



Issues Without Borders CUI 32741193
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IWB for Refugees detailed project description

Summary of the project

With this project we propose to launch a petition under the *European Citizens' Initiative* with recommendations for the reform of asylum policies in the European Union. The recommendations are to be based on research from 27 country reports assessing the situation for refugees and asylum seekers, conducted by national researchers who are all voluntary members of civil society, and who will also take part in developing the specific recommendations.

After registering our petition with the European Commission, we will run a campaign to raise the one million signatures needed for the petition to be analysed by the Commission. We choose this specific method to meet our two main objectives:

- To influence reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), based on civil society contribution
- To strengthen solidarity and instruments of cross-European democratic participation in times of nationalistic political developments

Background

The so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe has seen a total number of more than 1,600,000 irregular migrants enter the European Union (EU) since its peak in 2015 when, famously, over 1,000,000 individuals reached European shores. Moreover, over 10,000 people never made it during this period as they drowned at sea before arriving at any coast. As we write in 2018, arrivals have decreased drastically, but the 'crisis' still very much persists as Union Members have yet to find a solution for those who continue to come, and for those who are currently stuck in countries like Greece and Italy without being properly processed or helped to move on, some now for years.

The European Union has a Common Asylum System (CEAS) from 2005 which sets a minimum standard for the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. However, in reality, the experience for refugees and asylum seekers still vary hugely, depending on the Member State in which they seek protection and, due to the Dublin Regulation, they are forced to apply for asylum in the first country they arrive in, creating a huge strain on countries with an outer border. Within this context, the European Union is currently working on a reform of the CEAS to strengthen shared responsibility and solidarity between Member States.

However, this is proving difficult in a political environment where more and more EU countries are introducing new domestic legislative changes to discourage asylum seekers from settling in their territories. In recent years, countries such as Hungary have made it illegal to provide aid to undocumented migrants, and members of the Schengen Zone have reinstated border control in an attempt to keep migrants out. Sweden and Germany who were initial champions of welcoming refugees are now backing down again, and Denmark, which was the first country in the world both to sign the UN Refugee Convention and to take in resettled refugees from third countries, have now become the first country to halt its resettlement of refugees altogether.

Beneath these developments are national populations who have become deeply polarised on political matters and fundamental values, leading many to argue that what we are witnessing is far more than a question of migration and in fact constitutes a democratic crisis in one of the world's most developed and powerful regions. An increasing number of Member States across the Union are voting in (or experiencing a surge in) anti-immigrant and anti-EU parties whose opinions seem more based on fear and emotion than facts and respect for the rule of law, reminding some of the continent's fascist past.

As such, Europe has gained a reputation as anti-immigrant and racist, and unwilling to meet its obligations within international law, leading to unnecessary humanitarian crises and continued loss of life. However, this is only part of the story, as an impressive number of Europeans have also gone against reactionary political and populist trends by either actively fighting for the rights of refugees or simply refusing to follow the convictions of those who promote anti-refugee sentiments. In fact, a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that far more Europeans are in favour of taking in more refugees than those who are against it, and that people are generally unhappy with the way that the EU has been tackling the situation.

For this reason, IWB believes that we have a civic duty to promote European democratic engagement in our effort to defend refugees' rights. In times of nationalistic ideologies it is not sufficient that European leaders attempt to 'enforce solidarity' on Member States at a superficial level; the change must be visibly grounded at civic level to ensure that solidarity is genuine and to strengthen the sense of real democracy in the Union.

As such, our project aims to rely on civic action and democratic tools that include as many ordinary European citizens as possible. All researchers on the project are voluntary non-affiliated members of civil society, and their research covers asylum policies in all remaining 27 Member States of the European Union (post-Brexit). Based on their findings, we plan to write both national petitions tackling policies at domestic level and, notably, a petition at EU level promoting positive changes to the CEAS. Known as the *European Citizens' Initiative* (ECI), the EU offers a mechanism for any group or individual to raise one million signatures from a minimum of seven Member States, after which the European Commission is obliged to consider the proposed changes.

Refugees need protection, and the CEAS needs reform to meet that end. However, to be successful, this needs to happen on a base of popular support and democratic sentiment throughout the EU. Anti-democratic forces feed of the idea that 'solidarity' is elitist and Brussels-centred, and will continue to do so until proven wrong. Additionally, members of civil society should not just be there to fill the protection

gaps left by their governments, but also to hold these governments to account. And in the understanding of *IWB for Refugees*, this is what democracy is all about.

Project activities

On the background of the above, we propose to carry out the following activities as part of the project:

- 1) Creation of 27 country reports: members of IWB from all across the EU will finalise 27 country reports assessing the situation for refugees and asylum seekers in each Member State (excluding the UK). These reports will focus on all aspects of the refugee experience, as they follow the same guidelines which include the following sections:
 - Summary of the national legislation on refugees
 - Refugee life in [country] (refugee population, state support, integration, discrimination...)
 - The legal process
 - Interviews with refugees and/or experts in the field (optional)
 - Description of what happens if they do not receive refugee status
 - Analysis of how the media depicts the refugee issues in [country]
 - Follow-up on the refugee crisis (optional)
 - The author's subjective perspective (with recommendations)

All researchers are volunteers, and they are selected for the project on background of their education/experience/proven interest relating to the subject matter. Many are recent graduates and young professionals who want to use their skills and knowledge to support civil society initiatives and be inspired to continue working for human rights and democratic progress. Most country reports are already done, but we still need to finalise the reports for Belgium, Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Latvia and Slovenia. We aim to have these finished by 1 June 2019.

- 2) *IWB for Refugees* conference in Romania (or online alternative, subject to funding): once all country reports have been finalised, our project researchers will be invited to a conference where they will compare their research and discuss recommendations. The purpose of the conference is to prepare for writing national petitions in as many Member States as possible, and to identify all cross-cutting issues to be addressed in our European petition. Conference participants will be instructed in petition writing and mechanisms of the ECI, and prepare to become local representatives when we launch the campaign and start collecting signatures from the public.

In addition, the conference will include workshops where researchers can freely interact to share ideas while using the space to work on their national petitions. Furthermore, they will work together to identify key topics and recommendations for our joint European petition and to come up with original ideas for the petition campaign.

- 3) National petitions: at the conference, our researchers will be encouraged to use the recommendations from their reports to write a national-level petition and present it to the

parliament and general public in the country that they represent. The idea behind this is to apply a direct practical function to each country report, to challenge specific issues at national level and to prepare for our ECI petition.

National petitions will be customised to the concrete needs of that country, and individual researchers will work independently but in parallel with other national campaigns, meaning that they can support each other as they compare lessons and results. Additionally, they can start approaching media outlets as members of a wider movement and, crucially, start stirring up interest for the launch of the campaign around the ECI.

- 4) *European Citizens' Initiative*: as already mentioned, the EU offers a unique tool for members of civil society to have a direct say on policy changes in the Union. Any group or individual in the EU can write a petition and register it with the European Commission as a *European Citizens' Initiative* (ECI). Once registered, the holders of the petition have 12 months in which to collect one million signatures from a minimum of seven different Member States. If they are successful, the Commission has to assess the proposals. If the Commission agrees, it passes over to the European Parliament, and if not, it needs to give a satisfactory reason as to this. The petition holders may also get a public hearing in front of the Parliament.

The ECI was introduced in the Lisbon Treaty in 2007, but has only had four successful initiatives since then, and only one since 2012. By using the ECI, we hope not only to utilise an available method to influence policy making through direct democracy, but also to raise awareness around the existence of this method. People in the EU can sometimes feel estranged from the bureaucracy in Brussels, and we want to promote a positive image of how citizens can get involved and have their voice heard, as well as challenge nationalists who combat the idea of cooperation between countries.

ECI petitions must be short and concise, and our petition will mainly consist of simple and concrete recommendations relating to European asylum policy. These recommendations will be developed by the researchers during the conference in Romania, and will then be formatted and prepared for registration with the European Commission by the Project Manager.

- 5) *Promotional package*: In order to run a successful campaign and raise one million signatures, we need as much material as possible to create visibility and engage civil society in Europe. The material will mainly be in digital format, due to the geographical size of the interest area, and will serve to catch interest, educate and ensure that people have something to remember. As already mentioned, the researchers will use the conference to come up with ideas for this, but at the moment we have two proposed products which we plan to create:
 - *Short videos*: the aim is to produce a number of short videos, based on interviews with refugees in countries of the EU. Each video is to focus on one particular Member State and will be used by our researchers when preparing the national petitions.

In IWB we believe in a rights-based approach where those affected by changes envisioned have their own voice to share experiences and express opinions, and it is important for us to include these.

- Picture collage: the idea is to create a 12-picture collage with the portraits of 12 women, three of whom are refugees, and nine who are successful European women. Once we have the 12 photos finalised, we will start promoting it online, inviting people to pick the three women who they consider to be refugees, before revealing the true identity and story of each woman.
- 6) Petition campaign: once we have the ECI petition finalised and registered with the European Commission, we start our 12 month campaign to raise one million signatures. We aim to do this within the first six months of 2019. The campaign will mostly be carried out online, considering the geographical scope of the project, and because we wish to reach as many people as possible. Before campaign launch, we hope to have at least one product from the promotional package ready, however developing these will also be done alongside and launched throughout the campaign year.

In order to generate the necessary interest, the petition will rely heavily on sponsored ads through social media where we will publish material from the campaign package and link to the petition page for people to sign. Because we wish to reach the widest group of individuals possible, we will focus on the services with the highest number of active users in Europe; Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter. We will also approach organisations with similar interest for potential partnership around promoting the initiative through their membership correspondence, etc. This would be a way to reach those already interested in the topic and willing to participate in spreading the word.

Apart from social media, we will also approach local and national media in different EU countries. We are able to do this because we have people on the ground in almost every Member State, which we believe is what makes us special and gives us the democratic strength a project like this needs to succeed. The more mentions we can get in newspapers and on TV, the more visibility we can create for the petition outside the constrictions of social media, and the more we can spark public debate around asylum on an informed basis.

Organisational background

Issues Without Borders (IWB) is a platform which enables its members to publish their own research and blog-style articles online, as well as engage with each other through comments, discussions and even the occasional physical meet-up! The organisation also encourages members to take action and strives to host projects pushing for real change, such as our current IWB for Refugees.

For those in need of facts, insight or confidence to take action, IWB offers an online information portal and network that supports its users to participate as active citizens. IWB aims to provide serious and crosscutting information, based on the knowledge and experience of its users. In order to achieve this,

users are encouraged to produce their own research and bring original solutions to issues around the world.

Mission:

As an advocate of human rights and equality for all, the mission of IWB is to offer an online platform that empowers its users to take on personal and societal injustices and supports them in their actions.

Vision:

IWB's vision is a world where democracy is sustained through civil action and the freedom to challenge the status quo. We believe that independent, individual and inventive thinking is indispensable for any society to be free from inequality and human rights violations.

IWB focuses on the following categories which are usually more research-focused and academic in style (although creativity is always welcomed; some members have even published their own poetry!):

- Political issues
- Human rights issues
- Social issues
- Environmental issues
- Refugee issues
- EU law issues

Furthermore, in the editorial section members are free to voice their opinion on any issue they want, usually in shorter and more subjective-style pieces.

IWB constantly strives to break down traditional frames and constraints by encouraging its users to directly contribute, share and discuss their knowledge, experiences and insights. The organisation's goal is to make meaningful contribution to forming a societal mind-set which is independent, open minded, generous and has the courage to question its beliefs. The organisation works towards this vision on the basis of our *four core values*:

- independence and freedom in thought and action,
- respect for diversity of cultures and different points of view,
- a fair and objective attitude towards all issues, and
- promoting real and effective action in our societies.

IWB currently has over 50 members representing around 30 different countries, in Europe and beyond. It has been represented by its members at conferences and seminars in different parts of the world, and on occasion, has also collaborated with big players such as the International Organisation for Migration, with whom we worked on the "i am a migrant" campaign to shed light on the situation for the Roma population in Romania.

As part of the *IWB for Refugees* project, we have so far completed 18 country reports. In November 2017 we held our first international human rights conference, *Let's Talk About Refugees*, where 11 of researchers from the project came together in Timisoara, Romania, to act as speakers and present their findings and ideas through lectures and dynamic workshops. A brief video from the conference is available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EF2vEQaVcw>

The conference also premiered our first creative product which will form part of our promotional package when we launch the petitions next year; a short film entitled *Refuge D'Amour* and set in the streets of Paris where a young woman rediscovers her sense of freedom and belonging after fleeing her home country of Syria. The short film was made in collaboration with our partners from 4ever Films productions and can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sBWlUSuDyw&t=7s>

Up until now, all work has depended on volunteering and pro bono contributions; even the project manager is currently on a volunteer contract. However, in order to sustain and move forward with the next crucial phases of the project, funding is needed to secure a successful outcome.

More on our website: www.issueswithoutborders.org