

Opening Remarks of First Vice-President Frans Timmermans: Press Conference on the way forward for EU migration policy

Good morning to all of you. As you know, we've discussed migration many times in this press over the last three years. We've seen many challenges. With the Member States, international organisations and the NGO's we've worked together, towards security at our borders, better management and control within our borders, and stability beyond our borders.

On the one hand we saw the sad plight of refugees, fleeing from war and persecution but also migrants simply in search of a better life. On the other hand we saw the fact that some of our citizens felt overwhelmed with so many people arriving so suddenly without any certainty that governments had control over it or that Europe had control over it. Without any idea if and when this was going to stop. And with questions about whether our welfare societies might buckle under the strain.

We need to do this for our citizens. We need to be here for our citizens. We need to manage this issue for our citizens. But also for the people who need protection. Let me be very clear. This issue will be with us for at least another generation, if not two. If there is anybody who thinks that if the short term crisis is over, the issue migration can sort of fade into the background, that would be mistaken.

We now need to move from an ad hoc crisis response to structural solutions that can provide a safety net to any EU country that is acutely exposed to very high migration pressures. We have to admit that the instruments such as we have them now, do not provide the answer to that challenge.

Solutions that we need to find must simultaneously protect our common borders, save lives, stop the smugglers, relieve inhumane suffering, give refuge to those in need and return those who have no right to stay; and also solutions that focus on tackling the root causes of migration in close cooperation and partnerships with third countries, especially in Africa.

We need to be realistic: this is an issue that needs policy and needs an integral approach. Migration is and will be a permanent feature of our life. And issues such as climate change, geopolitical upheaval, poor governance, and demographic developments all will have their influence on migratory flows.

And no matter what people may want you to believe: there is no sea wide enough, no fence high enough, to prevent people from coming if desperation takes a hold. If they don't see any alternative, they will climb even the highest wall. That's not what we need to do.

Europe is the continent of solidarity, and our doors will remain open for those in need of protection. But we must be able to manage arrivals collectively in an organised and more structural view. The only way we can ensure that those who need protection will receive protection, is if we can also ensure that those who are not entitled to protection return to their places of origin or stay where they belong.

Our citizens deserve to have a robust, resilient, future-oriented European migration policy which is fair to all member states and calls upon all member states to show solidarity and responsibility.

As I alluded to earlier, experience shows that unilateral policies are expensive, erode our mutual trust, harm the Schengen system and ultimately will all fail. Only a truly comprehensive approach by us all, Commission, Parliament, Council and Member States will deliver real results to the challenge of migration.

You know that we have already put many proposals on the table. Out of the main 23 border and migration proposals presented, 15 are still outstanding and need to be adopted. It is essential that Parliament and Council now move forward quickly. Because without all these building blocks – all building blocks are necessary – you cannot have a comprehensive solution. If you leave one or two of the building blocks out that will not work. The others will fail as well.

This then is our contribution we want to make to the debate in the European Council next week and we hope and trust that Heads of State or Government will agree to this path, and give the necessary political impetus.

You know, people in our Member States, they don't care at all if it's the Commission, the Parliament or Council that has to make the next move. Because for many we're all the same. Every Citizens' Dialogue I do, people say: "Europe is failing us." They're not saying: "The Commission is failing us, or the Parliament is failing us or the Council is failing us." They're saying collectively we're not providing the solutions we should be providing. So everyone has to take its responsibility. And we need to do so before a next crisis catches us unawares.

And we have made progress over the years. Our joint efforts to respond to the migration and refugee crisis have led to tangible results, with irregular arrivals significantly down in both the Eastern and the Central Mediterranean.

We have set up in record speed the European Border and Coast Guard to strengthen control of our external borders and provide rapid assistance to Member States who are exposed to severe migratory pressure.

We reached out to partner countries to tackle the root causes of migration. The EU-Turkey Statement has resulted in the reduction of dangerous journeys across the Aegean by 97%, virtually eliminating the tragic loss of life, delivering a blow to the criminal business of the people smugglers.

The EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey has ensured that 1 million of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees in Turkey receive monthly cash transfers. And 2 million Syrian refugees will get access to primary healthcare service.

The launch of the first EU-wide resettlement scheme in July 2015 and the EU-Turkey Statement has offered legal pathways to almost 26,000 people.

But, we're not there yet. We have been struggling with relocation, with preparing and outfitting refugee accommodation for the winter, with the bad and deteriorating conditions in Libya, with increasing numbers of arrivals from Northern Africa, low returns from Europe and the fact that internal border controls persist.

On a side note let me say that with regard to relocation, we are today referring Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland to the Court, as they have given no indication, even after the reasoned opinion issued last summer, that they will respect their legal obligations and contribute to showing solidarity with Greece and Italy.

So what's the way forward? We must stay the course and further consolidate our comprehensive migration approach by putting in place the remaining building blocks of the internal and external dimensions of migration policy.

If you put all these bricks together, you have a very strong building. If you leave one brick out, the building will remain weak.

Before the summer of 2016, we've put forward a package of instruments to reform the EU's asylum policy. Everyone agrees on the importance of these reforms – but a year and a half after the proposals were made, the legislative process between the Council and Parliament has not advanced on some parts of the package, and the momentum seems to actually be fading.

The most contested aspect of these reforms is the Dublin Regulation, and more specifically the use of compulsory relocation as an expression of solidarity.

Taking into account positions expressed by the European Parliament and the Council discussions, one way forward could be to adopt an approach where the component of compulsory relocation would apply to situations of serious crisis, while in less challenging situations, relocation would be based on voluntary commitments from Member States. In those situations it could be possible to envisage solidarity being provided in different forms.

The Commission will do its best and play its role in helping the Parliament and Council to reach a compromise that is the right one for this Union and a fair one for all Member States.

In any event, everyone has to pull their weight. For that, the only means for the Union to function is when we share its benefits, share its burdens and help each other in difficult times.

As the Treaty states: the area of border checks, asylum and immigration shall be governed by the principle of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility, including financial implications, between the Member States.

While we can and should cooperate with third countries to tackle root causes of migration, we cannot control them. But we can determine what goes on in our own house. So let's get it in order.

Beyond reforming our common European asylum system, there are a number of important things that must be done in parallel to manage migration better. And all those elements require political will, real commitment, and of course money.

We need to consolidate the progress achieved together so far and deliver on the comprehensive reform package by June next year – this is what we propose to EU leaders today.

We understand this won't be easy. But the only way to confront an issue as complicated and as big as migration, is to find a comprehensive set of solutions that are proportionate to the challenge of getting back to Schengen and finally moving from an ad hoc to a structural approach.

In today's Communication we set out a step-by-step roadmap of what could be done from now until June next year.

First, the internal dimension. With regard to the asylum reform package: the EU Asylum agency and Eurodac proposals can be adopted by March. The same goes for a political agreement on the Qualification Regulation. This would facilitate reaching political agreement on the Reception Conditions Directive and the Resettlement Framework by May and starting trilogues on the Asylum Procedures Regulation also by May.

In parallel, the broad outlines with regard to solidarity and responsibility in the Dublin Regulation should be identified by April paving the way for an agreement at the meeting of EU leaders in Sofia in May, swiftly followed by a position from the Council to start negotiations, and a final political deal on the overall reform during the June European Council.

Furthermore, we need to complete the pledging exercise for the new resettlement scheme by February, increase returns capacity and commit the necessary assets of staff for the European Border and Coast Guard by March, and launch the first pilot projects on legal migration for key partner countries and agree at least three further readmission arrangements by May.

Then on the external dimension: to ensure full and sustained implementation of the EU-Turkey statement, the next 3 billion Euro allocation should be mobilised soon.

In Libya, the EU must do more – much more – to help protect migrants and refugees, and by February help at least 15,000 persons stranded in Libya to voluntarily return to their countries and carry out 1000 resettlements from Libya to Europe through the UNHCR emergency scheme. By March, the existing funding gap of 340 million Euros to the North Africa Window of our Trust Fund should be closed, with contributions hopefully by all Member States.

By May, we need to adopt the first wave of projects under the European Sustainable Development Fund. The work of the EU-African Union Task Force

should be supported too.

In conclusion, by agreeing how to fairly balance and share solidarity and responsibility, the EU can respond to one of the biggest concerns of its citizens.

This will inspire the confidence of our citizens that we can jointly control migration, that we can rebuild mutual trust and secure the unity between our Member States which, ultimately, is our greatest asset.

And most important of all, it will help us continue to see people in need as fellow human beings who deserve European solidarity. Not people to be feared because they disrupt us. People we can help, because they come into a European Union that is able and willing, with all its assets, to make sure that people who seek protection because they flee from war and prosecution actually get that protection.