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FOR NEW DIPLOMACY

“Politics of Fear: Public Security & Human Rights”

Kenneth Roth

and

Serge Schmemmann

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On 25 May 2016 the Académie Diplomatique Internationale, and the International New York Times co-hosted the “Forum for New Diplomacy” featuring a speech by Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch (HRW), followed by a conversation with Serge Schmemmann, member of the Editorial Board of the New York Times. In his speech Mr. Roth addressed the challenges that Europe faces with the streams of people seeking refuge from the ongoing conflicts in their home countries. After criticizing central aspects of the way the EU is currently reacting to the crisis, Mr. Roth introduced some starting points for improving the EU’s strategy and most importantly the situation of the refugees at the borders and within Europe.

A main point of criticism that Mr. Roth raised was the fact that the EU wrongly considers Turkey to be a safe country and therefore continues to send refugees back there. It has been claimed that the refugee convention only applies for the EU, which has dire consequences for the refugees in Turkey who are basically at the mercy of the Turkish government. Mr. Roth pointed to the situation of about 100,000 refugees on the Syrian side of the Turkish-Syrian border who are exposed to great dangers, who Turkey refuses to let into the country. Summarizing, he stated that Turkey is not recognizing its responsibilities for refugees and cannot be considered a safe country for them to be sent back to.

Mr. Roth’s proposal of how the EU can best address the refugee situation was twofold. First, he encouraged investment in Turkey and Lebanon to establish safe camps for refugees to live and wait, with the possibility of safely returning to their home countries. Noting that most refugees in fact do want to stay close their home country, Mr. Roth approved of funds that the EU had recently promised to Turkey. However, he underlined the importance of right investment including the provision of access to employment, education and medical care which would encourage many refugees to stay in Turkey.

Still, Mr. Roth acknowledged that many would seek a safe haven in the EU. Here, he proposed the installment of centers in countries of first refuge such as Turkey, where migrants can be screened and apply for asylum. This would not only allow to filter out security risks like ISIS infiltrators, but also economic migrants, thereby reducing the number of migrants to only refugees in the legal sense. The following step, Mr. Roth proposed, should be to turn to the rest of the world for support. As long as the refugees have not entered the EU but remain in Turkey,

F O R U M

FOR NEW DIPLOMACY

it could be a feasible method to ask countries such as the United States, Russia and Saudi Arabia to do their part in the migration crisis. A central task for the EU now is to convince those other member states that it is within their own national security interest that the EU does not fall apart over the migration situation.

Mr. Schmemann commenced the conversation by raising the issue that the idea of human rights may be a Western one and the effort to enforce them worldwide an action, may be more of an imposition of our values. To reply, Mr. Roth pointed to the fact that the concerned countries did sign the human rights treaties. Furthermore, he stated clearly that HRW is not trying to tell people they cannot live their way. Instead, they fight for the rights of those that are forced to conform to certain norms (hiding homosexuality, the subordination of the woman etc.) against their will. In the final part of the conversation Mr. Schmemann addressed the obstacles that states pose to the work of NGOs as Human Rights Watch. Mr. Roth analyzed the situation as a mix of old and new phenomena. It is ordinary that governments are tempted to violate human rights as the easy way to stay in power. The task of human rights organizations is then to raise the cost of those violations. However, the increased number of deliberate attacks on human rights in many countries is new and troubling. This situation leads to a need for NGOs to find new ways of reinforcing human rights issues.

In the following Mr. Roth outlined the new social media strategy of HRW. Traditionally human rights NGOs work through shaming governments in the media and convincing other governments to exert pressure, but today there is also a need for new ways of speaking more directly to the public, to talk about values not only abuse and doing so through different mediums. This includes increased provision of visual content in reports and the extensive usage of social media such as twitter and Facebook where Human Rights Watch already has 2.8 million and 2 million followers respectively.