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“Immigration – a source of wealth and duties for Europe”

Welcome address by Nils Muižnieks
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European Economic and Social Committee

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address this conference today.

Let me start by saying that I consider this event a very positive example of co-operation and networking between a national institution - the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, an EU institution – the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Council of Europe.

I am also glad that this is not an isolated instance of co-operation. Today's event is a follow-up to the conference organised in the same framework in Paris on 23 September 2011, on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Council of Europe Social Charter. That conference explored how the European Social Charter and European Union law, particularly the “Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights of Workers”, can complement each other, and how synergies to secure progress towards a more social Europe can be harnessed.

In this context I would like to congratulate Jean Paul Delevoy, president of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council for his significant work on human rights issues, in particular on social exclusion.

I would also like to use this occasion to congratulate Staffan Nilson, president of the European Economic and Social Committee, for his work on many facets of social rights issues.

Turning now to the subject of this conference, I am particularly glad to address the issue of migration, which is one of the major thematic areas of my work as Commissioner. Migration continues to be a hot topic for many European countries, torn in a tug of war between the need for migrants, notably due to the demographic crisis of the native populations and the shortage of supply in workforce, on one hand, and a widespread fear of migrants, on the other hand.

Unfortunately, the pull of those opposing migration is very strong. The rhetoric of fear and hatred of migrants is spread by politicians at low and high levels in many European countries. Various groups and parties present migrants as a threat to public health and security and as adding to the suffering of Europeans hard-hit by the economic crisis. Moreover, migrants are increasingly pictured as threatening the identity of European nations, even though these have always been inherently multi-ethnic.

Sadly, this negative stance towards migrants has time and again proved its tragic consequences. I have already mentioned on other occasions the UNHCR statistics showing that 2011 had been the deadliest year in the Mediterranean, with at least 1 500 people, having been left without aid, drowning or going missing while attempting to cross the sea in search of a better life or of international protection. The recent report of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly on "[Migration and asylum: mounting tensions in the eastern Mediterranean](#)" points out that such tragedies have not stopped in 2012. In early September, at least 60 people perished when their boat sank off the coast in Izmir. On 15 December, at least 18 migrants drowned off the coast of Lesbos while attempting to reach the island by boat.

When not pushed back at sea, intercepted migrants very often are arrested and detained like criminal offenders. The Parliamentary Assembly's report shows that between August and December 2012, 3 280 persons were arrested and detained after crossing the Greek-Turkish sea border, compared to 65 persons in the first seven months of 2012.

The hostile attitude towards migrants does not stop at the borders. During my visit to Greece last January I met with migrants who have directly experienced the horrible effects of unfettered hatred against them. Between October 2011 and December 2012 more than 200 racist attacks, primarily against migrants, were recorded by the racist violence recording network headed by UNHCR and the National Commission for Human Rights. These are, of course, only a fraction of the verbal and physical aggressions that happen on a daily basis.

This is, however, a trend that affects not only migrants who come from outside of Europe. The political scene in some countries, including the United Kingdom and Germany, has become recently animated by heated debates on the threat posed by an imminent "flood" of "Balkan Roma" to these countries. The populations of Western European countries are being warned about the disastrous outcome of the future "invasion" by Roma from Bulgaria and Romania to their lands, once the restrictions on the employment for citizens from these two countries are lifted in January 2014. A whistle should be blown here to stop this shameful rhetoric. Treating Bulgarian and Romanian citizens like a scourge is simply unacceptable.

These trends must be turned around. Politicians and national courts have a crucial role to play in this process. There are already some encouraging actions in several states concerned. I was relieved to learn that the Greek authorities have finally become alarmed and decided to effectively fight hate crimes against migrants. Many political leaders in Greece have realised that it is no longer possible to tolerate the impunity enjoyed until now by persons and organisations that promote hate speech and engage in hate crimes. In Germany efforts are made at federal level to ban the far-right National Democratic Party.

These are good examples that should be followed by other countries as well. Migrants should not become scapegoats for the difficulties faced by Europe. Instead, European states should recognise the benefits of welcoming migrants and of setting an adequate framework for their participation in the European economy and societies.

As pointed out in a study recently published by the Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, the European Union intends to tackle the challenges of labour-market shortages with a dual approach. One involves promoting intra-EU labour mobility. The other involves attracting foreign migrant workers to the European labour markets. The Mobility Partnerships, such as those signed with Moldova, Cape Verde, Georgia and Armenia, also play a role in addressing these challenges.

Naturally, highly skilled migrants and brilliant artists from wherever are welcome, and European countries congratulate themselves for attracting them to their labour markets and cultural scenes. The added value brought by them is evident and is a matter of pride.

However, the situation of migrants with lower skills is markedly different. On one hand, the near lack of integration measures in some countries leaves them exposed to destitution, severe exploitation and abuse. Last year in July I witnessed the plight of some 800 refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection living in destitute conditions in Rome. During my visit to Austria last June I discussed with the authorities about the difficulties faced by asylum-seekers in meeting the requirements for obtaining a work permit which is in any case mostly limited to seasonal work, including harvest labour.

Ironically, the failure of the host states to provide adequate support for migrants is used as an argument against them - the typical image of the migrant is that of one who does not work and drains the budgets of European states by free-riding their welfare systems.

On the other hand, lower-skilled migrants are attacked for “stealing jobs” from indigent populations. However, the reality is different. Lower-skilled migrant workers often fill in gaps in sectors that locals have deserted for what they deem as better opportunities. I have learnt with interest of the case of Punjabi migrants who have successfully inserted themselves in the dairy sector in Lombardy, Italy, without “stealing jobs” from native Italians. The need for stable workforce in this sector, from which young Italians have fled, made that migrants working in this sector were less exposed to abuse and exploitation from their employers. In fact, reports indicate that the majority of migrant workers in this sector have secured legal employment contracts. I was also pleased to learn about the on-going discussion in Austria on extending asylum-seekers’ access to the labour market including by granting young asylum-seekers permission to take up an apprenticeship and thus benefit from vocational training.

The reality that also needs to be acknowledged is that the presence of migrants is necessary in view of the serious demographic crisis faced by European nations. Actually [data](#) indicate that the number of people aged 60 and above in the EU is rising by more than two million every year, while in recent years, the increase in the population of the EU member states has mainly been due to high net migration rates.

These facts make clear the reason for which European political leaders should welcome migrants, instead of turning their presence into an instrument for getting votes from native populations already struggling with the perspective of future lack of social support. The wealth produced by migrants profits everyone. European states should recognise that irregular and regular migrants are working in Europe because their work is needed.

It is high time for European states to consider a different take on migration: one of rational management that would fully respect the civil, political and social rights of migrants. However, this is not to be seen merely as a reward for migrants’ contribution to the wealth of European countries. The dignity of each person is non-negotiable. Protecting migrants is a moral and legal obligation that no European state can renounce and the human rights perspective should not be lost in any discussion or policy concerning migrants.

The protection instruments are there: I would only mention the European Convention of Human Rights, which makes no difference on the grounds of a person’s origin in granting him or her human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the European Social Charter. I hope that the Convention will gain more impetus through the accession of the EU. The implementation of the Social Charter may still suffer the consequences of austerity measures taken in these times of economic difficulty.

I believe that there is no better moment than this to tighten our co-operation and throw in our combined weights - of national institutions, the European Union and the Council of Europe – to pull governments and public opinion towards a policy of better protection of migrants, compliant with the Convention and the Social Charter.

The Council of Europe is committed to continuing its co-operation with all its partners in supporting this effort. I am looking forward to meeting you in future events like this one.