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*Open letter*

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Re: Psychologists in Europe call for a revision of the European detention policy against refugees - psychological consequences are destructive for everyone

The treatment of refugees violates Human Rights, dehumanizes refugees and endangers European values and security

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

The burning of the refugee camp in Moria in October 2020 had drawn attention to the horrendous treatment that refugees are experiencing at the boundaries of Europe: Barred from crossing borders, the refugees are held in overcrowded camps under extremely poor conditions. In sharp contrast to the announcements of the European Community and leading European politicians, nothing has changed at the southern European borders. The relocation of refugees from the camps at the European south to other European countries remains far below the promised numbers - even though these numbers had been embarrassingly low from the beginning. In addition, the reports from Kara Tepe, from the new camp that replaced Moria, and other places describe the situation as worse than before. Politicians in Europe deny any responsibility and point their fingers at fellow politicians whom they say have to move first. Psychologists call such behaviour diffusion of responsibility or even moral disengagement.

The treatment of refugees as currently envisaged and implemented by the European Union and its politicians has negative psychological consequences for all. Subjected to trauma in their countries of origin and often the target of violence during flight, the experience of the refugees and their children is dramatically reinforced by the physical hardship and injustice in the European refugee camps. From a psychological perspective, the ongoing violation of their Human Rights has consequences for their physical and mental health. Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms and increased suicidality that manifest now or occur over time have been flagged up by more than one study (1).

In addition, given the feelings of rejection and exclusion that characterise refugees' experiences in the camps, it is no wonder that refugees may become reluctant to identify with the culture that they seek to join (2). Psychological studies unequivocally show that feelings of social exclusion and alienation are among the major preconditions for political extremism and the emergence of terrorist violence (3). Thus, the current European policy, brutal in its rejection of refugees, facilitates political extremism and thereby endangers Europe itself and its inhabitants.

Finally, the current treatment of refugees reaching the borders of Europe is not without strong impact and consequence for European democracy and the values that underpin it. The public read about and see news stories that reveal the orchestrated political diffusion of responsibility - stories that undermine trust in national governments and the European Community. In addition, continuously witnessing the ongoing injustice and mistreatment of refugees diminishes trust in European values. Psychologically one can predict that, faced with the dissonance between their values and observations, the likelihood of the citizens of Europe blaming refugees for their fate and devaluing them rises (4). Put simply, the ongoing mistreatment of refugees can significantly undermine trust and belief in the workings and values of European democracy and lead to a further increase in racism and hate crimes.

From a psychological perspective, the current treatment of refugees reaching the European border has negative consequences for all: for refugees, for European security and the European democratic political system. We therefore strongly recommend that all people involved in the political process of decision making adopt a renewed perspective and act responsibly to bring an end to the inhuman disregard for the human rights that refugees experience.

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