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Report from the conference “Migration Crisis as a Challenge for Democracy”, 14 November 2017

The international conference entitled “Migration Crisis as a Challenge for Democracy” – organised by the Polish Association of European Studies (PTSE) – was held at the University of Warsaw on the 14 November 2017. It gathered scholars and practitioners from all over Europe and it consisted of two panels and two lectures delivered by keynote speakers.

The aim of the conference was to analyse the current status of the migration crisis in the EU. Leading scholars were invited to the discussion of a wide range of topics such as:

- the ethics of migration;
- the inclusive business models as mechanisms for increasing participation of migrants on the labour market;
- the migration crisis in Europe;
- the role of mass media in the current situation of migration in Europe.

It is important to underline the relevance of the discussion among scholars, experts, policy-makers on the rising number of non-European population recently migrating to the EU. One could conclude that the contributions to conferences, as well as its round tables debates, have greatly expanded the understanding of the migration problem and helped to find some new ways to the solution of migration crisis. Nowadays the migration crisis is a global challenge to the world security and its order. During the last three years the EU experienced an unprecedented influx of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants to its own territory. According to the official data from the European Commis-

sion, more than 1 million of people arrived in to the European Union, fleeing from war and terror in Syria and other countries. As the response to that the EU have undertaken many measures to tackle the migration crisis, including improving security at borders, preventing migrant smuggling and offering safe ways for people to legally enter the territory of the EU. The open question remains to what degree the EU has been successful in that. These general background has been addressed, during the opening speech, by Prof. Elżbieta Kuźelewska (Centre for Direct Democracy Studies, University of Białystok). That was followed by welcoming words by Sylwia Garbat, who represented the foundation “Forum of Public Dialogue”, in which she expressed her firm conviction that the conference “Migration Crisis as a Challenge for Democracy” would broaden the knowledge on key aspects regarding the current migration crisis.

The conference commenced with two keynote speeches. The first one was delivered by Dariusz Kloza, who represented both Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Peace Research Institute Oslo with the speech entitled “The Ethics of Migration”. Kloza raised the issue concerning the ways how immigrants become members of democratic societies and draw the participants’ attention to the link between social membership and political citizenship of immigrant population in their new place of residence. Actually, it is now one of the main open problems how temporary workers, undocumented persons, refugees, and other non-citizen immigrants become members of the new societies and on which basis they deserve their rights.

Nowadays, policy makers, public activists and politicians are making many attempts to find a proper way to overcome the migration crisis. In this context, the different mechanisms for increasing participation of migrants on the labour market are of vital importance. Indeed, the access to the labour market is one of the most debated spheres of socio-economic integration for migrating populations in the host countries. This problem was addressed by the second speaker; Dr Anna Masłoń-Oracz (Warsaw School of Economics) in her keynote speech entitled “Inclusive business models as a mechanism for increasing participation of migrants on the labour market”.

The first panel debate – with the title “Is there a Migration Crisis in Europe?” – was moderated by Prof. Elżbieta Kuźelewska, who represented Centre for Direct Democracy Studies at the University of Białystok (UwB-CDDS). Its main objective was to understand the current status of the migration crisis in Europe, its impact on the EU economy and its social life. Among the panelists were leading Polish European Studies scholars: Dr Bogusia Puchalska (Lancashire Law School),

Dr Magdalena Lesińska (University of Warsaw), Dr Filip Krepelka (Masaryk University), Dr Marta Pachocka (Warsaw School of Economics), Dr Agnieszka Piekutowska (University of Białystok). They presented various aspects of the migration crisis in EU and outlined their forecasts to the future of the EU migration policy.

There is no doubt that the EU is now facing the most acute migration crisis since the end of World War II. The conflict in Syria is the biggest driver of migration, besides Iraq and Afghanistan, Eritrea, as well as Kosovo. Germany was the leading country that opened its borders for refugees. The main tensions that took place in EU were caused by disproportionate burden that some of the EU countries faced, mainly that countries where the biggest part of migrants arrived: Italy, Greece and Hungary. The panellists discussed whether the lack of tolerance to migrants would lead to the bigger crisis, firstly in minds of society, later on the global scale. The second important theme of the panel was connected to the weakness of the leading international humanitarian organisations, which are unable to ensure human rights protection in time of the recent migrant crisis. And third theme was related to the absence of complex EU migration policy and the EU's limited ability to prevent the crisis and to mitigate its consequences. The formation of the common EU migration policy is mainly a problem at level of the national governments and it has resulted in the lack of consensus among European citizens.

Comprehensive analysis of the migration crisis also requires examining the role of mass media in dealing with this problem. Indeed, the second panel debate "What is the role of mass media towards the current situation of migration in Europe?", moderated by Dr Karolina Boiret (University of Warsaw), was dedicated to that problem. It is clear that the role of mass media is very decisive for perception of the migrants in the EU. In many European and non-European countries migrants were depicted by mass media in the negative frame, as a problem rather than a potential benefit to host societies. On the other hand, media could contribute to exerting more positive impact on public attitudes and policy towards thousands of the refugees and migrants in Europe, like it was done in Germany.

The speakers of the second panel of the conference addressed the impact of mass media on the host societies in the situation of increasing number of migrants. An engaging discussion between Polish, Hungarian, Slovak and Belgian researchers shed a new light on the current role of mass media regarding the migration crisis in Europe. The panellists mentioned the importance of spreading complete and accurate

information about the status of migrants in Europe, their needs and problems with obtaining rights and freedoms. They also pointed to the crucial part of mass media in representing refugees and migrants as threats to national security, for example in Italy, Spain, Poland, where they are presented as a cultural threat or a threat to community cohesion.

The panellists: István Hegedűs (Hungarian Europe Society, Dr Milan Kubiátko (University of Žilina), Dr Aleksandra Szczerba-Zawada (The Jacob of Paradies University), Michał Czerniawski (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) agreed that there are some differences in presenting the problem of migration crisis within national press systems in the EU countries. In some of them, the press reported on asylum and immigration mainly in the same way, whilst in the other countries it was reported differently. Countries with the most similar interpretation of migration crisis in Europe – were Italy, Spain and Sweden. There was a difference between British and German mass media reporting of migration crisis. It is important to mention that during second part of conference scholars raised the problem of the collective responsibility for solving the crisis. The discussion, which was moderated by Dr Karolina Boiret, focused on different solutions for migration crisis designed individually by each of the EU member-states, while – according to panellists – the migration crisis in Europe can be solved or at least suspended only collectively.

Amy Weatherburn (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) provided a closing remarks to the conference. In her speech, she mentioned that immigration has become an increasingly challenging political issue in many European countries. She underlined that there was a lack of coherent migration policy among the EU member states, which only exacerbated the crisis. According to her, the official EU migration plan, presented in September 2017 (two-year programme to bring at least 50 000 asylum seekers into Europe), is not enough measure in the complex situation of the migration crisis. Nowadays, it is also important to understand the necessity for the EU countries to cooperate together on managing migration flows. Another challenging problem, mentioned by Weatherburn, is a perception by host countries public towards migration. Today the public perception of migration is rather negative than positive. The negative perception is formed by the widespread public feelings of insecurity concerning immigration, mainly caused by the negative press coverage. Also some of the negative attitudes towards migration may be influenced by the fears concerning the sustainability of the welfare state.

In conclusion of the results of the conference, one may say that nowadays there is a necessity of in-depth analysis of the major contemporary crises and problems in the EU. In this context, the migration crisis in EU is the most pressing one. Thereby, the organisation of the conference “Migration Crisis as a Challenge for Democracy” was a good attempt to broaden views on the nature of the migration to the EU, its influence on the EU system of democratic standards and values. Together with many eminent scholars, many students and practitioners interested in the migration problems also attended the conference. This illustrates a growing interest in the problem of migration and pinpoints its importance amid other different global challenges.