

Arthur ERKEN, IOM Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia statement at the Council of Europe Coordination Group on Migration– 28 April 2025

Good morning colleagues,

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak at this important meeting and to contribute to the discussion on the Council of Europe's new Action Plan on Migration and Refugees for 2026–2029.

This Action Plan could not be more timely. The migration landscape in Europe and its neighbouring regions continues to evolve rapidly, and this new Action Plan on Migration and Refugees (2026–2029) presents an opportunity to deepen synergies and develop coordinated responses grounded in human rights, dignity, and the full potential of migration as a driver for sustainable development.

Migration dynamics in the Europe and Central Asia region today, as we observe them, reflect a range of factors. The vast majority of people on the move, move because work opportunities, and although the media may sometimes project otherwise, the majority move in a regular manner. And one is surprised that an important number move from, to, and within the ECA region -and not from without the region. The demographic shifts we are witnessing will likely see more people on the move, driven by the need for labour in the ECA region, and increasingly in the services sector.

In most advanced and many developing economies, the services sector has overtaken manufacturing as the primary contributor to

GDP and employment. This shift is part of a long-term economic transformation. In high-income countries, services such as finance, healthcare, education, IT, retail, hospitality, etc. typically account for as high as **70% of GDP**, while manufacturing has declined to **10–20%**.

Student mobility to and within Europe is also rising, driven by favourable policies, affordability, and the desire for global education experience. This trend is expected to continue as European universities expand English-taught programs and countries compete for international talent.

Moreover, one cannot deny the evidence that climate change and conflicts are also important drivers.

IOM data shows that while overall irregular migration to Europe declined by 29% in 2024, arrivals through certain routes, like the Western Atlantic Africa Route, have increased.

It is essential to remember: migration is overwhelmingly a story of resilience, contribution, and shared opportunity.

Building on the strong foundations laid by the previous Council of Europe Action Plan (2021–2025) — which promoted human rights safeguards, access to justice, and cross-sectoral cooperation — this new Plan represents an opportunity for continuity and innovation, while also reflecting the commitments of the 2023 Reykjavik Declaration, where Heads of State reaffirmed their collective responsibility to uphold human rights, strengthen democratic institutions, and intensify cooperation in managing migration and addressing human trafficking.

These shared priorities echo IOM's vision, as outlined in our Strategic Plan 2024–2028 and our central role in supporting the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, also in our capacity as Coordinator of the United Nations Network on Migration. We believe in a migration governance system that is inclusive, protective, and future-ready.

It is therefore a pleasure for me to underscore IOM's readiness to fully support the Council of Europe in delivering this new Action Plan — through our global presence, operational expertise, robust data systems, and strong partnerships across sectors and borders -in each of the 46 states represented at this Council.

[Pillar 1: Human Rights in border control and other procedures]

Migrant smuggling and transnational organized crime linked to irregular migration are complex challenges that require urgent coordinated action. Thwarting the business model of the smugglers and the traffickers helps to reduce irregular migration. In line with the EU Pact's priorities, and those of the GCM, IOM works to strengthen anti-smuggling efforts and to combat smuggling in countries of origin, transit and destination.

The absence of safe and regular migration pathways increases risk of human rights violations at borders – IOM emphasizes the importance of adhering to international standards and fulfilling migrants' rights and supports Member States in mainstreaming human rights into border management practices and establishing Independent Border Monitoring Mechanisms.

Effective prevention and response involve robust data collection, inter-agency collaboration, and proactive enforcement. IOM's Data Exchange Solution for Counter-smuggling supports states in preventing irregular migration and curbing organized crime through real-time, secure data exchange and enhanced cooperation.

IOM provides policy and technical support to enhance states' capacities in return management, including readmission cooperation and reintegration assistance. Digitalization of return procedures can reduce case bias and better protect human rights. For instance, IOM supports the Government of Türkiye with developing frameworks for digitalization of return and readmission processes.

Human rights abuses, conflicts, environmental disasters, and health crises drive vulnerable populations across borders. IOM's Humanitarian Border Management (HBM) model offers solutions to assist crisis-affected populations, while maintaining border security.

[Pillar 2: Access to justice and protection of rights]

IOM's overarching goal is to ensure and promote the protection, respect and fulfilment of the rights and well-being of migrants, regardless of their migration status.

We promote migration as a choice through interventions aimed at reducing the risk of violence, abuse, exploitation and other rights violations. To support this, IOM works with partners to develop migrant protection strategies, policies and guidance and advocates

for inclusive responses to assist migrants, returnees and their communities with a particular focus on those in a situations of vulnerability, including victims of trafficking, exploitation, abuse and violence, migrant children and migrants with health-related needs.

IOM promotes access to justice for migrants through a range of programs, policies, and partnerships that aim to protect migrants' rights and ensure they are treated fairly under the law. For example:

- IOM facilitates access to justice through legal aid, case management, and partnerships with local providers to assist vulnerable migrants — such as trafficking victims, asylum seekers, and undocumented individuals — in navigating complex legal processes, including regularization, asylum applications, or appealing deportation orders.
- We support capacity-building for legal systems by training judges, police, and legal professionals on migrants' rights, and by helping governments align laws and policies with international standards, including strengthening legal identity and civil registration systems.
- Ensuring justice also means raising awareness. IOM informs migrants of their rights through outreach, multilingual materials, and helplines, while also working to combat discrimination that can hinder access to justice.
- To support victims of trafficking and exploitation, IOM promotes safe reporting mechanisms that protect migrants from retaliation or deportation.

- We also advocate for rights-based alternatives to detention, particularly for children and families, and support legal mechanisms to resolve migration status without detention.

[Pillar 3: Social rights and socio-economic inclusion]

Upholding social rights is essential to long-term inclusion. IOM's work under our Strategic Objective 3 and GCM Objectives 15 (access to Basic Services) and 16 (Inclusion and Social Cohesion) focus on enabling access to healthcare, education, housing, and sustainable livelihoods.

IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) deploys Flow Monitoring Surveys along key migration routes across Europe, and beyond — both land and sea — to capture up-to-date information on the profiles, needs, and intentions of people moving along major routes. In 2024, 50% of migrants surveyed in Italy, Spain, and Malta identified employment as their primary need. Support with documentation and local language acquisition followed closely, cited by at least one in four respondents, respectively.

These findings confirm what we already know: integration begins with opportunity and dignity. IOM remains committed to helping states translate this knowledge into action through inclusive, well-informed, and accountable integration frameworks.

We also support host systems through culturally sensitive health training, trauma-informed care, and the expansion of mental health and psychosocial services—particularly for children and women affected by displacement. For example, IOM is developing tailored

mental health modules for first responders and practitioners in collaboration with governments across the region.

These efforts complement the Council of Europe's work to implement the European Social Charter and to support housing, welfare access, and health rights for migrants and refugees.

Through our partnerships with local authorities, we help build inclusive communities. This complements States' commitments on GCM Objective 7 (addressing and reducing vulnerabilities in migration) and Objective 17 (eliminate discrimination, racism and xenophobia, and promote a new narrative on migration), thereby also facilitating civic participation.

We're proud to collaborate on initiatives like the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Displaced Talent for Europe (DT4E), helping bridge access to education and employment.

IOM's approach to regular pathways is based on the principle that migration should be safe, orderly, and well-governed for all, including those in need of international protection. By addressing regulatory, procedural, and practical barriers to employment-based migration for displaced populations, IOM aims to create meaningful opportunities for work and economic integration while maintaining the integrity of migration systems.

Yet, despite the growing recognition of the role that labour migration can play in addressing displacement challenges, significant barriers remain.

We also advance comprehensive information and orientation programmes to prepare migrants and host communities for successful integration.

[Pillar 4: Social integration of migrants and refugees – with a focus on vulnerable groups]

IOM sees social integration, especially of vulnerable groups, as the cornerstone of successful migration.

Leveraging its robust data and research capacities, IOM focuses on generating evidence-based research aimed at identifying the specific needs of migrants and refugees, as well as the individual and group characteristics most commonly associated with heightened protection risks and vulnerability to exploitation, abuse, and violence, both *en route* and upon arrival in countries of destination.

The 2024 iteration of IOM's Flow Monitoring Surveys revealed that well over half of respondents reported experiencing at least one serious issue, including financial hardship, hunger, robbery, lack of shelter, health problems, difficulties with documentation, or attacks. Many also faced abuse or exploitation during their journey: nearly one in three reported having experienced physical violence, one in five reported unpaid labour, and more than one in ten had been held in captivity.

Among those surveyed, women were more likely than men to report needing medicines and health services. These health-related needs,

compounded by the effects of abuse and exploitation during displacement, highlight the critical importance of considering the psychological toll of such experiences. Notably, more than one in five respondents indicated they were fleeing conflict or war, and nearly one in three were fleeing personal or targeted violence, including sexual and gender-based violence — underlining the need for trauma-sensitive mental health support in addition to basic services.

Children, particularly those traveling along the Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes, were significantly more likely than adults to report having experienced violence or unpaid labour. This consistent trend across multiple survey cycles points to the unique and urgent protection, assistance, and integration needs of adolescents and young adults who often arrive unaccompanied. In this regard, IOM remains committed to generating up-to-date data on children on the move in Europe — including their profiles, needs, and risks — through close collaboration with UNHCR and UNICEF.

IOM also supports governments to strengthen guardianship systems for unaccompanied children, facilitate access to foster care, and develop local strategies to include marginalized groups like Roma and stateless persons. We work with partners to identify and implement sustainable solutions for vulnerable migrants or those who have been trafficked, exposed to rights violations, or have been otherwise victimized, supporting them in their short-and long-term recovery and in their path to social, economic, and psychological well-being. Our research and programming continue to highlight and respond to intersectional vulnerabilities.

The Reykjavik Declaration's call to support frontline states, protect victims of trafficking, and fight hate speech echoes these values and reinforces our shared agenda -to which our work is strongly aligned.

Colleagues,

The IOM Strategic Plan 2024–2028 underscores our commitment to harnessing the power of migration, drive solutions to displacement, to tackle irregular migration and build pathways for regular migration. This vision is fully in line with the values and goals of the Council of Europe's new Action Plan.

We welcome the opportunity to further institutionalize our collaboration, including through the **Network of Focal Points on Migration**, joint data initiatives, and policy harmonization.

In adopting the Global Compact for Migration, Member States expressed their collective commitment to improving cooperation on international migration; and at the same time recognize that migration is a source of prosperity, innovation and sustainable development in our globalized world, and that these positive impacts can be optimized by improving migration governance. Let us therefore continue building a migration system that is safe, orderly, dignified — and above all — humane.

Thank you.