Today’s event on the Labour Integration of Migrants rightfully calls for a Multi-Stakeholder Approach, and it gives me great pleasure to be part of this group, Bulgarians and migrants, representatives of Government institutions, social partners, trade unions, employers’ associations, private sector. I would particularly like to thank the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria, and its President, Mr. Plamen Dimitrov, for providing the opportunity to share some observations and recommendations related to the employment of refugees in Bulgaria.

As we speak, the 73rd session of the UNGA is taking place in New York. On the agenda is the UN Global Compact on Refugees, and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. UNHCR was asked to prepare this Compact in consultation with all member states, its need very much triggered by the Syrian refugee crisis. It aims to provide a new way of addressing large scale crises. More inclusive, more comprehensive and joining both humanitarian and development responses.

A core component of the Compact is precisely a multi-stakeholder and partnership approach, which in addition to the primary responsibility of states, outlines the involvement and cooperation of local authorities, faith-based organizations, civil society actors, academics, and the private sector.

A job provides not only an income, it provides security, stability, independence, dignity. This is not any different for refugees. For refugees a job is also the main component for integration. It offers the restoration of a sense of normalcy, economic self-sufficiency, and the ability to contribute positively to a new and often challenging environment.

When we adopt a whole-of-society approach to supporting refugees, employment plays a central role. In the past two years UNHCR together with the OECD has conducted dialogues with employers and employer associations in order to better understand the challenges employers face in hiring asylum seekers and refugees and to design appropriate policy responses. A 10 step Action Plan was developed. It stresses the importance of a clear legal framework guaranteeing access to the labour market for both asylum-seekers and refugees. And of course employers and refugees should have full understanding of this legal framework, and there should be an active exchange on the professional profiles of job-seekers.

In Bulgaria, asylum-seekers are allowed to access the labour market 3 months upon their registration. Refugees have the same employment rights as Bulgarians. Moreover, the SAR, the Employment Agency, NGOs and UNHCR are investing a lot in establishing an effective mechanism to match the available talents with the labour market needs.

Last year UNHCR Bulgaria commissioned a study on the engagement of the private sector in refugee integration. It looked at the refugee profiles and identified some good practices of companies hiring refugees. It revealed that some of the most desired occupations for asylum seekers and refugees are in the sectors of construction, food preparation, transport, textile industry, factory work and sales. Most asylum seekers and refugees look for work in the area of their expertise. But job seekers were also realistic about employment chances and were willing to accept work that is on offer in the Bulgaria market such as factory work, translation services NGOs and call centres with projects in the Middle East.

To build on this knowledge we commissioned a follow-up study on the needs of the Bulgarian labour market by economic sector and region. This would allow us to facilitate job-seeking refugees and asylum-seekers to respond to this demand. This second study is still ongoing, but there some interesting preliminary results. The employment rate is currently the highest in the past 10 years, 72,6% for the second quarter of 2018. People with low education find it increasingly difficult to find work. Emerging industries and services require medium-level technical positions which are in high demand as professional schooling has not adequately adjusted to the new labour market needs. As a result, private businesses are taking matters in their own hands establishing hubs on a local level, many of them also offering re- and up-skilling vocational training centres. Such hubs exist in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Gabrovo-Sevlievo, and Stara Zagora-Kazanlak-Radnevo. The leading economic sectors in terms of employment opportunities in the period 2015-8 are sales, education, construction, transport and logistics, textile industries, administrative services, horeca, health care, and food and beverage production. What is encouraging is that there is a significant overlap between the talent pool among refugees and the labour market needs in Bulgaria.

Refugees in Bulgaria, and globally, offer a mixture of both high- and low-skilled labour force, but often face additional hurdles making it difficult to fully exploit their qualifications. Especially at first, the lack of knowledge of the Bulgarian language is a major hurdle. Also, very often they cannot have their previous experience and educational degrees officially recognized as they do not possess the original diplomas, as per the requirements of the Bulgarian legislation.

Since 2014 there is no state-sponsored integration programme for refugees in Bulgaria, which makes it difficult for them to be on par with Bulgarian nationals on the labour market. Some face the real risk of homelessness. In this context, it is even more relevant that they are included in employment, as it not only provides immediate financial income, it also offers a way into other existential issues such as accommodation, health care and education.

I am particularly appreciative of this event. It helps take stock of what is being done to reduce the difference between refugees and locals through employment by specific measures such as information dissemination, organization of job fairs, and importantly by identifying good practices that you have heard and will be hearing.

Finally, a word of caution against the stigmatization of refugees. While the term refugee signifies a certain legal status, it is now used to characterize all of a human being. We must not describe a person solely by the fact she or he was forced to flee their country. Every person is much more and much else before being a refugee. Also, we must not treat a refugee as per definition vulnerable. Like in any society there are those who have specific needs, and many refugees have lost their coping mechanism, but first and foremost they are persons with experience, skills, resilience, ambitions and energy. They are resourceful and a powerful resource.

Beyond what it means for the person, from an economic perspective refugee employment means a long term investment in a labour force which will increase economic outputs and returns of investment for companies. I do hope that with the willingness of all of us present here, and with the support for refugee employment, we can make a difference for the benefit of all of us. Refugees need Bulgaria, and Bulgaria needs refugees.