

Vienna Migration Conference 2021 – a comprehensive summary

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25.10.2021



Key points

- Migration is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, thus no single solution to migration challenges will suffice. The international community needs to adopt a holistic approach that encompasses areas including security, stability, development, and migration management. What is more, there is a need for migration partnerships reaching beyond bilateral agreements – regional and global initiatives should be encouraged.
- Although migration is a human right, there is a common agreement that irregular migration should be discouraged and prevented. Each person has the right to apply for international protection, however, to preserve the credibility of the asylum system, it is crucial to protect it from abuses.
- The EU needs a more coherent approach to migration. Adopting different solutions to migration challenges by member-states causes confusion and ineffectiveness.

The Vienna Migration Conference (VMC) is the International Centre for Migration Policy Development's flagship event for discussing partnerships and reassessing strategies to new migration challenges. Each year, this leading European forum on migration gathers a number of ministers, senior-level policymakers, and influential experts from all around the world. The 6th edition of the VMC took place on 19-20 October 2021, under the theme "Re-imagining migration partnerships: Challenges, opportunities and strategies".

A close look at Afghanistan

Unsurprisingly, the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan was at the heart of this year's conference. According to Kevin J. Allen, Principal Liaison Adviser at the UNHCR, there are now over 3.5 million IDPs within Afghanistan and thousands of people are already crossing the Afghan borders. Dr Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation of Afghanistan, highlighted the urgency of the issue, pointing out that the current atmosphere of uncertainty only encourages people to flee the country. In the near future, the biggest challenge for the region is expected to be posed by criminal networks of smugglers and human traffickers.

The speakers agreed that **the neighbouring countries are at the forefront of challenges coming from Afghanistan**. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan, Sharaf Sheralizoda, emphasised that thousands of Afghans are moving now to his country and the scale of human traffickers' activity in the region intensified. Even more hopeless situation seems to be unfolding in Turkey, which is already hosting the largest number of refugees in the world, including 4 millions of Syrians. Ahmet Muhtar Gün, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Turkey to the UN and International Organizations in Vienna, clearly said that **Turkey's capacity to accommodate refugees is no longer stretched, but rather exhausted**. Both representatives of Iran and Turkey called for **a pressing need to scale up humanitarian aid and engage in burden sharing with the neighbouring countries**.

Re-imagining migration partnerships in and for Africa

For the first time in history, the VMC hosted a representative of the African Union. Amira El Fadil, a Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, called for a need to address root causes of migration at home and create incentives for Africans to remain on the continent. As she recognised, such actions are already taking place, and, in effect, 80% of African migration takes place within Africa, rather than to Europe. The UNHCR's Special Envoy for the Mediterranean, Vincent Cochetel, agreed by reminding that **the majority of global migration is a South-South, rather than a South-North migration**. This has to be acknowledged when establishing migration partnerships that are more aligned to Southern partners' needs.

Connecting the Eastern Mediterranean and the Western Balkan Routes

Hungary, Greece, and Bosnia and Herzegovina's Ministers all agreed that there is a need to control their borders and improve security mechanisms to prevent irregular migration. Notis Mitarachi, Greek Minister for Migration and Asylum, admitted that **migration is a human right**, however, the asylum system is repeatedly abused by many migrants seeking economic opportunities in Europe. **To preserve the credibility of the asylum system, it is crucial to protect it from such misuses**. Perhaps the most controversial speech was made by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, Péter Szijjártó. He highlighted that **the region is in bigger danger now than in 2015, as in addition to pressure from the South, there is an**

additional movement of migrants coming from the East. By portraying border protection as a security issue rather than a human rights issue, he also clearly opposed the idea of mandatory refugee quotas in the EU. Moreover, he warned the EU member-states authorities not to make statements that encourage people to migrate to Europe.

When geopolitics come into play...

The ongoing situation at the external border of the EU with Belarus was also lively discussed at the VMC. Several speakers admitted that the EU was not prepared for this kind of challenge. Johannes Luchner from the European Commission stated that the current situation is not a migration issue, but rather a geopolitical issue, in which we face an obvious instrumentalization of migrants for political purposes. He added that **forcing people to stay at the border with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia is a clear abuse of their fundamental rights.** Likewise, Vladimír Šimoňák, a Director at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia, emphasised that the situation at the EU border with Belarus is exceptional, as there is no hope for establishing any partnership with Belarusian authorities on this issue. A particularly interesting point was made by Johannes Luchner, who highlighted that **migration is a changing phenomenon.** By mentioning the example of Poland, he recognised that these states which once opposed burden sharing with other EU states, a few years later are the ones who need other states' support the most. Migration partnerships should be reliable and genuine, whether in a time of stability or crisis.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Karolina Fabirkiewicz. She holds a BA in International Relations and Development Studies from SOAS University of London and currently studies the LLM Public International Law course at City University of London. Her interests include legal aspects of international relations, human rights, migration, and diplomacy.

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