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Grußwort zur Eröffnung der 1st European Conference „Minority Ethnic and Migrant Elders accross Europe – from Challenges to Opportunities“, October 1, 2008, World CC Bonn

Checked against delivery

Minister Laschet,
Secretary-General Stahl,
Director-General Vignon,
Mr. Mann,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased that the Administration of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia has decided to hold this conference, which is of particular importance for Germany and for Europe alike, here in the city of Bonn.

My special thanks go to Minister Laschet and his Ministry for Intergenerational Affairs, Family, Women and Integration of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, which has been preparing this conference over the past months.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the European Commission – Director-General Vignon is with us today; as well as to the representatives of the Committee of the Regions – we welcome Secretary-General Stahl – and to the representatives of the European Parliament – a special welcome also to the Member of the European Parliament, Mr. Mann.

It is a pleasure for us here in Bonn to act as host city to this conference.

The conference takes up a topic whose importance is increasing at a rapid pace, however, whose challenges and opportunities have not yet fully been recognized by many municipalities throughout Germany and Europe.

Statistics leave no doubt: The number of people with a migration background living in Germany and Europe is growing fast.

This holds true for Bonn as well: People of 173 nationalities live here – one out of five Bonn residents has a migration background – one out of 7 citizens in our city does not have a German passport.

The number of migrant elders is rising at a particularly fast pace.

In Bonn, the number of migrant elders ages 60 and above has increased more than twofold since 1991 and is growing considerably faster than the number of German elders – even though many migrant elders decide to return to their home countries, once they retire.

A number of questions arise from this development:

- How will we succeed in integrating migrant elders in professional life and in our society?
- How can we make it easier for them to learn the German language?
- How can we improve their access to public offers and services (such as in the fields of health, living, language, culture and leisure activities)?
- What are the opportunities arising from these improvements for a multicultural society in our municipalities?

Over the past months the guidelines for an integration plan have been developed by our local Administration, in close cooperation with migrant organizations, social associations, churches, religious communities and many others. This integration plan is in line with the integration plan as laid out by the State of North Rhine-Westphalia and with EU policy alike.

We now must focus on putting this plan into practice – piece by piece, and in close dialogue with all groups involved. Only recently did I create the position of an “Integration Commissioner“, following the good example set by other municipalities.

Moreover, already long before that, did we create a special Department of Multicultural Affairs offering special events, assistance and services to migrants in Bonn.

We know that we are only just beginning to deal with the question of integrating migrant elders. Public awareness-raising and powers of persuasion will be needed – both, for the German and for the migrant community alike.

The first projects have been put underway – here are some examples of what we have done in Bonn:

- We are offering extended advisory services for geriatric care in close cooperation with charity and social institutions
- We have introduced special offers in senior citizen community centers (such as intercultural weeks, lectures)
- Joint projects of migrant organizations and geriatric institutions have been put into practice
- Special lectures addressed to Turkish and Moroccan elders have been held as part of a series titled “Growing old in Germany”

The key factor for all projects is to convince both sides to trust each other.

This implies, for example, that, on one hand, the personnel in senior citizen community centers must be trained accordingly, on the other hand, that migrant elders must be persuaded to make use of these offers.

I am convinced that especially our German municipalities can profit from the experiences gained in other countries (The Netherlands, France, Great Britain and others).

The AAMEE-Project of the State Government and today's conference constitute excellent opportunities for promoting this exchange with municipalities across Europe.

The City of Bonn – dear Minister Laschet – will be very pleased and grateful to participate in this exchange of expertise and experience in the future as well.

Let me close by thanking the organizers of this important conference once again and by wishing you fruitful discussions over the next two days.