

“Munich Appeal”

Shaping labour migration fairly – in Germany and for the people and countries in Eastern Europe

On 31 August and 1 September, around 200 people from Germany and Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe came together for the 26th Renovabis International Congress, which was held in Munich and online under the title “Departing for a better life? The Challenge of Fair Labour Migration”. They addressed the opportunities that labour migration from Eastern Europe opens up, but also took a look at the downsides. It once again became clear that the fair organisation of labour migration is a task for society as a whole that takes into account the implications for the countries of origin and destination and requires international cooperation.

At the end of the congress, Renovabis made the following demands in a “Munich Appeal”:

1) No moral condemnation

Migration is a normality in human history. There are many reasons for it: fleeing war and existential hardship and danger, as well as seeking a better life, better social and financial opportunities, more education, participation and democracy. Labour migration can offer many opportunities – for the migrants themselves as well as for the countries of origin and destination. Last but not least, direct encounters between people of different origins can foster dialogue and mutual understanding between people, so that Europe grows together a little.

Our appeal to all of us: Let us not morally condemn people who seek work in another country.

2) Stronger social dimension of the EU

We reaffirm that the free movement of persons is a fundamental European principle. In Germany, more than 1.7 million people from eastern EU countries are currently officially in regular employment. They fill many gaps in the labour market and often work in sectors where locals do not want to work. Employing these people shows the fruits of EU freedoms, but at the same time

also the fundamental problem. Due to existing economic and social disparities, especially between western and Eastern Europe, migrant workers are often paid less and are also frequently exploited. In addition, there are a high number of undeclared workers in non-regular and exploitative employment relationships as well as a large number of workers who work in Germany according to the European Posting of Workers Directive.

Our appeal to the governments of the EU Member States: More political effort must be made to effectively combat poverty, unemployment and also corruption in the countries of origin, to overcome the economic gap between West and East and to create approximately equal living conditions in Europe. The EU needs a stronger social dimension. The principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which were proclaimed in 2017 for creating fair working conditions, equal opportunities and adequate social protection, provide a suitable framework for further development in this regard.

3) Fair compensation for countries of origin

Recruiting skilled workers from abroad has so far always meant that the countries of origin bear the training costs and that these workers are then lacking there. The countries lose important potential for their economies and international competitiveness, and some regions are threatened with marginalisation.

Our appeal to the German government: The recruitment and employment of workers from neighbouring countries to the east must be balanced out by providing financial and social compensation for the countries of origin.

4) Statutory regulation instead of a “grey care market”

Many people in need of care in Germany can only continue to live in their own homes if they make use of so-called “24-hour care” (live-in care), which is mostly provided by people from Central and Eastern Europe. This service takes place in a legally grey area and is more or less tolerated by politicians and the general public.

Our appeal to the German public and the German federal government: We have to admit: without this form of labour exploitation, hardly anyone could afford home care around the clock. People in need of care and those who care for them must be afforded equal appreciation. The “grey care market” is unsatisfactory and demands legal regulation in the long run. The rising costs for this must not be borne unilaterally by those in need of care. A social culture of care is needed, as well as better financial resources for the care sector.

5) Equal pay and consistent criminal prosecution of illegal practices

In particular, exploitative working conditions exist in agriculture, the food industry, construction, trade and the logistics sector. Many workers from Eastern Europe are employed in Germany in the low-wage sector – often below their educational level – and are disadvantaged in terms of earnings compared with local workers. Regularly employed and adequately paid workers from Central and Eastern Europe even help to strengthen our social system.

Our appeal to employers and politicians in Germany: The principle of “same pay for the same work in the same place” must always apply, and this principle must also be effectively enforced. This requires more controls by German authorities in order to enforce labour laws in particular in difficult sectors. Mafia-like structures in the labour market must be consistently prosecuted under criminal law.

6) Recognition and appreciation

In Germany, key public supply and economic sectors would have collapsed by now if we did not have workers from central, eastern and South Eastern Europe.

Our appeal to all of us: Let us therefore give these people, who are important but often unrecognised contributors to our society, more recognition and appreciation in our everyday lives and in personal encounters.

7) Expand counselling and strengthen self-organisation

People who have recently migrated usually find themselves in a country that is still foreign to them, often with a foreign language and foreign labour laws. This means that they are often unaware of their rights and find it particularly difficult to claim these rights. Counselling and information are needed.

Our appeal to politicians, society and the church: The existing counselling and information services for migrant workers should be further expanded and low-threshold access provided. The self-organisation of migrants, but also native-speaker communities, which in addition to their pastoral care also provide an important social counselling and networking function for the individual migrant groups, must be further strengthened and supported.

Renovabis, the German Catholics’ solidarity campaign with the people of Central and Eastern Europe, has been addressing the issue of “fair labour migration in Europe” since it was founded as an action of solidarity with the people in Central and Eastern Europe. By supporting projects in Eastern Europe, we work to improve the prospects of people living there so that they do not have to leave their homeland and families out of necessity. At the same time, we see how much

regions of origin suffer from migration. We try to mitigate these adverse consequences of labour migration through funding projects.

In our educational and public relations work, we raise awareness – including in collaboration with other church and social actors – about the positive and negative consequences of migration, and are committed to combating human trafficking and labour exploitation. The Pentecost campaign in 2023 will be conducted under the motto: “They are missing. Always. Somewhere. Labour migration from Eastern Europe”. We are also interested in contacting and collaborating with native-speaker communities who care for immigrants from Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe.

In addition to sharing ideas with dialogue and project partners, current guidance for Renovabis’ commitment is provided by the joint statement entitled “Shaping migration in a humane way”, which was published in 2021 by the German Bishops’ Conference and the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany in cooperation with the Association of Christian Churches in Germany.

Munich, 1 September 2022