreigners in the Netherlands. During our conversations, bits of his "past life" would creep in. He talked about Iran and the friends that he misses. And about his mother, sister and uncle that live in the Netherlands with him. He also talked about his time at the refugee centre, describing it as "the lost years" of his life. Years during which he did not study, or work, years in which he made a few friends, lost others, felt happy at times, desperate at others. Years in a small box. I am grateful that he chose to share his story with me:

"When I was 20 we came here. I had a diploma of architectural planning. I was in a basketball team in Iran. My city has 2 basketball teams. The first one was at a high level. I was at the second level. When I was 10 I began basketball. And when my father died, I was 9 and a half.

He wasn't sick, he had a heart-attack. He was 38 and I was 9. When my father died we didn't have the good perfect life, we had a house in the middle of the city. I have one sister, she is 2 years younger than me. When my father died, we had to start from zero. My mother never married again. She started working in an international apartment, a business apartment.

My mother's family was in another city, North-East from Iran. My mother also didn't have a father. When my mother was 15 her father died in the war between Iran and Iraq. My grandfather died in the war. My mother has 3

sisters and 2 brothers. My grandmother also never married after my grandfather died.

My family was in this other city and my mother was alone when my father died. My mother called her family, her mother and her brothers... my mother is the first child, she's the oldest one. And everyone came to our city. My mother was 26. She was 16 when she had me.

“When I was 12, I also started working. My mother was alone and I had a little sister to take care of.”

She started working in some international business apartment, she opened a fast-food place. At first it was ... it was so small, like half of this room (he shows around the living room of his rented apartment). After that she started to work hard, night and day, every day. And fast-food work is really hard... you don't have weekends, you don't have free days. In Iran it's not like here: it's Sunday, so the shops are closed. There, everyday is open.

When I was twelve, I also started working. My mother was alone and I had a little sister to take care of. That was a bit hard. I said “I want to go to work” and my mother didn't want me working in fast-food. And we had some friends who said “if you want to learn something, learn home planning. This will always be useful. When you'll be thirty, it will still help you.

When I was fourteen, people knew me from word to mouth and I had work. And what was it... what was the problem for us? Hm, that was mixed. When my father died of a heart-attack, he was a political man, he was protesting against the regime. He was the leader of some group, a protest group. I don't know exactly what these groups were about, I was really young and my mother never talked about it.

But I know my father was a leader and that his group didn't like the regime. 35 years ago the regime in Iran changed. Iran was a kingdom country and it was the 5th best country in the world. Nederlanders (the Dutch people) also know the kings from Iran. Then they came to Iran and changed the regime. And

now Iran is an Islamic Republic.

“They attacked him (my father) sometimes and the last time they came back to our house, he had a heart-attack.”

So my father was a protester, my grandfather was also a protester. They liked the king and they made a promise to the king that they would never accept another rule. And every year, my father was not at home for one month. He was in some place at the government, they asked him questions for one month. Every year, that was a problem. These people that would take him were like police, but more than police, like CIA or FBI.

They attacked him (my father) sometimes and the last time they came back to our house, he had a heart-attack. When my father died my mother was also active in these groups. But she never told me until I was 20. When I was 20, I could understand that.

After I also started working we put the money aside and we bought a nice house in our city; it was the best place in the city. Then it was cheaper than now, now it's horrible, but it was so cheap 10 years ago. For 6 years we worked and then we bought a house. And then we worked, worked, worked and we bought another fast-food place that was bigger and we opened a kitchen. We made food and people bought it. And then, when I was 18-19, we had our own house and car, a good house, a big house, we had a lot of money.

“The last 3 years that I spent in Iran were the best years in my life. “

I had my own house. When I was eighteen I was taking my friends to my place. In Iranian money, the rent was 500,000 per month. That was cheap. When I got my house in Iran, one euro was about 12,000 Iranian Rials. My best memory was when I was 18. I had my house, my friend had a car, and every night we had girls in our house (he's smiling). My friend was at the university and

every time he was with 3 or 4 girls and every night the house was full of girls. The last 3 years that I spent in Iran were the best years in my life. These three years seventeen, eighteen and nineteen were the best years of my life.

So what happened was that we had too many books, protest books, in the house. Books that belonged to my mother. But I never read them, because I don't like reading books, I told you. (he laughs) Those books are prohibited in Iran. In the market, some people have a bookshop, they go to other cities, other countries, they get the books, but in an illegal way. That was the first book: from Khomeini to Khomeini. And the other book was about serial killers. That was one of the books, the other one was about the kings of Iran and that was a dangerous book.

“And when they are coming, you don't know what they are going to do to you. You really don't know.”

When someone is a protester, they have to check on that person. They don't say “Hello! I want to do a check on you today or tomorrow”. They just come. And you don't know when. And you don't know what they will do when they come. Because they are not human, really.

Their children or their wives also don't know they are in this work. They are 100 percent invisible. And they are so dangerous and they don't have any feelings. And when they are coming, you don't know what they are going to do to you. You really don't know. And my mom had these books and some posters. They were hidden in the house, in some case. Her identity, everything was in the case. The case was locked in the closet. That was in May 2010.

It was the 1st of May. We were going to travel to another city to visit my mother's friend. This was some lady with 2 girls, she also didn't have a man. We went there, my mother gave a key to my grandmother, to watch the bloemen (flowers in Dutch) and the aquarium. I was with my friends. But we travelled together. That was the first of May.

We were travelling to another city, but my mother took our passports as well.

We didn't need them, but she wanted to bring the passports anyway. In Iran we have 2 identity cards, the first one is like a normal ID card, the second one is like a passport. So we were going to this other city. And we have some neighbours who lived right across from us. So my neighbour called my mother and she said "never come to the house" and my mother was "huh? never come back to house? why? what's wrong? we call to my grandmother, no answer. Call, call, call. My mother said "something happened, but I don't know what."

And this city where we were was 5 hours away from home. My mother said "let's come back", but my mother's friend said "no, don't, maybe something happened. Only call". We called my uncle and he said "yeah, they came to your house, they checked everything, they broke the doors, the Kasa (a cupboard) and they found it, they broke it and they saw everything.

"After one day, my grandmother called us and said "go out of Iran, wherever you can. Only go."

to be

continued...