

Parliamentary Web Dialogue

*«Protecting refugees and migrants during the pandemic:
Camps and closed centres under lockdown»*

Tuesday, 26 May 2020, 16:00-18:00 CET

HIGHLIGHTS¹

SUMMARY

On 26 May the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly held its fifth parliamentary web dialogue on the topic “*Protecting refugees and migrants during the pandemic: Camps and closed centres under lockdown*” as part of its efforts to promote inter-parliamentary dialogue on relevant security developments pertaining to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. This event focused on recent developments regarding the situation in camps and other migrant facilities on the Greek Islands and in the Western Balkans, but also touched upon migration issues across the OSCE region. The particular challenges associated with immigration detention facilities and the issue of child detention were also addressed. Experts and parliamentarians exchanged views on the impact of the health crisis on already existing vulnerabilities, shared examples of ‘good practice’ and put forth recommendations on addressing migration management challenges during the pandemic whilst ensuring the protection of the fundamental rights of refugees and migrants.

Participants included parliamentarians and staff from Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Russian Federation, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Representatives from OSCE Partner for Co-operation States Israel and Morocco as well as a range of OSCE delegates and experts also took part.

Opening the event, **OSCE PA President George Tsereteli (Georgia)** stressed the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on refugees, and asylum seekers across the region, adding to their vulnerability due to limited access to healthcare and hygiene services. **Vice-President and Acting Chair of the OSCE PA Ad Hoc Committee on Migration, Margareta Cederfelt (Sweden)** highlighted the need for enhanced international co-operation in implementing effective long-term responses to migratory issues, urged states to ensure unhindered access to health services for migrants and refugees across the OSCE region, and reiterated her call for reasonable, proportionate, and non-discriminatory state responses when implementing COVID-19 emergency measures. Finally, she underlined the need for an equitable mechanism for re-distribution of asylum seekers, especially given the dire conditions in overcrowded first reception centres.

¹ **DISCLAIMER:** The Highlights from this Parliamentary Web Dialogue are not intended to be official conclusions, nor an exhaustive list of all issues raised during the debate, but rather a collection of main points pulled together by the OSCE PA International Secretariat for possible future reference. As such, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly makes no claims nor warranties of any kind, expressed or implied, about their completeness and reliability.

EXPERTS' KEY POINTS

Ms. Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

- Stressed the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on restricting the rights of migrants and refugees, especially in accessing asylum services due to the application of lockdown measures, leaving people without legal status, and accentuating their vulnerability.
- Underlined the adaptability of several States in securing access to asylum services via videoconferencing technology and welcomed the automatic extension of permits in some countries.
- Highlighted the low level of standards in reception centers across CoE Member States, while underlining the need for these facilities to comply with the general social distancing standards, being critical to selective treatment of migrants and refugees.
- Urged EU Member States to upscale their efforts beyond financial support, in assuming collective responsibility and showing solidarity, a message extended to all CoE and OSCE participating States.
- With regard to immigration detention, stressed that this can only be lawful if a reasonable prospect of removal is ensured; praised instances of release of immigration detainees in response to poor social distancing and other protective measures for migrants and staff. The use of tools developed by the Council of Europe's Steering Committee on Human Rights was particularly encouraged.
- Condemned the detention of children, regardless of whether they are unaccompanied or not, based on their migration status, underlining that this practice violates their rights, as emphasized by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, urged parliamentarians to enhance their efforts and cooperation with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) on this topic.
- Emphasized that responding in a human rights-compliant manner serves society as a whole and urged for the need to place human rights, shared responsibility, solidarity and accountability at the heart of migration policies, in contrast to voices praising a crackdown on rights as the best way to deal with asylum and migration issues.
- Encouraged policy makers to use the current situation as an opportunity to advance dialogue and efforts in relation to human rights.

Mr. Gianluca Rocco, IOM Chief of Mission in Greece and Regional Response Coordinator

- Emphasized the need to enhance responsiveness on migration issues in line with a long-term perspective as the pandemic will likely persist for years to come.
- Urged the need to deepen anticipatory mechanisms and to build on lessons learnt, as the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of states and societies in responding to large-scale crises.
- Briefed participants on the current state of play on the Greek islands, focusing on the overcrowded reception centres, underlining logistical but mainly political reasons that hinder the de-congestion of these facilities which currently lack the capacity to respond to even basic needs.
- Presented IOM's mandate in mainland Greece, while focusing on the response plan by the Greek

authorities to the pandemic, the good level of cooperation with IOM in handling the situation in the camps, as well as the low number of COVID-19 incidents in accommodation sites across the country.

- Underlined the need to define specific approaches for certain communities accommodated in camps and apartments while ensuring access to health care services and investing in information sharing and awareness raising networks.
- Emphasized the importance of working in parallel with local communities in order to address discrimination and racism which have been amplified during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Stressed that access to asylum remains an issue, despite modalities to ensure that asylum-seekers receive assistance even during lockdown.
- Underlined IOM's recommendations in finding alternatives to detention and refraining from implementing returns; claimed that although voluntary return corridors remain open, questions arise regarding the reception capacities of countries of return.
- Welcomed the recent relocations of unaccompanied migrant children from the Greek islands to EU Member States and urged that the principle of solidarity should constitute the main driving force with regards to migration in the coming years.

THE DEBATE

Over a dozen OSCE PA members actively engaged in the ensuing debate and exchanged a wide range of views and experiences on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant communities and on possible instruments to mitigate its effect on vulnerable populations across the region. OSCE parliamentarians and experts from the international community discussed, in particular, the efficacy of administrative detention of migrants in a context where there is no prospect of impending return and what alternatives to detention could be implemented under current circumstances.

Highlights:

- Human rights must remain relevant during times of crisis, while executive bodies should ensure their universal application.
- The COVID-19 health crisis should be considered as an opportunity to upscale efforts in addressing chronic issues exposed by the pandemic, including in the area of migration.
- Efforts should be multiplied to address prejudice and conspiracy theories which scapegoat Asian, Jewish, Muslim, Romani, and migrant populations during the pandemic as well as to counter escalating violence against members of Asian populations.
- Dialogue and co-operation among police, border management and other law enforcement authorities must be reinforced in parallel with fostering a humane treatment of refugees and migrants by law enforcement officials.
- The contributions of essential workers of migrant backgrounds were recognized and highlighted, underlining their increased exposure to health-related challenges while ensuring the provision of essential services. In this context, the need to mitigate the effect of the health crisis on low-paid essential workers was underlined.

- Exploration and implementation of alternatives to detention is encouraged and efforts need to be upscaled. No person should be subjected to unjustifiable and/or long-term detention as a result of migration status. Children should be exempt from any detention or punitive measures.
- Co-operation between countries and within countries is crucial in enhancing integration efforts in parallel with keeping communication corridors open with local communities.
- Substantial support to first reception countries should not be limited to the mobilization of financial resources. A renewed and enhanced political commitment based on solidarity must be advanced in order to ensure migration policies that respond to people's needs.
- Instrumentalization of migrants and refugees for any kind of purpose must be avoided. Humanitarian considerations must prevail.
- Access to health care should be ensured without discrimination. The critical multi-faceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the exceptional exposure of vulnerable people on the move to health-related risks. Providing access to health services for all reduces health risks and ensures the well-being of all members of society.
- Trafficking of people should be addressed through a common approach at the regional and international levels and be coupled with strong commitments regarding the respect of the dignity of persons.

In his concluding remarks as Rapporteur, **Lord Alf Dubs (United Kingdom)**, member of the Ad Hoc Committee on Migration, commended the recent relocation of migrant minors from Greece to the UK and the EU, while calling for strengthened solidarity and shared responsibility between states on migration issues. He raised concerns over the accentuation of racism and xenophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic and urged policymakers to increase efforts to develop inclusive migration policies, through forging open communication channels and close co-operation with local host communities. Lord Dubs underlined that ensuring legal and safe passage should be a priority in the management of migration routes while underlining that efforts by parliamentarians should continue and should be upscaled towards their respective governments across the OSCE region.