



Vienna Migration Conference 2018

From Crisis Management to Future Governance

18-19 October 2018

Vienna, Austria

Background Note

1. Context

The “Vienna Migration Conference” (VMC) is ICMPD’s annual flagship event for discussing the central issues in the field of migration, gathering political decision makers, government experts, academia, the media and civil society. The VMC discusses these issues from the European perspective, and includes also the perspectives of ICMPD’s many partners from outside Europe.

2015 marked the starting point for a new chapter in the history of global migration governance, and this chapter is yet to be finalised. The VMC2018 will take stock of achievements and shortcomings, as well as dynamics and developments in a process that will continue to occupy the international community for many years to come. It will debate how to overcome the current crisis management mode and move towards a sustainable migration governance system.

Last year’s VMC2017 discussed the concept of “migration partnerships” as a framework for safe, orderly and regular migration. Based on the conviction that contemporary challenges related to migration and refugee protection can best be addressed when the international community works together in a spirit of genuine partnership, the VMC2017 identified a set of overarching priorities to make migration partnerships work in practice. These partnership priorities referred to:

- The enhancement of crisis responsiveness;
- The strengthening of the regional dimension of cooperation on migration and displacement;
- The creation of perspectives for the young and educated in countries of origin;
- The development of more intelligent return policies;
- The fostering of refugee autonomy;
- The promotion of pathways to protection; and
- The promotion of pathways to legal migration.

An advanced version of this background note will be provided as a discussion paper for the VMC2018.

The VMC2017 concluded that significant progress had been made in these areas since the beginning of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. When discussing the partnership priorities listed above, however, the VMC2017 made obvious that the international community in general and the European Union in particular find it especially difficult to make progress in two central areas: the promotion of pathways to protection and to legal migration.

Yet, these priorities need to be met, first and foremost, when global migration governance is to be put on a new foundation. Future migration governance will have to take policies on protection and legal migration to an entirely new level in terms of delivery on the ground, agreement between all concerned states and international partners, and the degree of public acceptance. Migration frameworks must become much better in seeking the approval of political audiences and in communicating more persuasive messages to these audiences. There is much to suggest that the so-called refugee crisis more than anything else caused a severe and lasting crisis in public confidence, mainly driven by a sense of unease towards an unpredictable migration situation and a sense of distrust in the ability of political leaders to effectively regulate it.

2. The Nature of the Crisis

At present, there are 258 million international migrants worldwide, with 19 million refugees amongst them. While the total number of international migrants and their share of the world's population have grown over the last 25 years, the total number of refugees has remained stable and their relative share of the world's population has even decreased. Politically speaking, however, the topic of refugee protection has once again taken centre stage. This is particularly true in Europe and is closely related to the inability of the Member States of the European Union to agree on how to organise refugee protection. The stalemate has largely overshadowed other aspects of the migration debate, including prominently the issue of labour migration and skills gaps in a growing number of EU labour markets.

For decades, governments pursued a migration control approach. By doing so, they stayed clear of the more complex debate of root causes and drivers of international migration. The so-called refugee crisis of 2015 made it obvious that European governments had underestimated the symbolic power and political explosiveness of the issue. What happened in 2015 and 2016 led to a growing rift between European governments and large parts of populations as governments seemingly displayed their inability to control borders and the entry of non-citizens. It went much deeper than whether or not European populations supported the idea of providing protection to hundreds of thousands of refugees, it actually shook the basic confidence in the ability of governments to manage emergency situations, maintain control in case of crises and respond to current and future challenges. A refugee crisis situation gradually transformed into a political crisis and a crisis of public confidence.

3. From Crisis Management to Future Governance

Global conflicts will persist and continue to force people to flee. At present, only 3% of refugees have access to the durable solutions of (i) return, (ii) local integration, and (iii) resettlement. Not enhancing their access to durable solutions will inevitably continue to feed irregular migration and the businesses of migrant smugglers.

At the same time, socio-economic inequalities and diverging demographic trends in regions across the world will increase both the demand and supply for labour migration. In the absence of functioning

labour migration governance, irregular migration and illicit employment will persist, with migrant smugglers taking economic gains and governments having to bear political losses.

The political pressure resulting from the events in 2015 and 2016 triggered responses that, for the first time in decades, involved the highest levels of governments. They defined the core of a future global agenda on migration and protection, and began to shape this agenda from a perspective of partnership between the countries concerned. The Global Compacts for Migration and on Refugees are testament to this.

Since 2015, a tangible progress could be observed in the public debate as well as in terms of policies, measures and approaches on international cooperation and mobility. New concepts have emerged, some have been tested successfully, some are in their early stages, and some are subject to a controversial debate. The changing patterns and dynamics of international migration and forced displacement, however, require that policies move beyond crisis management and provide more coherent and long-term responses that are based on a sound understanding of the drivers of migration. In Europe, the crisis of 2015 has ultimately shown that the existing policy architecture is ill-prepared with a view to the challenges and demands of global migration and displacement dynamics. By the same token, the European public was ill-prepared for the regulatory complexities and the socio-economic and cultural consequences related to migration.

It has become plainly clear that a crisis management approach to migration has reached the limits of its regulatory potential. It is time to progress to a more suitable policy architecture that offers a more nuanced and differentiated, holistic and sustainable approach to international migration and mobility: a sensible migration governance system that offers a more effective, coherent, inclusive and sustainable framework for international migration. In order to address the crisis in public confidence, moreover, it needs to be accompanied by a public debate which is capable of adequately framing the long-term challenges and demands associated with international migration and mobility as well as outlining the range of policy options and required trade-offs that form part of a governance system.

The VMC2018 will therefore again place its focus on those aspects that are currently absorbing much of the attention of politicians and policy makers as well as the wider public and which are among the migration partnership priorities identified at the VMC2017: (i) refugee protection, and (ii) labour migration. Over the past months, political efforts were invested into reforming the European asylum system; however, no consensus could yet be reached. While there is a number of concrete proposals on the table, it remains unclear how a reformed European asylum system will ultimately look like. Recently, the discussion on labour migration and skills shortages in European labour markets, which has been there already before the refugee crisis of 2015, has become more prominent again. And, although the issue of access to the European labour markets also features prominently in several EU policy frameworks with its partner countries and regions, concrete policies and programmes are yet to be developed.

The VMC2018 will provide the opportunity to take stock of the debate, to evaluate existing policy options and to identify concrete proposals for improving the respective policy frameworks in a mutually reinforcing way. Progress in these two migration policy areas will significantly contribute to creating safe, orderly and regular migration in Europe and beyond. As a result, the VMC2018 aims to provide an input to overcoming the crisis mode in both migration policy and politics as well as to contribute to laying the groundwork for a more sustainable migration policy that is understood and accepted by the wider public. Global solutions require European contributions, and European solutions require global frameworks.