

CEI – Central European Initiative: Networking Meeting

Speech by Mr Michael Spindelegger, Director General, ICMPD

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Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Colleagues, Partners and Friends,

It is with special pleasure that I have the opportunity to address you today in the house I served as Foreign Minister from 2008 to 2013. In my new capacity as Director General of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) I should of course focus on the issue of migration and share a few thoughts with you on that matter.

But before that I want say a couple of words about my organisation. Well, the CEI and the ICMPD have quite some things in common. The CEI was founded in 1989, the ICMPD in 1993. Both organisations are inter-governmental. We share a membership base: twelve out of the fifteen ICMPD MS are also Member States of the CEI. And both organisations want to promote cooperation between their Member States, with the EU and of course also other countries, partners and stakeholders. Today ICMPD has about 150 staff members, an increasing network of missions, operates field offices and representations in the European neighbourhood and further abroad and runs more than 60 capacity building projects, migration dialogues and research initiatives in many parts of the world.

But let's turn to migration now, one of the current burning issues on the European and Global agenda. Today, we experience the highest numbers of displacement since the 2nd World War. More than 60 million people are estimated to have fled from war, conflict and violence on a global scale. In 2015, close to 1.3 million refugees, displaced persons and irregular migrants had applied for asylum in the EU, the highest number since the end of World War II. As we know, first they had made their way to Europe across the Mediterranean and in the second half of the year mainly via the so called Balkans route. Throughout the whole of 2015 and 2016 the countries along the routes and the other European partners had struggled with finding solutions, reaching agreements and regaining control of the entries to their territories. It is clear that in a crisis like this there was disagreement on the right approaches. And for some time it seemed as if states had lost the will to work together. The EU – Turkey agreement of March 2016 spreads some hope that regardless of all challenges there is a reinforced commitment towards joint solutions. These solutions will not be perfect but better than the ones that were at hand some months ago.

We must not fool ourselves. We have made steps in the right direction. But we have to be aware that the EU – Turkey agreement, even if it works, can only be the starting point to find global and functioning solutions. The fundamental issue of how to fulfil the obligations of protection in the age of mass migration; the very pressing issue of cooperation Libya and the long-term issue of emigration pressures from Africa and other world regions all wait to be resolved.

Let me start with the example of forced migration. Today there is not much media attention when it comes to the conflict in Ukraine. And there is almost silence around the large numbers of refugees and displaced persons. However, UNHCR speaks about almost 1.4 million Internally Displaced Persons in Ukraine and almost 340,000 refugees and asylum seekers originating from the country. When we look at these figures we have to admit that we face a humanitarian crisis that is at least comparable to the one in Syria.

But we should not get stuck with forced migration. The region is much more about labour migration, temporary and circular migration. Many of the movements in the region are circular and do not always show up in statistics and an unknown but important share is irregular and unrecorded. Notwithstanding this, we can conclude that the CEI Member States are part of one of the biggest migration systems in the world.

In this system there are two main axes: one towards the European Union and one towards Russia – the two migration magnets in the region. In the EU, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus have often ranked among the annual top-ten immigration countries. In 2013 almost 950,000 citizens from these countries had permanently settled in the EU. The Ukraine – Russia migration corridor is considered the second biggest migration corridor in the world [*After Mexico - USA*]. In 2013, 3 to 3.5 million persons have moved between the two countries.

When we look at emigration, we see that many of the CEI Member States are important countries of origin of international migration. The World Bank, for instance, estimates that more 45% of Montenegro's total population lives abroad, in case of Bosnia and Herzegovina it is more than 44%, in Albania more than 43%, in Macedonia more than 30%. For Ukraine, estimates speak about more than 14% of the population living abroad – this share translates into an impressive 6.5 million people.

Many of the CEI Partner States are important countries of destination for other partners' citizens. In Italy, for instance, Romania was for long the most important origin country of immigrants; Albania and Ukraine were among the top five. [*All examples refer to UN figures on international migration*] In Austria Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and again Romania were among the top five origin countries; in the Czech Republic Ukraine, Slovakia and Poland. In Hungary it was Romania, Ukraine, Serbia and Slovakia. [*I say "for long" because the huge refugee inflows of last year have changed the situation in some countries*]

Migration statistics also make obvious that we cannot speak of a simple country of origin – country of destination logic. It is a bit more complex. Yes, Ukraine is an important country of origin but it is also an important destination country. Before the crisis it hosted up to 5.3 million immigrants and the CEI Member States Belarus and Moldova were among the most important countries of origin.

But these figures also bring me to a big problem when we look at migration in the region. Let us take the example of Moldova. It is estimated that about 25% of the total population has migrated from the country, more than 1 million people. However, it is believed that only one out of 10 Moldovan emigrants stay legally in their respective country of destination. And these migrants do not burden welfare systems in their host countries, they do not take away jobs from the domestic population and they are not engaged in any criminal activities. Two thirds of Moldovan migrants are believed to be male, headed to Russia and other CIS countries and working in construction. Many of them do not have a proper legal status. One third are female and move towards EU countries like Italy and Greece, mainly working in households and domestic care. Again, most of them have no proper status. They have entered on basis of a valid visa and overstayed. And this means that they cannot move freely between Moldova and their destination country. This also means that an estimated 100,000 Moldovan children are “left behind” and have to grow up with grandparents or other relatives but without their mothers and fathers. Just imagine the situation – your child is sick and you cannot come to see it. You cannot see it because you cannot run the risk of travelling without a visa. This might cost you your informal job and your family its whole income. You cannot risk that to happen.

It is a silent crime against humanity right before our eyes and it is about time that we do something about it. As I have said before – most of the large scale irregular migration in the region is labour migration which is needed. It is needed by emigration countries which depend on migrant remittances. In Moldova remittances are believed to represent more than 26% of the country’s GDP, in Bosnia more than 11% and in many other countries like Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and Ukraine still between 5% and 10%. But countries of destination need these migrations as well. They do not find enough people on their labour markets who are willing and capable of doing the hard jobs their economies need to be done. It is about time to acknowledge this need and to honestly discuss how to make these migrations legal, it would be for the benefit of all parties involved.

This becomes even more important when we look at demography - another factor that will shape the future of all countries in the region. It is often argued that they will urgently need immigration in the future. And this is not just a media catchword; demographic ageing is a reality that will affect our economies and welfare systems more than many are aware of. Until 2050, in most of the CEI Member States the total population would shrink significantly without immigration, the average age would increase even more significantly and the burdens for welfare, health and public finance systems would be dramatic.

But we have to be realistic – it is not about simply taking in people. Each country needs the right kind of immigration with the right kind of skills, qualifications and characteristics. And here the CEI region provides huge potentials. There are a lot of ties – language, culture and history – that make it easier for people to move and integrate. General and professional education standards are closer than in comparison to any other world region. And there are many cooperation frameworks like the CEI or ICMPD’s Budapest and Prague Process that provide a perfect basis for states to discuss and agree on better labour migration. Also in the future – and despite of demographic ageing – there will be countries in demand and in supply of labour migration. We have to become a bit smarter in managing mobility between them. We can do this

and we have to do this if we want to meet the economic and demographic challenges of the future.

Many of the existing policies and instruments to steer migration at the European and the global level will need a fundamental reorientation, based on sound and functioning policies and carried by the spirit of cooperation and solidarity. To ensure “orderly migration” European migration governance needs a holistic European concept as well as functioning individual policies in the various areas of migration management - from protection to labour migration to integration to migration and development. It is my ambition that ICMPD plays an even stronger role in this, as a platform for discussion, exchange and policy-making between the states linked by international migration; and as a think tank to search for new solutions for the current and future migration issues. In this regard, I hope that we will continue and deepen the good cooperation between ICMPD and the CEI and its Member States.