

“The future of International Migration beyond the Covid-19 pandemic”

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Mr. Ambassador, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to join you today and to give a keynote on the impacts of Covid-19 on International Migration, but also to share a few thoughts on possible future developments once the world has learned to better cope with the pandemic. Of course, I would have liked to join you in person for this event; unfortunately, this is not possible at the moment.

The pandemic has its grip on the world, but thankfully, we have learned to use our digital tools to meet and to work together, even when there is some distance between us. And although we are still in the middle of a severe crisis, it is time to take stock of what we have learned and how the future of migration might look like once we have started to overcome the pandemic.

Migration is a complex phenomenon, which is influenced by a variety of factors, causes and motivations. But when it comes to the main drivers, the most important factors are 1) war, civil war and conflict; 2) economic and wage disparities; 3) socio-economic development and 4) demographic imbalances that result in movements from comparatively poor and young regions to comparatively rich and old regions. In addition, we can expect that these drivers will become even more relevant in the future.

A look at the figures confirms this assumption. The share of international migrants among the world population has been comparatively stable over the last five decades and increased slightly from 2% to 3%. However, since the world population has also grown, the total number of migrants has significantly increased from 82 million in 1970 to 272 million in 2019. Should this trend continue, the total number of international migrants will be about 380 million in 2050.

The majority of migrants move in a voluntary and regular way. However, a large minority cannot or does not move in such a way. Currently, conflict-induced migration has to be our biggest concern. The latest estimates speak about 80 million refugees or internally displaced persons. This is 20 million more than in 2015, the year when the world started to speak about a “refugee crisis”.

In reality, 2015 was an expression of a global displacement crisis that had started much earlier and that has continued to worsen since then. With about four million refugees, Turkey is home

to the world's largest refugee population, so I do not have to tell you how challenging the situation is today and how challenging it will be in the future.

And then in March of this year, the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world. Since most countries and regions in the world introduced travel restrictions and strict border controls, the pandemic had an immediate effect on mobility and on migration as well. There was an estimated 65 % decrease in international travel and a 70 % decline in tourism. The latter has huge effects on economies and societies in low and middle-income countries, which largely depend on this sector. Estimates speak about more than 160 million migrant workers that are affected by Covid-19 related restrictions. Migrant remittances went down by 20 %; making it difficult for migrant families to cover school fees of their children, medical expenses, housing costs or even food. The ILO speaks about more than 80 million jobs that got lost in Latin America alone because of Covid-19, and Latin America is meanwhile one of the main regions of origin of asylum seekers in the EU.

I give you these examples because they seem to support an assumption we at ICMPD had already in March. Covid-19 will not bring an end to migration. On the contrary, the pandemic will further aggravate the global economic imbalances and will increase the pressure on people to migrate in search of a decent living or a better future. When the Member States of the EU introduced travel restrictions in March the arrivals of irregular migrants and asylum seekers decreased in the most drastic way ever recorded. In April 2020, the related numbers were almost 80 % lower than during the same month of last year. But as soon as travel restrictions were lifted in May, the figures went up again. In July, they had almost reached the levels of last year.

And we already see that the economic impact of Covid-19 has its influence on these trends. A good example is the recent upsurge in irregular arrivals from Tunisia. In July alone, more than 4,000 Tunisians arrived in the EU in an irregular way, ten times more than in previous years. Why was there such a development? Well, as a consequence of the break-down of tourism in the country due to the pandemic, many young Tunisians see no other option than leaving their country and trying to find work in the EU. This pattern will repeat itself many times in the future. In parallel to their own economic recovery, the rich countries of the North will have to support their partners in their recovery efforts too.

And other crises will be with us as well. The Beirut harbour disaster, for instance, has displaced an estimated 300,000 people in a country plagued by severe political and economic challenges and hosting large-scale refugee populations. Nobody should be surprised if this situation triggers significant migration flows, but everybody should be prepared to cope with such a development.

Coming to the end of my presentation, ladies and gentlemen, allow me a careful look beyond the current situation. In a very short time span, our societies have learned to live with the virus in one way or the other. And we will continue to learn to contain the damage that the pandemic is causing. There is good hope that the recent progress in the development of vaccines and medications will be successful and gradually bring our lives back to normal. Nevertheless, the path to recovery will be long and there is a high risk that the countries of the global North will use their economic power and gain faster access to vaccines and medication.

In this context, the global community should avoid making the same mistakes as it has made in migration, where full global partnership is still missing. There needs to be a fair allocation mechanism once a vaccine is working and considered safe. It is a question of fairness and solidarity but it is also a simple matter of truth. In a globalised world, nobody is safe unless everybody is safe. We will get out of this crisis only when act together as a global community, work together and show real partnership to each other.

To conclude, there will be a world beyond Covid-19, and it is safe to say that this world will still be one of migration. The causes that drive people to migrate have not disappeared during the pandemic and they will not disappear in the future. In this broader setting, however, Covid has its specific impact on the economic, social and political factors that influence migration. A major concern is the economic fall-out and an uneven path to recovery among the world regions. This would create even bigger imbalances and further feed the existing conflicts of today, leading to even more displacement and irregular migration. We can address these issues successfully, but only when we work together and in a spirit of partnership.

This leaves me with a final word. I would like to thank Ambassador Yenel again for his kind invitation to speak to you today and thank all of you for joining the discussion.

Thank you very much.