

Remarks by Commissioner Avramopoulos on the reform of the EU visa policy, progress made on migration and the Facility for Refugees in Turkey

Dear all,

Today is another important step forward in Europe's mobility, migration and security policies, both internal and external.

First of all, today we present the first part of a comprehensive reform of the EU's common visa policy.

We have in recent times faced increasing security risks and evolving migratory challenges. We must adapt our visa policy to this new reality and make it stronger, more efficient and more secure.

With the reforms we propose, it will be easier and faster for legitimate travellers to obtain a visa. Every year, millions of travellers visit the EU. In 2016 alone, more than 15 million Schengen visas were issued to travellers coming for short stays. With the reform, legitimate travellers will be able to submit their visa application up to 6 months before their planned trip. They will receive an answer within 10 days. We also create a new special scheme at the external land or sea border, where travellers will be able to apply for a very short visa of less than 7 days, under strict conditions. In addition, trusted, legitimate travellers who have used their previous visas lawfully will be issued multiple entry visas and no longer have to go through a new visa procedure every time they want to travel to the EU.

But while the majority of travellers to the EU are genuine and bona fide travellers, we know that some are not – and we need to detect them immediately and prevent their entry. This is why we will soon revise the Visa Information System to allow for swifter and more effective background checks on visa applicants and visa holders. Border guards and visa officers should have all the information they need to detect someone suspected of organised crime or if someone is using fraudulent documents. This will enhance security for all in Europe, citizens and travellers alike.

If we want to truly beef up our visa system, we need the appropriate resources to do so. This is why we propose to increase the visa fee by 20 EUR. This small increase means EU visas are still cheaper than in the US, China or elsewhere but it will mean Member States can maintain enough consular staff worldwide to better serve applicants and upgrade their IT equipment and software to ensure stronger security screenings.

With these changes, we will keep Europe's doors open for bona fide travellers, but close them for those who pose security risks.

But our visa policy is not a stand-alone policy. It is deeply intertwined with our overall migration and mobility policies.

With today's reform, we will make sure our common visa policy contributes to improving the cooperation with non-EU countries when it comes to the return of irregular migrants. We will introduce stricter conditions for processing visas when a partner country does not cooperate sufficiently on the readmission of irregular migrants.

But I want to make clear that this new approach will not have an impact on travellers' basic right to apply for and be granted visas.

A future-proof EU visa-policy is fundamental for an open and secure EU. We understood that the reform proposal from 2014 was not fit for purpose. We heard the concerns, and we have come back with a new and better proposal. I hope this means that the European Parliament and the Council will now work towards a swift adoption of today's proposal.

Now, coming back to the bigger picture. Today we also see the positive results on the European Agenda on Migration more generally.

There has been a clear and consistent decrease in irregular arrivals. Our work continues on all fronts, inside and outside the EU: to save lives, tackle root causes, protect Europe's external borders, and further strengthen cooperation with international partners.

Over 34,000 persons – more than 96% of all eligible applicants – have been relocated with almost all Member States contributing.

Our efforts to open legal pathways are bearing fruits: Member States have already pledged to resettle already 40,000 people under the new resettlement programme.

The EU Trust Fund for Africa continues to play a critical role in providing protection to migrants and refugees. The External Investment Plan and the European Fund for Sustainable Development are expected to unlock around €9.6 billion of public and private investments.

At the same time, the EU continues to provide substantial financial support to Greece and Italy, EU countries at the forefront of the migration crisis.

As I have said, we also need to send a clear message that irregular migrants will be returned to their countries of origin. We are reducing irregular migration by working together with partner countries, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Tunisia, China and Morocco. Tomorrow for example I am travelling to Niger to step up our successful cooperation, and continue our support.

We need to continue working with partner countries to better manage and reduce the flows coming from Africa, to ensure cooperation on readmission, and to improve the conditions of migrants stranded in Libya.

I am pleased to report that the €3 billion Facility for Refugees in Turkey was fully contracted by the end of 2017 – meaning the EU lived up to its

promise in full. Now, the Union and its Member States need to fund the second tranche of €3 billion of the Facility for Refugees in Turkey. So far, this Fund has given 500 000 children access to education and is supporting 1.2 million refugees with monthly cash transfers. The Commission's objective is to ensure that the valuable work of the Facility can continue.

For the Commission, it also makes sense that we follow the same division as before, with the EU budget mobilising €1 billion and Member States delivering the other €2 billion. This would allow us to keep the same governance structure of the Facility, and would not mean taking away funding from other migration priorities.

More than this, I would like to stress that our cooperation with Turkey is key to address common challenges. The rapprochement of Turkey and Europe is a long-term engagement that has started some years ago between our citizens.

It's a matter of common political will and in this context unnecessary escalations can and should be avoided.

In fact, ending these tensions would send a strong signal that both Turkey and Europe are committed to this relationship. I therefore hope for a swift return of the two Greek soldiers, right now in detention in Turkey.

Finally, we have reached the point where further progress on these vital issues also depends on a successful reform of our common asylum system. Our ambitious but essential goal is to ensure that the Leaders can reach an agreement in June this year.

Thank you.