**International Conference on “Legal discourses on international and EU migration/refugee law in Central and Eastern Europe: emerging new narratives or business as usual?”  organized by the European Society of International Law (ESIL)-supported event by the Faculty of Law of Charles University (Czechia) and the Corvinus University of Budapest (Hungary) with the support of the Institute for Legal Studies– Hungary, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Odysseus Academic Network Faculty of Law, Charles University, Prague 9-10 May 2024**

**Opening Statement**

**Ajmal Khybari**

**Head of UNHCR Office, Czechia**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honor to participate today at this prestigious institution which will deliberate on a critical issue “Legal discourses on international and EU migration/refugee law in Central and Eastern Europe: emerging new narratives or business as usual?”As we gather here in the halls of Charles University, we are reminded of the profound importance of cultivating the virtues of upholding justice, compassion, and human rights in our global community. We are also meeting in beautiful Prague, in Czechia which has demonstrated exemplary solidarity, generosity and protection to Ukrainian refugees. Czechia is the 3rd largest recipient of Ukrainian refugees on its territory.

The year 2024 marks the 20th anniversary of the beginning of the EU enlargement. This anniversary presents a good occasion for scholars and practitioners to reflect on ways we collectively engage with EU and international refugee law and migration organisations, take stock of the achievements, good practices, challenges, and lessons learned and deliberate on the way forward.

The migration and asylum situation in Central Europe is multifaceted, influenced by geopolitical, economic, and social factors, as well as the policies and responses of both national governments and international organizations like the EU. Balancing humanitarian considerations with national interests and security concerns remains a complex and ongoing challenge for the region.

Addressing refugee protection challenges and migration in Central Europe requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that prioritizes respect for human rights, international cooperation, and solidarity. Working together with all stakeholders in Central European countries can help better manage asylum flows and migration in a manner that upholds the dignity and rights of all individuals seeking protection from persecution.

The world is witnessing unprecedented levels of displacement, with millions of individuals forced to flee their homes due to conflict, persecution, violence, and climate change. Today 1 in every 75 persons is an individual who is forcefully displaced. In other words, today we have 110 million forcibly displaced people worldwide which include 36.4 million refugees. 62.5 million internally displaced and 6.1 million asylum seekers. We should also not forget that there are 4.4 million people worldwide who are stateless. It is noteworthy that 75% of refugees are hosted in low and middle-income countries and 20% in least-developed countries. In the face of such immense human suffering, the principles of refugee law and humane policies in managing migration stand as a beacon of hope, offering protection and support to those in need of protection. Universal Declaration of Human Rights has underlined that “Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected." Asylum seekers, refugees and migrants are not merely statistics or political pawns; they should be seen as human beings with inherent rights and aspirations. Respecting refugees is not only a matter of humanity; it's a reflection of our commitment to justice, compassion, and the principles of equality for all.

Despite the progress made since the adoption of the 1951 Refugee Convention, significant challenges remain. From inadequate funding for humanitarian assistance to the rise of xenophobia and intolerance, we are confronted with formidable obstacles in our pursuit of protection, justice and humanitarian solidarity. However, in the face of adversity, we must not lose sight of the opportunities before us. By fostering greater cooperation among nations, investing in sustainable solutions, amplifying the voices of refugees and managing migration, we can build a more inclusive and compassionate world. As scholars, practitioners, activists, and global citizens, we have a collective responsibility to stand in solidarity with an individual who has been forcefully displaced. Whether through legal advocacy, humanitarian aid, or grassroots activism, each of us has the power to make a difference in the lives of those forced to flee their homes.

Migration of the root causes by supporting development, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding efforts in countries of origin and transit has become imperative. [UNHCR](http://www.unhcr.org/) High Commissioner, Filippo Grandi recently said that “Forced displacement and mixed movements are complex challenges for all: countries of origin, countries of transit and countries of destination,”. UNHCR is advocating for protection-sensitive entry and admission, strengthening asylum systems for refugees and rights-focused migration management, addressing immediate protection and assistance needs and comprehensively addressing trafficking and smuggling. This is not just UNHCR’s framework, but IOM’s and that of other agencies. UNHCR is advocating for protection and rights-centred options in countries, as well as for safe, legal, and complementary pathways for durable solutions. UNHCR is working with other partners on enablers for meeting these objectives by engaging in data collection and analysis, research, and route mapping. We are promoting partnerships and collaboration, engaged in advocacy for protection and rights. UNHCR is leveraging its convening power to engage policymakers and influencers and strengthen its engagement with communities and people on the move. Further, UNHCR is involved in resource mobilization and capacity-building for governments and NGOs mainly on asylum procedures and inclusive policies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The role of academia in the protection of refugees and migrants is multifaceted and crucial in several ways. Academia plays a pivotal role in conducting research and analysis on issues related to refugees and migrants which helps to deepen our understanding of the root causes of displacement, the challenges and the effectiveness of policies and interventions aimed at protecting their rights. Academics contribute to the development of evidence-based policies and strategies as they provide valuable insights and recommendations to policymakers, helping to shape laws, and regulations, that uphold the rights and dignity of displaced populations.

Universities and academic institutions play a crucial role in educating students, professionals, and the broader public about refugee and migrant issues. By offering courses, workshops, and seminars on topics such as forced migration, refugee law, and human rights, academia helps to raise awareness and foster empathy and understanding for refugees and migrants. Academia contributes to capacity-building efforts aimed at strengthening the capabilities of governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other stakeholders involved in refugee and migrant protection. Through training programs, technical assistance, and knowledge-sharing initiatives, academia helps to enhance the skills and expertise needed to effectively address the needs of displaced populations. I wish to commend the organizers of the conference and the host, Faculty of Law, and Center for Migration and Refugee Law Charles University and other sponsors of this event for this excellent initiative.

In February 2022, the world witnessed, and Europe witnessed the humanitarian spirit and solidarity shown towards refugees from Ukraine displaced due to Russian military aggression and invasion. The humanitarian response to the Ukrainian refugees until today manifests Europe’s capacity, steadfastness and show of solidarity to protect forcibly displaced people. This is an excellent opportunity to build on this and make it a new precedence to protect refugees no matter what their place of origin and background is and to protect their basic human right to safety, dignity, and the opportunity to rebuild their lives in peace. Let us remember the words of President Václav Havel "The fight for human rights is never-ending. It requires constant vigilance and commitment." In his wisdom he also said the ‘Without a respect for human rights, where is the basis for human dignity?"

In the end, I wish to say that human mobility is a reality and a global phenomenon and it’s increasing. Addressing challenges related to the management of asylum and migration requires a comprehensive approach that balances security concerns with respect for human rights and international obligations.

As academia, practitioners and activists let us reaffirm our commitment to refugee law and uphold the principles of justice, compassion, and human dignity for generations to come. After deliberating on the important topic of this conference and as we depart, let us reiterate that we carry forth the spirit of compassion and solidarity, and work tirelessly to build a world where all individuals can live free from fear and persecution.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you.