

CCME Webinar on EP Elections Reaffirms Commitment to 'Protection of People More Than Borders'

By Joy Eva Bohol

PARTICIPANTS from across Europe, including members of the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) and its partners, joined a webinar on asylum and migration on May 21, in the context of the upcoming European Parliament (EP) elections.

From June 6-9, European citizens in the EU's 27 member states will elect 720 members of the European Parliament (MEPs) for the 2024-2029 term. This event is one of the largest democratic exercises globally. Many churches and Christian organizations have been and will be engaging with MEPs on critical issues.

The webinar aimed to outline the importance of the European Parliament in its next term, particularly concerning asylum and migration issues—a central concern for churches and Christian organizations. The next EP will continue to play a crucial role in these areas.

“There is so much at stake in this upcoming EP election... One of the biggest concerns is the Migration and Asylum Pact, the number one issue of the past term of the parliament... There are several areas that CCME and its membership find difficult, particularly regarding the conditions of people kept at the border for screening and possibly border return procedures... The same concern applies to detention and detention-like treatments, which may be connected to the question of legal remedies and the fate of families...” CCME General Secretary Dr. Torsten Moritz said.

Moritz added that the widespread concept of safe third countries and externalization raises questions about whether this represents “true European solidarity with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, and solidarity with other regions.”

Two MEPs standing for re-election, Lena Düpont of the German CDU/European People's Party and Tineke Strik of the Dutch GroenLinks/Greens, shared their perspectives on the Migration and Asylum Pact and its future implementation. Both have played central roles as members of the LIBE Committee, working on European asylum and migration legislation.

“Regarding the Migration and Asylum Pact, there are many things at stake that we need to closely monitor and correct, if necessary,” MEP Tineke Strik said.

Strik elaborated on several areas of the pact, including the feasibility and accessibility of health practitioners and legal aid at reception centers and during border and screening procedures, criteria for screening (including identifying vulnerabilities), NGOs' time and access to people detained at reception areas, significant changes in Schengen border codes, proposals to criminalize assistance to irregular entry and stay (which may put humanitarian assistance at risk), and rules on returns, including preventing pushbacks and funding border management where pushbacks occur. She also mentioned the increased interest among member states (19 out of 27) in externalizing asylum processing through safe third country legislation.

“With the proposal on criminalization coming at the end of 2024, now is the time to create alliances with churches, NGOs, and municipalities to develop strategies and secure the right majority to ensure that migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are not placed in broad and vulnerable situations...” Strik added.

Meanwhile, Lena Düpont shared her views on the Pact, framing it under three guiding principles: (1) migration and asylum policies bounce at all political levels in Europe, from the EU to the local level, particularly concerning integration and capacity; (2) EU actions should be carried out within an EU perspective and context, emphasizing that the Pact “represents the first real common migration and asylum policy within the EU,” achieved after nearly eight years of effort; (3) following EU and international laws, the EU must be humane with those in need of international protection but firm with those who are not.

Düpont further discussed differentiating legal migration and the valid reasons for providing international protection. She noted that her party did not support all details of the Pact but ensured there is a balance between humanity, solidarity, and responsibility. She highlighted the broader context of the Pact, including the instrumentalization discussion related to the safe third country concept.

Both Strik and Düpont affirmed the creation of a monitoring group for the next term to oversee the implementation of the Migration and Asylum Pact, emphasizing a stronger role for the European Parliament alongside the European Commission.

The speakers agreed that more dialogue and exchange on the Pact’s details with multiple stakeholders are crucial, moving forward.

The webinar aimed to mobilize churches, Christian communities across Europe, and the broader public, emphasizing the importance of participating in the upcoming European Parliament elections to address central concerns of churches and Christian organizations in asylum and migration.

“For us at CCME, we will revisit the question of activism and responsibility, engaging in responsible activism with and towards the European Parliament... For CCME, the question of safe passages will remain extremely important... I hope that we can work towards a system that protects people more than borders and take it up in a very constructive way. To be constructive, the European Parliament needs to be strong. I appeal to everyone to get out and vote. Vote for someone who is constructively engaging in the European Union,” Dr. Moritz concluded.