

Wystąpienie wicepremiera, ministra spraw zagranicznych Radosława Sikorskiego na otwarciu 16. Warszawskiego Seminarium Praw Człowieka

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*Commissioner O'Flaherty,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am pleased to open the sixteenth Warsaw Human Rights Seminar and to see you all in Warsaw.

This year we concentrate our event on migration. Judging by today's turnout and the interest the conference has generated, I can say it was the right choice.

Migration is a topical issue both on domestic political agendas and in the proceedings before international human rights mechanisms.

Before I address the migration-related challenges, let me highlight some data of IOM, UNHCR and the European Parliament.

At mid-2024, there were around 304 million of international migrants – double the number when compared to 1990.

Migrants account for about 3.7 % of the world's population these days.

If we look at Europe, in 1990 there were 51 million international migrants whose share in our continent's population amounted to 7 %.

At mid-2024 these numbers were 94 million and 12.6 % respectively.

When it comes to refugees and asylum-seekers, the trends are even more visible.

In 1990, there were about 1.4 million of refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe.

At the end of 2023, the same figure was 10.7 million.

Last year, the EU saw almost one million asylum applications.

The countries that saw the largest relative increases of first-time applicants were Poland (87.1%) and Ireland (39.4%).

EU countries granted protection status to more than 430,000 asylum seekers.

Europe does not function in a vacuum. Globally, the numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers reached 45 million in 2023.

These figures strikingly illustrate what we hear in daily news – that more and more people in various regions are forced to leave their homes as a result of conflicts, human rights violations, climate change or economic hardship.

Behind these numbers there are individual people's stories of war trauma, human trafficking, exploitation or unaccompanied children separated from their families.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The growing migration has diverse consequences for the countries of origin, destination and transit alike.

These consequences are very well visible in Poland. These days we are becoming a country of destination rather than of origin, as it had been for decades or even centuries.

In 2022 we opened wide its borders for the immense wave of Ukrainian war refugees. We quickly adopted legislation that granted them rights in many areas of life, such as access to labour market and social benefits, education and healthcare.

Today we continue to host about 1.5 million of Ukrainians.

At the same time, our dynamically developing economy and rising standard of living is attracting economic migrants. Their work contributes to our GDP as well as our pension schemes.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The advantages of legal and controlled migration are many.

At the same time, we must admit that migration is not a human right and must be subject to limitations. It is also the right of states to regulate who and on what condition can enter their territory.

We note the increasing level of fear and reluctance. These are easy vehicles for populists and extremists across Europe.

We must be honest in our debate on migration.

We must not shy away from talking about challenges.

Such challenges may stem from a too speedy and uncontrolled influx of migrants compared to limited absorption capacities of the host populations.

We also cannot ignore the fact that migration can be used instrumentally by terrorists, or hostile regimes to sow unrest and disrupt stability.

This is what Poland and other countries of the region have been facing at the borders with Belarus. Here the illegal migration has become an element of hostile hybrid activities by Belarus and Russia.

Both regimes are openly using migrants as a weapon. Not only do they exploit the difficult life situation and lack of awareness of people seeking better living conditions, but they also deliberately reach out to criminals and organised gangs.

By facilitating the illegal entry into the European Union, they undermine the security of all European citizens and polarize public debate.

Sponsors of instrumentalised migration resort also to using legal tools and instruments aimed at human rights protection, including those related to granting of international protection, for their own purposes.

In consequence, we see the increasing workload of the European Court of Human Rights that has to deal with not only the merits of migration and asylum cases but also with high numbers of applications for interim measures.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a former refugee in Great Britain, I am well aware of the perspective of an immigrant in the receiving country.

And this perspective is very important and is rightly taken into account by the European Court of Human Rights and other international human rights bodies.

Still, as Poland's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, I know that the perspective and interests of the receiving society and the host country should also be taken into account.

Otherwise, we risk alienation of the human rights protection from the expectations of our citizens.

We should not pretend that the challenges do not exist.

If European democracies and international human rights organisations fail to find balanced responses to the current challenges, the undemocratic groups will step in.

They will take over the leadership and impose solutions that may completely disregard human rights commitments.

And the consequences will be severe.

If we want to avoid such scenario, we need to reconcile the interests and needs of host populations, national security concerns and the safety of migrating people in need.

The key theme of our seminar is relevant indeed.

I wish you all fruitful discussions.

I do hope they will bring us closer to finding such a balanced solution.

Thank you.