

Remarks by Commissioner Avramopoulos following the Informal Justice and Home Affairs Council in Innsbruck

Dear all,

First of all, allow me to express my thanks to Minister Herbert Kickl for hosting this Council and the excellent way he steered it. I'm also more than happy that Minister Seehofer is joining us for this press conference.

To be frank with you, when I arrived in Innsbruck this morning I was optimistic but the results are better than expected. I said before that I'm sure some were disappointed, but the majority of European citizens are happy with the outcome of this very important meeting. This morning, we had an important open, frank, constructive and political exchange on migration following the European Council.

I will be brief and direct with you.

First of all, the essence of our discussions this morning built on the conclusions of our Leaders' discussion two weeks ago. We can only continue to proceed with a common European approach on this matter. There has been a lot of reporting and statements made on this topic over the past weeks, you all know that, but I want to be clear once again: we are no longer in a migration crisis.

If you look at the figures: we have gone from 1.8 million irregular crossings in 2015 to 200,000 last year and even less this year. Clearly, this shows that what we have been doing over the past three years, under very difficult circumstances both inside the EU and in our neighbourhood, has delivered results.

We must now build on that progress, structurally and sustainably.

There are three areas where we will do more to:

Firstly, to better protect our external borders;

Secondly, working with our partners outside the EU – including by improving our search and rescue coordination;

And internally, to ensure that we will have a modernised European asylum and return system.

All these elements go hand in hand.

Concerning our external borders: we will soon propose to enhance the capacities and the mandate of the European Border and Coast Guard to protect our external borders. We will propose a genuine European Border Police and

set up a standing corps of 10,000 European Border guards by 2020 already. This will notably allow the Agency to boost its support to all Member States at all times.

In the meantime, I have called on ministers to address existing gaps in human and technical resources.

On search, rescue and disembarkation: there has been a lot of speculation on this in the press lately. I want to be crystal clear: we are not outsourcing any of our responsibilities; and any future plans will fully respect the Geneva Convention and EU and international standards. What we want is to reduce dangerous journeys and that lives are lost.

For those of you hungry for a *deus ex machina* today: I have to disappoint you. We are still discussing and exploring the concept of regional disembarkation platforms, together with the International Organisation for Migration and the UNHCR.

Nothing will be imposed in Europe or outside. Let me say it again: our neighbours are our partners. We are confronted with the same challenges. We have to support each other and work together to our mutual benefit.

Similarly, within the EU, we discussed how Member States can ensure that when migrants disembark;

- they do not abscond,
- they are quickly screened and,
- they are quickly channelled towards the asylum or return procedures,
- or they are voluntarily transferred to other EU Member States.

The solidarity component will also be essential to this approach and this I have made clear to ministers today.

For this to work, the EU is ready to provide the necessary financial support. The EU Agencies – European Border and Coast Guards, the Asylum Agency and Europol, will provide the human and technical support.

It is exactly in this spirit and with these objectives in mind that we work on the concept of controlled centres.

That brings me to the third point: return and asylum. The return of those having no right to stay in the EU must be significantly stepped up. I intend to propose some important improvements to our return rules to increase the coherence and effectiveness of our policy in this area.

In particular we need to streamline the return procedure at the border. I will also propose to give the European Border and Coast Guard an even stronger mandate to carry out returns.

But all of the elements that I mentioned will be worthless if we don't have a

well-functioning common European asylum system. That is why I have once again called on the ministers this morning to proceed with agreeing and adopting the five files of the reform of the Common European Asylum System which are close to finalisation.

A speedy solution must also be found on the two remaining files, the Dublin regulation and the asylum procedure regulation. This will also allow us to curb secondary movements within the EU. The next six months will be crucial for us to make progress on these files and I count on the Austrian Presidency to make progress. At the same time we have to continue to be operational.

I look forward to cooperating closely as we have already started doing with Minister Kickl and the Austrian government over the next six months. In this very beautiful town between the mountains and that lies between to 2 other important Member States – I am pleased that unity, solidarity and common sense have prevailed.

Thank you.