

Conference of Integration Ministers

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Dear Minister Raab, dear Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to speak to you today and to share a few thoughts on the current and future challenges the European Union is facing in terms of migration, displacement and integration.

The war in Ukraine is not only a turning point in terms of the global order but also in terms of the EU migration history and migration situation. According to the UNHCR, one-third of all Ukrainians have been displaced since Russia's invasion in February. 6.5 million Ukrainian nationals have entered in the EU and 3.8 million have registered for Temporary Protection. The Ukrainian refugee crisis is the largest human displacement crisis in the world today. And it is the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the end of the Second World War.

But it is not the only one. Over the last thirty years, the number of displaced persons increased by 400% from about 20 to more than 100 million. Conflict and instability, economic disparities, demographic imbalances and the effects of climate change result in ever-growing levels of human mobility. As an area of freedom and stability, the EU has developed into a main destination of international migrants and refugees from many regions of the world. And this trend is likely to continue. The constant high numbers of asylum applications submitted by citizens from Afghanistan, Syria or Latin American countries and the increasing numbers of asylum applicants from countries like Egypt, India, Morocco or Tunisia confirm this assumption.

We should not forget, however, that refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection represent less than 10% of all third country nationals, who legally reside in the EU. Still, when looking at all residence permits issued, we see that the number of refugees has increased by four times over the last ten years (from approx. 450,000 to approx. 1.8 million). And we know that refugees face specific challenges in terms of integration: Unfinished education and vocational training, lack of formal qualifications, cultural distance or trauma due to the loss of livelihoods and family members. It takes them longer to enter the labour market and it takes them longer to catch up to other migrant categories and citizens of their host countries.

Against this background, I would like to point out a few of the conclusions of the Austrian Integration Report 2022 that was published on Monday of this week. In terms of refugee integration, the report emphasises the importance of language and language training as the basis for all other steps in integration. It stresses labour market participation as the second main priority, also for functioning social inclusion and identification with the host society. The recognition of skills and qualifications, job training and bridging measures and the provision of

childcare for young mothers participating in programmes are some of the main priorities in this regard. Our European labour markets need qualified and motivated workers and we should not miss the opportunity to utilise all existing potentials. But we also should not forget about communicating and teaching the values and fundamental principles of our societies and our legal and political systems. This supports integration but, equally important, it is the only way to ensure the acceptance and the support of our citizens for migration and integration. This refers to Austria but it refers to all the other Member States as well.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude by briefly addressing two more points. All Member States host large numbers of Ukrainian refugees in addition to refugees from other world regions. They all feel the burden, they all face the challenge. But Member States like Poland, which granted Temporary Protection to more than 1.2 million Ukrainian citizens, or others which do not have a long-standing history on refugee integration but also host large numbers by now, deserve our full solidarity and our full support. My final point refers to the Ukrainian refugees themselves. Many of them want to return as soon as the situation allows and we have to think about return and reintegration support already now and include it in our policies and programmes. Together with the Ukrainian authorities, we should think about the skills the returnees might need upon return. We must include returnees in our thinking on reconstruction plans and we have to think about developing a functioning support structure in Ukraine itself.

Of course, we cannot predict how the conflict will develop; we have to assume that many Ukrainian refugees will want to stay in the EU for a longer time. Still, we should prepare already now for a situation when the skills, qualifications and motivations of these refugees will be crucial for the recovery and future development of their home country. We should make sure that we do not miss this opportunity.

Thank you.