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“Education and community – paths of integration in challenging times”

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues, Partners and Friends,

It is with special pleasure that I have the opportunity to address you today in my capacity as Director General of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and to open together with my co-panellists the session on “Migration instead of Rural Exodus – Integration as a Chance for Regions”.

But before I do that I want say a couple of words about my organisation. The ICMPD was founded 1993 with the idea to help states in managing migration. Very much like the “Institute of the Regions of Europe”, our work focuses on dialogue and partnerships between states and other stakeholders at the international level. Today ICMPD has about 150 staff members, a growing network of missions, field offices and representations in the European neighbourhood and further abroad. It runs more than 60 capacity building projects, migration dialogues and research initiatives in many parts of the world.

At the moment we face the worst refugee crisis since World War II. About 65 million people around the world have fled from war, conflict and violence. In 2015, about 1.3 million persons applied for asylum in the EU, the highest number since more than 60 years. Austria registered 88,000 asylum seekers. Many more transited through the country on their way to Germany or Sweden; stretching the capacities for accommodation, transport and registration to their limits. The countries along the migration routes and the other European partners still struggle with finding solutions and with agreeing on the right approaches. The EU – Turkey deal of March spreads at least some hope that there is a reinforced commitment towards cooperation. The debate continued at the recent Bratislava Summit and on the global level at

the UN General Assembly Summit from 19 September. In all of this we see some progress but we will need some patience before durable solutions will be found and implemented.

It is no surprise that in a situation like this “migration” is mainly discussed in connection with terms like “crisis”, “problem” and “difficulty”. We cannot deny that the situation puts immense pressure on the political systems in Europe, heats up the public debate and implies very practical challenges we need to address. But we also have to keep in mind that Europe has a legal, moral and historical obligation to help people in need of protection. And the picture of migration would never be complete without acknowledging the important contributions migrants make to their host countries and the huge potentials refugees have in this regard as well.

Integration is indeed a big chance – as the title of this session rightly puts it. However, in order to use this chance, we have to be aware of a simple fact: Integration does not run by itself. It requires big investments from migrants and societies; it requires time and patience; and it requires the willingness to do the right things the right way and in the right order.

As you might know, the long and lively debate on integration has never resulted in a general definition of what integration is or should be. However, all related approaches and policies have one major goal. They want to make sure that migrants acquire the necessary means to participate in the economic, cultural and social life of the receiving societies; have equal access to rights, and are subject to the same duties as the domestic population.

And here three priorities come into play: language, education and community. Learning the language of the host country has to be the first priority. It might not be needed to find occupation or accommodation. Manual and low-paid jobs do not require language skills; families and networks can help with finding a flat or room to stay in. But language is *the* key to empowerment, to communication and participation. Not speaking the language of the receiving country results in social and cultural exclusion and prevents migrants from moving upwards on the economic and social ladder. And we know that exclusion might feed extremism as well. In view of the terrorist attacks all over the world have to be very aware of that too.

Language is key for social integration; however, it is not sufficient for successful economic integration. Consequently, promoting education and professional training has to be the second priority. Refugees are diverse in terms of education, language skills or age structures. But all research shows that they perform better on labour markets than one might think. They have difficulties at the beginning, have to deal with specific social and health issues in connection with their flight, and often face specific prejudice when it comes to recruitment. Despite all of this, they begin to close the gaps in employment levels after three to four years. Still, it may take ten years or more until they fully catch up with other groups.

Thus, they often get stuck in low-skilled and low-paid jobs for their entire careers, regardless of the qualifications they might have.

We have to do more to promote qualified entry in the labour market and to avoid de-qualification. And there is some potential for that. Refugees are often quite young. Many of them belong to the age group that is in school age, at university or undergoes professional training. Displacement and flight disrupt educational biographies which are incomplete when they reach Europe. Access to professional education helps their economic integration. But it also creates a much needed pool of young and skilled workers that can replace the labour force reaching retirement age. Demographic ageing is not just media hype; it is a reality that will affect us more than many are aware of. To give you one example: In 2015, 63 % of the Austrian adult population was in working age (between 15 – 64 years); 27 % was in retirement age. By 2050 and without immigration the age distribution would shift to 62% in retirement age and 28 % in working age. The burdens for welfare, health and public finance systems would be dramatic. We cannot solve all challenges linked to ageing societies by migration; we need a whole range of other measures: later retirement, higher participation, innovation and better educated labour force to name only a few.

Still, immigration will be needed and integration will be the pre-condition to utilise its potential. We will need significant investment in integration policies, in language training and bridging measures for labour market integration, especially when refugees are concerned.

My third priority is community. The reason for that is quite simple: At the end of the day, successful integration *always* happens at the local level and *always* takes place in smaller social contexts: at school, at the work place, during sports, at social events and gatherings. In addition to that I think that the regions also have a big chance in offering opportunities to young and ambitious refugees, opportunities that are not available in the big cities.

I think of the special experience and know-how local small and medium enterprises have when it comes in training young apprentices according to their needs. I think of the high social competence you find among teachers and educators in rural areas; I think of the embeddedness of school, work and life in small but tight social environments. In those environments people look out for each other, watch each other and see that nobody gets lost on the way. And some degree of gentle pressure to make sure that everybody complies with the local customs can also help when we think of young people on their way to adulthood. But most of all: The rural areas have unique economic structures and can provide opportunities for training and employment that are not available in the bigger cities. At the same time they increasingly struggle to find applicants among the domestic population, as many of the young ones prefer to pursue academic education and careers in the urban centres.

To achieve this we have to create real incentives. We have to reach out to young refugees and communicate clearly that in our societies education is everything; that it will pay off for them to go through an apprenticeship; that they will gain from taking up jobs or taking over businesses outside the urban centres. And that smaller municipalities are often much better in providing an “emotional home” for refugees and their families, turning them into a “real home” faster than it is the case in the big cities.