Transit Migration in central and eastern Europe

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Mr IWISKI (Poland).- At the beginning of the 1990s, following democratic changes, migration into central and eastern Europe has changed significantly. Thanks to many factors, the countries concerned have experienced large-scale movements of people from outside the region. Those movements fall into two distinct categories. The first includes migrants who intend to stay in those territories, whether in the short or long term. The second includes migrants heading for western states. That makes the countries of the area under discussion transit states.

My report concentrates on the latter category. Two years ago, my committee organised a seminar on the issue in Russia. West-bound transit migration is a common problem for all the countries of the region, but some are more concerned than others, particularly the Czech Republic and Poland, as they border Germany, which is the most important country for transit migration. On a smaller scale, a similar function is performed by countries bordering Austria. Another route leads to Italy, including sea routes from Albania and Greece. Particularly important are the countries of the Commonwealth Independent States because considerable stretches of their borders are poorly marked or unguarded.

There are only hazy estimates of the numbers of transmit migrants, which are derived from several sources, including the numbers of expulsions from surrounding countries, the number of illegal border crossings prevented, figures for deportations and the balance of entries and exits. According to estimates, some 150,000 to 250,000 migrants from Asia and Africa stay in the territories of the countries of central and eastern Europe at any given time, awaiting trafficking to the west. It is often thought that border apprehensions may be only 20% to 30% of actual illegal crossings. The number of clandestine migrants staying in the territories of countries such as Russia, Ukraine and Belarus is considerably higher. An estimated 30,000 to 50,000 migrants are trafficked from Poland to Germany, and reports from the Czech Republic yield a similar estimate. All those numbers are on the rise. The two major characteristics of transit migration are its illicit nature and the high level of criminal organisation.

It is impossible to assess how many migrants are trafficked, but there is evidence that they constitute a substantial proportion of irregular migration. The number of intercepted illegal migrants increases every year.

Transit migrants are not a homogeneous group by reference to country of origin, educational background, age, sex, religion or nationality. Generally, they fall into three principal categories: those fleeing armed conflicts, ethnic minorities escaping discrimination and economic migrants. The last group is probably the largest.
The ethnic composition of trafficked migrants is very varied, but migrants originating from the Indian sub-continent prevail. In addition, among the migrants are to be found people with Algerian, Chinese, Iraqi, Iranian, Somali and Vietnamese passports.

Until the late 1980s, the model of migration control in central and eastern European countries was based on tight restrictions. Nowadays, migration laws conform to established international standards. However, as freedom of movement in the wider Europe increases with the abolition of frontiers and the relaxation of border controls, there is pressure on the region's governments from their western neighbours to make their refugee and immigration policies more restrictive.

On the other hand, there are obviously concerns among central and eastern European countries that the EU harmonisation process in the field of migration and the measures that that implies will result in the shifting of the burden to their territories. In particular, readmission agreements could play an important role.

Since 1991, in response to the sharp increase in the volume of immigrant flows, measures have been taken by the Czech and Slovak Republics, Poland and Hungary to tighten controls on their eastern borders.