The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Using Raoul Wallenberg to Unite the EU

By George Soros

October 30, 2012



Originally, the European Union was what psychologists call a "fantastic object," a desirable goal that inspires people's imaginations. I saw it as the embodiment of an open society: an association of nation-states that gave up part of their sovereignty for the common good and formed a union dominated by no single nation or nationality.

The euro crisis, however, has turned the EU into something radically different. Member countries are now divided into two classes — creditors and debtors — with the creditors in charge. The EU is today held together by grim necessity. That is not conducive to a harmonious partnership. The only way to reverse the trend is to recapture the spirit of solidarity that animated the European project from the start.

To that end, I recently established an Open Society Initiative for Europe, or OSIFE. In doing so, I recognized that the best place to start would be where current policies have created the greatest human suffering: Greece. The people who are suffering are not those who abused the system and caused the crisis. The fate of the many migrant and asylum seekers caught in Greece is particularly heart-rending. But their plight cannot be separated from that of the

Greeks themselves. An initiative confined to migrants would merely reinforce the growing xenophobia and extremism in Greece.

I could not figure out how to approach this seemingly intractable problem until I recently visited Stockholm to commemorate the centenary of Raoul Wallenberg's birth. This reawakened my memories of World War II — the calamity that eventually gave birth to the EU.

Wallenberg was a hero who saved the lives of many Jews in my home city of Budapest by establishing Swedish safe houses. During the German occupation, my father was also a heroic figure. He helped to save his family and friends and many others. He taught me to confront harsh reality rather than to submit to it passively. That is what gave me the idea. We could set up solidarity houses in Greece, which would serve as community centers for the local population and also provide food and shelter to migrants.

Sweden has made migration and asylum policy a high priority, while Norway is concerned about the fate of migrants in Greece. So both countries would be prime candidates to support solidarity houses. This has to be a European project — one that eventually must find its way into the European budget.

As soon as possible, I will dispatch an OSIFE needs-assessment team to Greece to work out a plan for which we can generate public support. My goal is to revive the idea of the EU as an instrument of solidarity, not only of discipline.

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https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/10/30/using-raoul-wallenberg-to-unite-the-eu-a19032