

Remarks by Commissioner Avramopoulos on managing migration and on upgrading the EU Visa Information System

Dear all,

The migration situation in the EU and its neighbourhood has continued to be relatively stable, but recent developments call for vigilance and continuous efforts and coordination from everyone. While there has been a steady decrease on the Central Mediterranean route, we have seen some increases at the Greek-Turkish Land border but also increased movements along the coastal route in the Western Balkans and some peaks in arrivals in the Western Mediterranean.

The European Union has continued its work on all fronts:

- protect Europe’s external borders;
- strengthen cooperation with international partners;
- provide international protection to refugees;
- and save lives on dangerous migration routes.

Today’s situation shows that:

- 1) our continuous efforts are making a difference;
- 2) but that our job is not done and that we need to strengthen certain efforts;
- 3) and also that we need to work towards structural and long-term solutions.

When it comes to border protection, I’m glad to say that more than 1,300 experts are deployed on the ground, helping national border guards. The European Border and Coast Guard Agency has also supported a growing number of return operations. However, Member States still need to take better advantage of the Agency’s new and expanded mandate on return. Member States also need to take steps to ensure that more return decisions are really implemented.

I also call on Member States to urgently fill the pledging gaps for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency’s operational activities at the EU external borders. This will also be important, for example, to provide the support needed at the Greek-Turkish border, where the European Border and Coast Guard is ready to help even more, if needed.

Today, we also propose to revise and strengthen our Visa Information System, which will equally contribute to:

- stronger external borders;
- more security;
- and fluid travel.

We propose to have automated checks through which visa authorities and border guards will be able to search all relevant databases with a single search, and obtain the information they need to do their job and prevent entry for those who pose a threat. We want to upgrade the Visa Information System to allow Member States to also exchange information on holders of long-stay visas and residence permits, and to introduce security checks on these persons.

Border guards will be able to quickly determine whether a long-stay visa or residence permit is valid, whether the person presenting the document is indeed its rightful holder, and whether the person poses a threat to the internal security of the Member States. This will make border checks easier, faster and more secure, while strengthening the security of the Schengen area.

I am also glad that the European Union has continued to uphold its values and offer protection to those in need, both here in Europe as well as along the migration routes. Under our latest resettlement scheme, 20 Member States have pledged more than 50,000 resettlement places, making it the largest collective commitment of the EU and its Member States on resettlement to date. I call on Member States to deliver at least half of those pledges by October this year, and those that haven't committed yet to urgently do so.

I'm also pleased to announce that so far 1,152 people have been evacuated from Libya to Niger through the Emergency Transit Mechanism for further resettlement to Europe. Referrals by the UNHCR should now be accelerated, so that pledges can be materialised and that persons evacuated from Libya can be resettled as soon as possible by the receiving Member States. In this context, our ongoing cooperation with several third countries has been paramount and must continue.

We have recently reached agreements with several partner countries on arrangements for return and readmission. The EU-Turkey Statement also continues to play an important role in reducing irregular and dangerous crossings. The mobilisation of the second tranche of EUR 3 billion is now under way and should be implemented swiftly.

In support of ongoing efforts to engage with partner countries and manage migration more effectively, we are today also proposing to revise the legislation on Immigration Liaison Officers and to create a genuine a European network of Immigration Liaison Officers. These officers have unique operational expertise and first-hand knowledge that is hugely important in:

- preventing and combatting irregular migration,
- facilitating the return of irregular migrants

– and managing legal migration.

The new network will strengthen coordination and enhance support for their work abroad.

Dear all, the progress that we have made so far on all fronts underlines the importance of our comprehensive and joint approach – and the need to continue it. Together we are building a stable and long-term answer to the challenges of migration today and in the future. The reform of our Common European Asylum System is an essential part of this approach, and I hope that European leaders recognise this importance and will be able to find an agreement in June.

Thank you.