

Remarks by Commissioner Avramopoulos on a stronger, more effective and fairer EU migration and asylum policy and on preserving and strengthening Schengen

Dear all,

More than two years after we presented the European Agenda on Migration, we can see the tangible, positive results of European, united and joint efforts. Irregular migration flows to both Greece and Italy have been drastically reduced.

We have the situation much more under control today than compared to two years ago, on all aspects – ranging from a better protection of our external borders, to significant achievements on solidarity.

But we must remain vigilant, as some recent increases in Spain but also in Romania show us.

All the work that we have done to save lives, to put in place safe and legal pathways, to protect our external borders and to return those who have no right to stay must continue.

In all of this, solidarity and the sharing of responsibility have been and remain the silver thread, the fundament of all our efforts.

Now we have a window of opportunity to make decisive progress on 3 key areas:

- Continuing to ensure solidarity;
- enhancing legal pathways;
- and stepping up returns .

We have managed to relocate almost 30,000 people in clear need of international protection across the EU. Solidarity cannot stop from one day to another. All Member States have to continue showing solidarity.

They have to ensure that all the remaining eligible persons who arrived up to 26 September are relocated from both Italy and Greece swiftly. And I also call on them to continue showing solidarity for those people needing protection after that date.

At the same time, we cannot continue to rely on ad hoc temporary solutions. A reformed Dublin and Common European Asylum System is the only structural solution if we want our asylum system to be crisis-proof and future-proof.

Now is the moment to move ahead, and to find the right balance between

solidarity and responsibility, between effectiveness and fairness.

In parallel, now that irregular arrivals have drastically fallen, we must step up our efforts to enhance legal pathways. Europe has to show that it is ready to share responsibility with third countries notably in Africa.

People who are in genuine need of protection should not risk their lives or depend on smugglers. Resettlement should become the preferred way for refugees to receive protection. We have delivered on our promise: almost 23,000 people will be resettled by the end of the year.

With more than 65 million displaced around the world, we cannot stop showing solidarity towards these desperate people, and the countries hosting them. This is why we are proposing to support a further 50,000 resettlement places with half a billion euros and I count on Member States to make ambitious pledges.

We also know that Europe is an ageing continent and that we will need skills from abroad, in addition to employment efforts of our existing work force.

It's time for the EU to be smarter, selective and proactive when it comes to legal migration, particularly in our cooperation with third countries, and according to the needs of our economies.

The EU's common visa policy is also an essential instrument for mobility but equally a key tool to prevent security risks or risks of irregular migration.

We will assess whether the current visa policy still matches present and future challenges, and whether we need to modernise it. We also need to step up returns of those who have no right to stay on our territories.

Finally, the current situation, where less than half of return decisions are actually enforced, undermines the credibility of our entire migration and asylum policy.

The European Border and Coast Guard has an enlarged mandate on return – this should now be fully applied and the Agency should be equipped with a true Return Department. Member States need to also further streamline their return policies, and we offer all the tools to support them to do so.

At the same time, we have to further increase our cooperation on readmission with countries of origin, and use all incentives and leverages available at EU and national level.

Finally, Europe should also continue to show solidarity towards Africa and tackle root causes of migration, notably through the EU Trust Fund for Africa and the External Investment Plan.

Today, mobility is an intrinsic feature of our times. We cannot stop it. But we can better manage it. It is also on this basis that we propose to further strengthen and preserve Schengen today, which enables over 400 million people to move freely.

Schengen is one of the major achievements of European integration, and the absence of internal border control constitutes its very essence. In such an area where persons may move freely, the reintroduction of border control at internal borders is and should remain the exception therefore, and only and always as a measure of last resort.

But in an area without controls, cross-border threats affecting public policy or internal security are a matter of common interest.

This means that we need to carefully balance two important principles: the freedom of movement and the need to be able to address important security threats.

Today we are proposing to amend the Schengen Borders Code precisely in order to maintain that balance. Experience has shown us, such as the repeated terrorist attacks, that Member States reintroduce temporary important controls to address these serious security threats.

Let me however be clear: we are NOT proposing a prolongation of internal border controls. We propose a regime-change while maintaining and respecting Schengen's fundamental principles and spirit to ensure a coordinated EU approach to internal border controls.

We ensure this through: reinforced procedural safeguards, an obligation for Member States to coordinate their actions with other concerned Member States and clear parameters, conditions, and restrictions.

With our proposal today, we strengthen and preserve a coordinated approach to the process of reintroducing internal border controls in exceptional cases.

This approach allows us to prevent abuses and makes sure that everyone plays by the rules.

I would like to make an additional important point: a stronger Schengen means also a unified Schengen. We call on the Council to finally decide for Bulgaria and Romania to join the Schengen family.

It's not only politically fair; it is also needed from a security point of view. Because the internal security of one Member State is the internal security of all, and the security of all our citizens.

Thank you.