37th Session of the Congress, Strasbourg, 29 October 2019

Speaking notes for co-rapporteur Oleksandr SIENKEVICH (Ukraine, ILDG)
835 words = 7 minutes

The role of local and regional governments in protecting internally displaced persons (IDPs)

Dear Colleagues,

My colleague Marianne HOLLINGER and I will share the task of presenting the report on the role of local and regional governments in protecting internally displaced persons, or IDPs as they are shortly called.

I will try to summarise the main ideas we put forward in this report as well as the draft resolution and Ms HOLLINGER will outline the main points of the draft recommendation.

I would like to take this occasion to thank the expert Ms Bina DESAI on the one hand, and Congress members, Youth Delegates, representatives of NGOs from Georgia and Ukraine and the UNHCR representative in Strasbourg on the other hand, for participating in our reflection group and for their valuable contributions to the report.

The number of IDPs exploded in recent years because of an increasing number of conflicts, wars and natural disasters.

- In Europe, some 4 million people have been displaced over decades.

- Being a Ukrainian citizen, I am particularly mindful of the situation concerning IDPs. Ukraine has received 1.7 million IDPs due to the situation that arose following the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and further occupation a part of the Ukrainian Donbass. This amounts to 42 percent of the total European IDPs.

- Georgia also suffers from a protracted internal displacement crisis, characterized by two major waves of displacement caused by violent clashes with the Russian Federation in 1991-1992 and 2008.

- Even though the number of IDPs is below the number of migrants and refugees who have sought to take refuge in Europe since the beginning of the refugee crisis in 2015, their plight is equally important, as they are as vulnerable as migrants and refugees.

In the Current Affairs Committee, we worked on refugee and migration issues for three years, looking at the reception and integration of refugees and migrants, of refugee children, and border regions facing migration.

Our colleagues in the Monitoring Committee prepared a report on the voting rights of IDPs at the local level and underlined that it is an element of successful long-term integration of migrants and IDPs in Europe's municipalities. Yu adopted this in October last year.

It was time to look at the situation of IDPs and to recognize the responsibility of public authorities in ensuring the rights and freedoms of IDPs whose situation resembles that of refugees and also differs in many ways.

To this end, in our Resolution, we defend the idea that local and regional authorities must:

- facilitate integration and participation of IDPs in public and political life,
- facilitate their entry into the labor market,
- find solutions to the housing challenge, and
- provide an equal access to basic services and infrastructure.

Colleagues, it is crucial not only to help current IDPs, but also future ones. No territory is immune from the risk of mass displacement. Apart from the painful reminders of Georgia, Ukraine and Syria, climate-related displacements are likely to proliferate, as seen in the disasters of the wildfires in Greece and the floods in France.

We cannot let an ever-increasing number of IDPs live in fear. Likewise, we cannot let local and regional authorities be overwhelmed by the arrival of large numbers of IDPs. They have the power and the responsibility to act but they also need some guidance to deal with the situation.

In view of protecting IDPs rights and improving their situation, our Resolution invites local and regional authorities of the member states of the Council of Europe and their national association to take a series of measures:

- We must provide IDPs with equal access to basic services and infrastructure as local residents.

We should recognize their right to return to their places of origin and to their homes or places of habitual residence, in safety and with dignity.

- We must acknowledge that IDPs are not a homogeneous group. They have varying needs according to who they are, where they come from. We as local authorities must adapt our approach depending on the target group. Here I must underline that women and vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied minors and the elderly need specific measures for help.

- We need to keep track of new displacements so that we know exactly how many IDPs live in a given area and so that we can adapt our policies to the new situation.

- We must cooperate with other levels of governance when we organise activities, projects, initiatives, from the planning phase to implementation and evaluation.

  We must remember that the private sector and private actors can be valuable when dealing with specific issues.

- And most importantly, we must raise awareness among the host populations regarding the plight of IDPs. All too often people do not realise how difficult the situation of IDPs are.

  We must emphasize the positive aspects of the situation. One way of doing this is drawing attention to the fact that the presence of IDPs can be an opportunity for host communities.

Colleagues, I look forward to the discussion and invite you to approve the present resolution.