

## **CCME Nordic/Baltic meeting challenges the church to be more prophetic amid worrying migration trends in the region**

Tightening and narrowing on migration policies, cutting down resettlement quotas for refugees and asylum seekers applicants, increasing hate speech and crimes, and a rising number of right-wing governments are some of the many complex issues that country representatives reported, during the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) Nordic/Baltic meeting on 7-8 September 2023 in Reykjavik, Iceland.

Although not immediate on the borders of the ongoing Ukraine-Russia conflict, these Nordic/Baltic countries still receive and have seen a significant surge in numbers of refugees and asylum seekers from Ukraine, Russia, and MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries. However, governments of the Nordic/Baltic countries are resisting to accommodate these ongoing and new refugee arrivals in the region by creating stricter and narrower policies. At the same time these governments' inaction against the growing cases of racism, Islamophobia, and hate and violence targeting LGBTQIA+ communities lead to further alarming future in the region.

In Finland, according to Ulla Siirto's sharing, "the government's published program concerning immigration policy is very tight...especially on humanitarian immigration...the quota (number) for resettlement of refugees will be decreased significantly, for example from 1,050 down to 500. Other deteriorations of rights of asylum seekers, humanitarian refugees, and even work-based immigration include shortening resident permits, extending living years in Finland before getting the right to apply for citizenship or taking away the right for undocumented people to get necessary health care..."

Sweden's churches share the same challenge as its government is prepared to release an order to the Swedish migration office to prioritize the revocation of permanent residences for some applicants. At the same time the government has placed stricter policy and more limited public access to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Hate speech and hate crimes against Muslims are also becoming prevalent. "The church (Church of Sweden) finds it challenging to be in dialogue with the government on its current and frequently changing migration policies. This will impact the church's diaconal work," said Anna Karlgren, senior policy advisor for migration.

On the other hand, Lemma Desta, advisor on migration and multicultural ministries of the Christian Council of Norway said that there needs to be more inclusion and diversity in responding to the so-called "migration", including the churches' stand against hate, discrimination, and exclusion. He asked, "The Ukrainian refugees are welcome, but what about the others?"

CCME General Secretary Torsten Moritz said, "Our meeting showed worrying common trends about the shrinking space and endangered rights of refugees and migrants across the region. I hope that our meeting could provide a contribution to churches addressing this dangerous development."

Witnessing the ongoing increase of arrivals of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in their region, churches like in Denmark, Iceland, and Estonia are exploring new ways of becoming the church in a diverse society, hoping to accommodate and engage people from different cultures, faith traditions, and languages in the life of the church and society.

Toshiki Toma, priest to the migrant ministries of the National Church of Iceland which was hosting the meeting, shared that the church must go where the people are and "stop thinking about inviting people to the church building, instead we should go and get to know people first."

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