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The impact of the global economic crisis on migration in Europe

Motion for a resolution
tabled by Ms Corien W.A. JONKER and other members of the Assembly

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This motion has not been discussed in the Assembly and commits only those who have signed it

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The global financial crisis and subsequent economic downturn affects migrants and receivers of remittances worldwide. As the economic recession unfolds, competition for jobs intensifies, which will impact migration flows. Although the extent, depth and impact of the crisis are still unknown, migrants and those relying on remittances are certainly among those who will be hit the hardest by the crisis.

At European level the situation is particularly precarious for a number of emerging economies in Central and Eastern Europe, which are already traditionally emigration countries, and where collapsing industries and limited welfare provisions are likely to push even more people to seek opportunities abroad. Increased trafficking in human beings from these countries is a real risk.

With unemployment rates everywhere on the increase, migrants along with ethnic minorities, the young, the elderly and the lower-educated people are often the first to be made redundant. Although migrant workers are known to be able to adjust more quickly than native-born workers to changing labour market conditions, they are highly over-represented in many of the most badly suffering sectors, such as service industries, construction, low value-added manufacturing, food processing, leisure and hospitality. The impact of the crisis on migrants will thus depend on how severely it affects the sectors in which migrants work, and how long it lasts.

There is a serious risk that the decreasing incomes in European countries may increase demand for cheaper goods and services and generate in particular shadow economic activities, which open more opportunities for irregular migrants. Migrants who lose their jobs but remain abroad will be in an increasingly precarious position, with fewer opportunities for legal employment and the possibility of greater stigmatisation – potentially resulting in abuse, discrimination and xenophobia..

The economic downturn is a blow to the amount of migrant remittances received by countries of origing of migrants. These remittances have been identified as a key source of external capital for developing countries in the past decade. The World Bank estimates that the remittances worldwide will decrease by up to 6% in 2009. This poses a serious threat to the fight against poverty and exacerbates hardship in communities dependent on such transfers.

At the same time, the decrease of remittances is not the only important factor that many developing countries will be hit by within the economic crisis. The decrease in the worldwide trade flows, foreign direct investments and a possible decrease of the official development aid will likewise affect these countries. Many low-income countries that are traditionally highly dependent on remittances have neither the policies to facilitate the reintegration of migrants, nor resources to improve education, transport systems or social security for returning migrants.

Anti-immigration lobbies exploit the current crisis to promote their agenda. This may fall on fertile ground as indigenous workers who suffer from the crisis might turn to blaming migrants for their misfortune. There are alarming reports of growing xenophobia and racism around Europe. In various Council of Europe member states social discontent has already manifested itself, mostly directed against governments but some also targeting migrant workers.

The Parliamentary Assembly is concerned by the recent policies adopted by some of its member states aiming at reducing migrants' admission for employment and encouraging unemployed migrants to return home. Such measures risk making the crisis worse, stripping economies of productive workers, increasing the numbers of undocumented and therefore unprotected migrants and creating new avenues for human trafficking in Europe. Past experience has proved that keeping markets open to migrants and migration is important to stimulating a quicker economic recovery. Returning migrant workers home may have potentially grave consequences for development, given the scale of remittances, the already high levels of unemployment in most developing countries and the likelihood of an outbreak of economic and social unrest in those countries.

In the light of the above, the undersigned urge the Assembly to call upon its member states, the European Union and the world community at large to address the multi-dimensional and interconnected elements of the crisis, and to take grater consideration of the impact of the crisis on migration and development in Europe. In particular, they are called upon to:

– keep open the channels of regular migration with a view to meeting any continuing demand for migrant workers, thus helping to prevent irregular migration and trafficking in human beings;

– work out functional, coherent and long-term migration management policies with a view to maximising the benefits of migration;

– provide guarantees that the rights of migrants are adequately and effectively protected in terms of their human rights, working and living conditions and in the event of loss of employment;

– promote measures to facilitate remittance flows through initiatives of tax deductibility of both remittances and money placed in special savings accounts to support development projects in a migrant's home country;

– offer adequate protection to migrants from any form of discrimination and xenophobia, considering their particular vulnerability to stigmatisation in such circumstances;

– raise awareness, in particular through public media, about the valuable economic and social contributions made by migrants;

– work with civil society groups, and notably with diaspora associations, with a view to challenging the stigmatisation of migrant workers;

– in cases where migrant return programmes are initiated by governments, ensure that migrants are treated with dignity and given proper assistance upon return; give prominent attention to working with the countries of origin towards transforming the potential of these returned migrants into "brain gain".

The undersigned also express their conviction that the role of parliamentarians in organisations like the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is to be forward-looking in seeking innovative solutions. They therefore propose to examine the issue of the impact of the global economic crisis on migration as a matter of priority for debate in the Assembly.

Signed (see overleaf)

Signed[1]*:*

JONKER Corien W.A., Netherlands, EPP/CD
ACKETOFT Tina, Sweden
ANDERSON Donald, United Kingdom, SOC
BILOZIR Oksana, Ukraine, EPP/CD
CILEVIČS Boriss, Latvia, SOC
CURTIS-THOMAS Claire, United Kingdom
ETHERINGTON Bill, United Kingdom
GEORGIOU Aristophanes, Cyprus
HAGBERG Michael, Sweden
HANCOCK Mike, United Kingdom, ALDE
IWIŃSKI Tadeusz, Poland, SOC
KALLIO Reijo, Finland, SOC
LAMBERT Geert, Belgium
MEMECAN Nursuna, Turkey, ALDE
POULSEN Jørgen, Denmark, ALDE
PUPOVAC Milorad, Croatia, SOC
REPS Mailis, Estonia, ALDE
STRIK Tineke, Netherlands, SOC

1. ALDE: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
EPP/CD: Group of the European People's Party
SOC: Socialist Group