

**Vice-President Kristian Vigenin,
Chair of the Ad Hoc Committee on Migration**

Report to the Standing Committee

(21st OSCE PA Winter Meeting, Vienna, 25 February 2022)

Madam President,
Distinguished Colleagues.

Thank you for this opportunity to present to you a snapshot of current migration trends in the OSCE region and the recent initiatives of the Ad Hoc Committee on Migration under my leadership.

I. Snapshot of Migration Trends in 2021/2022

Two years after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the gradual reopening of national borders has meant that, within Europe, irregular migration and asylum applications have returned to pre-Covid levels.¹ Over the past months, there has been a marked increase in requests for international protection from Afghan citizens. Amid an ever-worsening humanitarian crisis and increasing risk of economic collapse, more than half the population of Afghanistan is currently dependent on life-saving and essential assistance. Since the beginning of 2021, some 700,000 people have been internally displaced, 80 per cent of whom are women and children, bringing the total number of internally-displaced persons to 3.6 million. A further 141,000 people were forced to flee altogether in 2021.²

While mass migration to the neighbouring countries of Central Asia has not materialized, in large part due to closed borders, the UN Refugee Agency still anticipates that risks associated with economic collapse and an increase in humanitarian needs, compounded by armed conflict, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, may potentially drive increased internal displacement as well as refugees outside of the country.

There has also been an influx in asylum applications by Iraqi citizens, which may be attributed to the situation at the EU's borders with Belarus that unfolded last summer. While the humanitarian standoff de-escalated later that fall, the situation drew renewed attention to the utilization of migrants for political purposes, and the protection of borders through pushbacks and other policies in contravention of international

¹ European Union Agency for Asylum, "Asylum applications in EU approaching highest level since 2016," 28 January 2022,

<https://euaa.europa.eu/news-events/asylum-applications-eu-approaching-highest-level-2016>

² UNHCR, "Afghanistan Situation Update," 15 January 2022,

<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90588>

commitments. Belarusian authorities estimate that over 700 irregular migrants, including about 270 children, remain at a logistics centre on the Belarusian side in Bruzgi, while unknown numbers are hiding in the woodlands.

The impenetrability of borders and the employment of deterrent tactics has become a recurring theme in European migration policy. This has made many migrants reliant on organized criminal groups, engaged in illicit smuggling/trafficking activities.

This is true for both land and sea routes. Throughout 2021, the Central Mediterranean route remained the most common pathway to Europe.³ Unfortunately, this was the deadliest year since 2018. On the Central Mediterranean route alone, some 1,500 migrants were recorded missing in 2021.⁴ Major shipwrecks off the coast of England, Spain, Greece and Libya reminded us of the persistent danger of these routes.

A robust and comprehensive European approach to migration management is urgently needed to prevent mass irregular arrivals and the exploitation of vulnerable persons. In this regard, evidence-based approaches to combat disinformation aimed at migrants by smugglers and traffickers are critical.

Negotiations for a new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, announced nearly a year and a half ago, have yielded only limited progress due to internal disagreements, while a number of “frontline” OSCE participating States have continued to struggle to accommodate influxes of irregular migrants. Cyprus, for example, continues to hold the EU record for the highest number of asylum-seekers per capita. In Greece, three EU-funded multi-purpose reception centers have opened on the Aegean islands of Samos, Kos and Leros, while the one on Lesbos and Chios are still outstanding.

As spring approaches, and pandemic restrictions are eased, we can expect the resumption of increased traffic along the major migration routes to, and within, Europe.

OSCE participating States should cooperate to address irregular migration in a holistic and comprehensive manner in compliance with human rights commitments, including at national borders. As the International Organization for Migration (IOM) recently emphasized, “border integrity and safety can be achieved when the human rights and well-being of migrants, regardless of their status, are at the heart of States’ response to mobility.”

The pervasive pushback of migrants and shifting of responsibility from one state to another, including proposals to outsource asylum obligations to third countries, not only undermine efforts in this direction but run contrary to commitments under the 1951 Refugee Convention. The right to seek asylum is a fundamental human right which must be preserved, also in times of emergency.

³ Frontex, “EU external borders in 2021: Arrivals above pre-pandemic levels,” 11 January 2022, <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/eu-external-borders-in-2021-arrivals-above-pre-pandemic-levels-CxVMNN>

⁴ IOM, Missing Migrants Project, https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean?region_incident=All&route=3861&year%5B%5D=2500&month=All&incident_date%5Bmin%5D=&incident_date%5Bmax%5D=

II. Implemented Activities

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, most of the Committee's activities continued to be held online. Since my appointment as Chair last August, we have held two online meetings with the participation of representatives of the OSCE, international organizations and non-governmental organizations. While we continue to monitor developments in a number of areas within the OSCE region, two received special focus.

1. Situation in Afghanistan

In September 2021, the Committee convened online to discuss how to best address humanitarian needs and migration management in the wake of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan last August. In our discussions with representatives from IOM and the Norwegian Refugee Council, we consulted on the potential impact of recent events on displacement trends within the OSCE region. Members especially stressed the need for a protection-oriented international response, including the establishment of safe pathways to neighboring countries. While members noted the need to support their reception capabilities, they also called for increased emergency preparedness along the the Central and Eastern Mediterranean route.

During a visit to Albania in October 2021, Committee Vice-Chair Farah Karimi (MP, The Netherlands) met with Afghan citizens and their families who had been offered temporary protected status pending onward relocation to the United States by private foundations for which they had worked. In meetings with authorities, the challenges of accommodating large numbers of temporary refugees and meeting the education needs of children were discussed.

Afghanistan was again on the agenda of the Committee's meeting in December, when OSCE Senior Migration Security Expert Luca Pianese updated members on OSCE efforts to develop a concerted institutional response to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

2. Situation at the EU's borders with Belarus

The Committee has also been keeping abreast of developments at the EU's eastern land borders with Belarus, notably those with Poland and Lithuania. In October 2021, in a joint statement with the leadership of the General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions, I called on the respective governments to ensure that persons trapped in the border area have access to food, water, adequate health care and temporary shelter.

At an online meeting in December 2021, members received a comprehensive update on Lithuania's response by Committee Member Laurynas Kasciunas for which we were very grateful. We were also briefed by representatives of IOM and Médecins Sans Frontières as well as a Lithuanian NGO, the Human Rights Monitoring Institute. Wary of the instrumentalization of migrants, our interlocutors urged for the lifting of the state of emergency and the provision of access of humanitarian actors to the border region. Members were briefed on the dangers of pushing migrants back to Belarus, where many had reported experiencing mistreatment. Members also discussed options to stop onwards passage through countries of transit and how to increase voluntary returns.

III. Next Steps

The Committee is dedicated to maintaining regular contacts with the European Commission and hopes to travel to Brussels in the coming months to assess progress in developing a common European migration and asylum policy and to ascertain the robustness of current mechanisms in dealing with potential crises situations.

At our next meeting, scheduled for 28 March, we also hope to hear from a representative of the Polish OSCE Chair-in-Office about migration issues in the OSCE region and the Chair's plans in this regard. I sincerely hope that we will not be facing a new mass influx of refugees due to current tensions regarding the situation in and around Ukraine.

I am moreover pleased to announce that, after nearly two years of COVID-19 induced suspension, the Committee will resume field trips, albeit under certain limitations on the number of participants. I have extended an invitation to the five Vice-Chairs of the Committee to accompany me to Greece between 20 and 23 March 2022 to follow up on the reception of asylum seekers on Lesbos following the fire which destroyed the Moria camp in September 2020. We will also have the opportunity to visit one of the new multi-purpose reception and identification centers inaugurated on Samos last fall.

I hope that we will be able to realize at least one more field visit before the 29th Annual Session in Birmingham. These in-person visits are invaluable supplements to our work as members of the Committee and in our national constituencies and serve our efforts to promote effective and humane migration governance in the OSCE region.

I look forward to reporting to you again in Birmingham and to presenting the recommendations of the Committee in the form of a resolution.

Thank you for your attention.

ANNEX I

Mandate of the Ad Hoc Committee on Migration

The Ad Hoc Committee on Migration was established following the unanimous decision of the OSCE PA Standing Committee on 25 February 2016 in Vienna. Its mandate is defined as follows:

- Serve as a focal point for the OSCE PA's work in the field of migration in all three dimensions of the OSCE: political and security questions; economic issues; and human rights and humanitarian questions; and report back to the President and the Standing Committee;
- Develop policy recommendations aimed at enhancing OSCE work in the field of migration and at improving the treatment of, and prospects for, migrants in OSCE countries;
- Promote discussion within the Assembly on issues related to migration, and promote parliamentary exchanges of best practice in these fields;
- Work closely with the OSCE Secretariat and Institutions as well as with relevant outside actors on issues related to migration to promote the understanding among the members of the Assembly of the importance of the work done in this field.

Membership of the Ad Hoc Committee on Migration (as of 11 February 2022)

1. Vice-President Kristian Vigenin (Bulgaria), **Chair**
2. Luigi Augussori (Italy), **Vice-Chair**
3. Lord Alfred Dubs (United Kingdom), **Vice-Chair**
4. Kyriakos Hadjiyianni (Cyprus), **Vice-Chair**
5. Farah Karimi (The Netherlands), **Vice-Chair**
6. Gudrun Kugler (Austria), **Vice-Chair**
7. Jan Bauer (Czech Republic)
8. Valerie Boyer (France)
9. Johan Büser (Sweden)
10. Hedy Fry (Canada)
11. Sheila Jackson Lee (USA)
12. Laurynas Kasciunas (Lithuania)
13. Mehmet Sait Kirazoglu (Turkey)
14. Massimo Mallegni (Italy)
15. Dimitrios Markopolous (Greece)
16. Vesna Markovic (Serbia)
17. Gwen Moore (United States)
18. Georgios Varemenos (Greece)

ANNEX II

Implemented Activities (September 2021-February 2022)

<i>24 September</i>	online	Meeting of the Committee <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus on Afghanistan, with the participation of Ms. Astrid SLETTEN, Country Director, Norwegian Refugee Council – Afghanistan, and Ms. Elizabeth COLLETT, Special Advisor to the Director General, IOM;• Report by Vice-Chair Kugler on the joint visit with OSCE SR/CTHB to Bosnia and Herzegovina (11-14 July 2021).
<i>13 October</i>	Tirana (ALBANIA)	Visit by Vice-Chair Farah Karimi <p>Focus on Afghans sheltered in Albanian under Temporary Protected Status incl. meetings with representatives from the NED, IRI, CIPE as well as the Directorate for Asylum, Ministry of Interior of Albania.</p>
<i>13 December</i>	online	Meeting of the Committee <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Situation at the EU-Belarus border, incl. contributions by<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Mr. Laurynas Kasciunas (MP, Lithuania), Member of the OSCE PA Ad Hoc Committee on Migration;- Mr. Patrice Quesada, Senior Regional Emergency and Post Crisis Specialist, IOM Regional Office for the European Economic Area, European Union and NATO, Brussels;- Ms. Frauke Ossig, Emergency Coordinator, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Holland, and Ms. Inma Vazquez, MSF Representative to the EU, Brussels;- Ms. Goda Jurevičiūtė, Project Manager, Human Rights Monitoring Institute, Vilnius.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of OSCE efforts to develop a response to the implications of the situation in Afghanistan, incl. contribution by Mr. Luca Pianese, Senior Migration Security Expert, OSCE External Cooperation Section, OSCE Secretariat
<i>18 December</i>	online	OSCE PA Statement on the occasion of International Migrants' Day

ANNEX III

Draft Plan of Upcoming Activities (February-July 2022)

24-25 February	Vienna / online (AUSTRIA)	<p style="text-align: center;">21st OSCE PA Winter Meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report of the Chair to the Standing Committee (25 February)
20-23 March	Lesbos, Samos (GREECE)	<p style="text-align: center;">Field Visit #1: GREECE (Lesbos, Samos)</p> <p>Limited delegation of the Committee leadership consisting of Chair + five Vice-Chairs + 3 Greek MPs</p>
28 March, 15:00-17:00 CET	online	<p style="text-align: center;">Meeting of the Committee</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debrief on the Field Visit to Greece with the Greek Minister for Migration and Asylum Notis Mitarachi (tbc) • A representative of the Polish OSCE Chairpersonship to outline plans in the area of migration (tbc) • A representative of the European Commission on the topic of implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (tbc) • Upcoming activities
4 April	Copenhagen (DENMARK)	<p style="text-align: center;">Bureau Meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report of the Chair
<i>tbd</i>		<p style="text-align: center;">OSCE PA Migration Committee Field Visit #2: CYPRUS (tbc)</p>
<i>tbd</i>		<p style="text-align: center;">OSCE PA Migration Committee Field Visit #3: ITALY (tbc)</p>
20 June	online	<p style="text-align: center;">OSCE PA Statement on the occasion of World Refugee Day</p>
2-6 July	Birmingham (UNITED KINGDOM)	<p style="text-align: center;">OSCE PA Annual Session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report of the Chair • Supplementary Item? • In-person meeting of the Committee on the sidelines of the Annual Session?