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## **ADDRESS TO THE LVII COSAC IN MALTA**

*(30 May 2017)*

**Vannino CHITI**

*(Chair of the Senate Committee on European Union Policies)*

Mr Chairman, Mr Commissioner, colleagues of the COSAC,

Following Italy's request, a delegation of the Conference of Committees specialising in EU Affairs (COSAC), held a visit to Sicily on 5-6 May 2017, to enhance the awareness of MPs from Member States on the challenge of migration and its often tragic aftermath, to the point that it has become a full-fledged humanitarian crisis. The visit also aimed at addressing this issue with a Europe-wide approach, applying the values of solidarity and the defence of human rights which constitute the very basis of the Union and its ability to move forward.

It was an unusual and unprecedented activity for COSAC.

And for this I would like to thank the last two Chairs, Slovakia, when the problem was first raised, and above all Malta, for enabling us to hold this field-visit in the course of its presidency.

The visit was divided into in two separate moments.

On the afternoon of 5 May, at the Ragusa Prefecture – which we thank most sincerely for its cooperation and for the professional expertise of the Prefect and her co-workers – a meeting was held with national leaders and representatives of civil society, including representatives of the main non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active locally.

On the morning of 6 May we visited the Hotspot at Pozzallo.

28 COSAC parliamentarians from 18 Member States came to Sicily, while two other Parliaments were represented by their staff. There were also several MEPs, the speakers of 4 Regional councils on behalf of all Italian Regions, and 11 Italian MPs.

This broad participation proved that COSAC can really act as a link between the national Parliaments and the European Parliament on matters of key importance for the Union.

During the two days spent in Sicily, one particularly interesting activity was experiencing the effectiveness of the Pozzallo Hotspot. This is one of the

“crisis points” in Italy that is endeavouring to cope with increasing numbers of migrants reaching the external borders of the Union, in line with the May 2015 European Agenda on Migration.

The delegation found 67 people staying at the hotspot during the visit. But this should not come as a surprise because the Hotspot is a transit station by its very nature, and secondly because on the evening of 6 May 400 more people were expected to arrive in a matter of hours. The number thus reflected the particular situation at that particular moment

Furthermore, it is clear that the emergency emerges at the time of landing. When children, women and men land on the shore they need primary medical care, to overcome the terrible traumas of travelling under inhumane conditions, and general medical checkups to see if they are suffering from any diseases, and if they need human and psychological support. Most women have suffered abuse and some of them are pregnant. On these vessels, unaccompanied children are often present.

At Pozzallo, and in Italy as a whole, we are concerned.

The non-governmental organisations present at the Ragusa meeting requested the deployment of psychologists to all structures, precisely to address these needs.

The Pozzallo hotspot has 300 beds, while Italy's other 3 facilities – namely Trapani, Lampedusa and Taranto, the first two of which are in Sicily while the third is in Puglia – have 400, 500 and 400 beds, respectively.

The purpose of these hotspots is to ensure primary assistance and to identify, register, and fingerprint new migrants, in order to be able to steer them through the appropriate legal procedures: asylum, resettlement or repatriation.

Both in the meetings with the government officials and in the course of the visit proper, it became clear that migrants reaching Italy, whether asylum-seekers or economic migrants, are being accurately identified. All of them undergo an identification and registration procedure, their fingerprints are taken, and they are then directed to the following stages.

These procedures are being applied in every Italian Hotspot (about one-third of arrivals) and also at other landing sites which are not Hotspots. This means that nearly 100 percent of migrants are identified.

Moreover, further Hotspots, still in Sicily, are being created to improve the total capacity and provide more efficient assistance.

It became clear to visiting parliamentarians that this system is working well, and that it is being implemented in stages.

An important role is played by the staff of European agencies present locally and in particular the Frontex personnel, who deal with repatriation, and

the European Asylum Support Office, which provides information on relocation.

Italian police officers explained in detail how all people coming through Pozzallo are fingerprinted. This is done with the consent of the people concerned, without any coercion. A decisive role is also played by the social workers who talk with the migrants regarding this particular aspect.

Fingerprints are stored in European databases and identify each individual from that moment on, so that anyone travelling in the European Union, if fingerprinted again, is recognised as having reached the EU via Pozzallo.

One important stage is to ascertain the nationality of every migrant because not all countries of origin allow them to apply for international protection. Many of the people passing through the Hotspot seek political asylum, at all events.

A major challenge is the large number of unaccompanied children landing on Italy's coast. It is necessary to enforce the legislation and work in closer contact with ad-hoc facilities, because the sheer number of children may lead to the undesirable situation where they become long-term residents in the hotspot, rather than settle into society.

Another challenge has to do with the status of people reaching Italy. In quite a substantial number of cases migrants are not eligible for international

protection. That, of course, can only be ascertained at the end of the identification process. In the meantime – some complained – these individuals can move freely around the Italian and European territory, placing a burden on the welfare and reception systems.

This is a politically divisive matter, but it must be pointed out firstly that there is a legal and moral obligation to save at sea, and secondly, European rules must be complied with. These lay down that every citizen of a third country who does not live in a so-called “safe” countries is entitled to seek international protection. Every Member State is duty-bound to process asylum applications following a specific procedure. Today, a measure proposed by Home Minister Minniti and backed by the whole government – and later voted into law by Parliament – the time needed to ascertain the right to political asylum has been halved. This shows that great progress has already been made in this respect.

A third challenge raised by the delegation had to do with the speed of repatriation. This can only be done with countries that the Union has concluded a readmission agreement with. For this reason, in order to speed up the process, more agreements should be concluded. Several third countries are not actively cooperating, and this makes it difficult to get them to readmit migrants.

With regard to resettlement in other Member States, there are delays for which Italy can certainly not be held responsible. Of the 35,000 people to be resettled as political asylum-seekers as per decision of the European Commission, only 5,700 have been actually resettled. This is absolutely unacceptable. The Commission must ensure that all decisions taken be effectively and efficiently implemented.

A few days ago, the European Parliament approved a resolution by a large majority in favour of requiring EU States to honour their commitments to transfer 160,000 asylum seekers from Greece and Italy by September 2017 and to accelerate the relocation of refugees, particularly children.

This has been an important decision, and is the right way forward.

To conclude, we should emphasise that the visit to Ragusa and Pozzallo showed that there is very close integration and cooperation between all parties involved: the Prefect, who is doing a great job in cooperation with the Police, the medical profession, the non-governmental organisations and the port authority.

Pozzallo is a model that has been created in stages: but it stands as a model and it must be made known. For this reason, too, the Hotspots must not be left alone in terms of resources and in terms of cooperation and solidarity.

When managing the reception of migrants it is crucial for the people working in this sensitive field to be professionally qualified and trained. This also applies to the networks providing assistance outside the Hotspots, such as the Multifunctional Centre, and the project to provide greater protection to unaccompanied children.

Following a proposal from the delegation, the Pozzallo Hotspot may be used to train officers in countries hosting migrants, through the support of European funds for reception centres.

One hopes that the experience gained in this field visit will help raise the awareness of European countries and Parliaments on this challenge. Migration is a matter that has to be governed by the European Union as a whole, because this is the external border of the EU. Europe also has a political obligation: to lead the world in defending and disseminating fundamental human rights, peace and stability.

The strict and rigorous accounting requirements applied, somewhat excessively in some cases, by the Union to control public accounts, are not equally being enforced when it comes to making everyone comply with their obligations to accept and relocate asylum-seekers. As has been said already, enforcing the distribution of asylum-seekers in EU countries is proving very difficult.

By the same token, the Union should be more robustly committed to expanding its partnership agreements with Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Ethiopia, which are the home countries of so many of the migrants, and to stabilising transit countries, particularly Libya.

Resources should be provided to set up reception camps in Northern Africa. At the same time the Libyan Coast Guard must be equipped with such assets as will enable them to check people leaving their borders. This is what the Italian government is doing. Border controls must also be conducted in Southern Libya in order to check arrivals from the desert, where as many people lose their lives as those who die at sea.

Respect for human rights knows no borders: we must stem this shameful trafficking of human beings from Central Africa through Libya and thence to Europe.

The task facing Italy and Europe is to make sure that human life is safeguarded first and foremost, and that the dignity of the human being is respected in all reception centres, in Libya as well as in Turkey, which is another migration corridor. Unacceptable violations of human rights are often taking place in those camps today.

Lastly, I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to all the people in Sicily: their extraordinary commitment and their generosity towards people suffering

from a humanitarian crisis of such huge proportions stand as an example for Europe, and also for Italy.