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Article

Creaking Labour Markets: Migrating into Unemployment?

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ANDRÉ LEYSEN,
Honorary Chairman of the Board of Directors,
Agfa-Gevaert NV and Gevaert NV, Mortsel

Ladies and gentlemen,

For someone born in Flanders in the late nineteenth-century, someone who vividly remembers the Second World War, the peaceful unification of Europe is the fulfilment of a dream. One feels that one's family has escaped from the curse of living in a region that has been border territory since the Treaty of Verdun in 843. How right Arnold Toynbee was when he wrote: „Flanders was the battlefield of Europe for over 250 years, before Europe itself became the battlefield of the world“. The peaceful unification of Europe is my generation's mission. It is the reason I am here. And if it poses any problems they must be dealt with, however difficult they may be. It is an extraordinary feeling to have seen the last attempt to unify Europe by force give way to a Europe unified in peace.

Having been a member of the Chairman's Committee of the *Treuhandanstalt* for four years, where we were confronted with similar problems when the country was unified, I have acquired some experience in these matters. However, I think that the German case was much more difficult, as there was suddenly no frontier left between the two hermetically closed parts of the German state. As there was no language barrier either, it was feared that the whole of eastern Germany would go west for work, which would have been a disaster. Fortunately, west Germany was strong and rich enough to finance all kinds of schemes to induce the people to stay where their „*Heimat*“ was. This aim has been more or less achieved, but it was much more costly than foreseen. The bill for reunification stands in direct relation to the time available for solving the problems.

In the case of Germany there was no time really, but this is not so with enlargement. As far as Europe is concerned

- there are still national frontiers,
- there are language barriers,

- and transitional measures have been agreed between the different countries, which should make it possible to control the flow of migrants.

Public opinion tends to underestimate or completely neglect the advantages that migration can bring – both for the migrants and for us.

Western European countries are rapidly becoming labour-scarce economies. They are confronted with the problems associated with aging populations, a diminishing labour force and, ultimately, population decline. Without an annual influx of at least 230,000 people per annum, Germany's population of 83 million will shrink to 51 million in 2050 and 24 million in 2100, according to the Berlin Institute for World Population and Global Development. And despite an unemployment rate of more than ten percent, many jobs are presently unfilled because of a shortage of skilled workers.

The first conclusion one might draw is that what may cause a problem in a transitory period, may become an opportunity in the future. I am convinced of this, although many Europeans, with their inborn pessimism, see it as an insurmountable problem.

We need to organise the influx in such a way that it does not cause undue disruption to existing structures but nevertheless leads to reform. The authorities of the European Union have to act like sluice-keepers who are confronted with greatly varying water levels. They have to open the sluice gates in such a way that they don't create a destructive flood, but allow enough water in to drench a thirsty countryside.

I know there are many arguments that can be presented against this, but we have no choice. This is an historical moment.

Thank you.

