

Leaders' Meeting on refugee flows along the Western Balkans Route

Draft Leaders' Statement

Version for the sherpa meeting of Sunday 25 October 2015 11:00

At the invitation of the President of the European Commission, the Heads of State or Government of Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia, in the presence of the President of the European Parliament, the President of the European Council, the current and incoming Presidencies of the Council of the EU as well as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), agreed the following statement:

"The unprecedented flow of refugees and migrants along the Western Balkans route is a challenge that will not be solved through national actions alone. Only a determined, collective cross-border approach in a European spirit, based on pragmatic cooperation between national, regional and local authorities can succeed. Countries affected should talk to each other. Neighbours should work together. This is the only way to restore stability to the management of migration in the region and to slow down the flows.

All countries have responsibilities and obligations under the Geneva Convention, and EU Member States have to fully respect EU law. Refugees need to be treated in a humane manner along the length of the Western Balkans route to avoid a humanitarian tragedy in Europe. Migrants who are not in need of international protection should be swiftly returned to their countries of origin.

We welcome the readiness of the European Commission, the UNHCR, Frontex and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) to support us in the swift implementation of the following operational measures as of Monday:

Permanent exchange of information and effective cooperation

1/ We commit to nominating contact points reporting directly to us to facilitate the exchange of information and coordination; we will nominate these contact points within 24 hours to allow daily exchanges, steer and coordination to begin immediately to achieve the gradual, controlled and orderly movement of persons along the Western Balkans route;

2/ We will work with the European Commission to make use of all tools available at European and international level, including financial assistance, based on joint needs assessments to be launched within 24 hours; immediate efforts should be focused on the provision of temporary shelter and support for all arrivals as well as on organising swift and effective returns of migrants not in need of international protection.

Supporting refugees and providing shelter and rest

3/ We commit to increasing the capacity of our countries to provide temporary shelter, rest, food, health, water and sanitation to all in need. Where these fall short, we commit to make our needs clear to the European Commission and, where appropriate, to trigger the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. Sufficient temporary shelter facilities should be ensured along the Western Balkans route. We welcome Greece's intention to increase reception capacity to 50.000 places with the support of the UNHCR before the end of the year. We commit to immediately exchange information about our capacity to provide shelter to ensure its optimal collective use;

4/ We will work with the UNHCR who has committed to support our efforts in improving the effective collective use of capacities; we request that the UNHCR support be strengthened immediately in particular as regards reception capacity and the provision of humanitarian support. We will work with EASO on an exchange of information in this regard;

5/ We will engage in immediate operational contacts with International Financial Institutions such as the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Development Bank of the Council of Europe which are ready to support financially efforts to provide shelter. We commit to engaging with these International Financial Institutions to act in a coordinated manner. We welcome the readiness of the European Commission to call a coordination meeting with these International Financial Institutions within a week.

Managing the migration flows together

6/ We will ensure a full capacity to register arrivals, with maximum use of biometric data, notably fingerprints; this is vital in particular at the point of first entry into the EU. Registration does not replace the obligation for EU Member States of mandatory registration in line with the common European asylum system rules;

7/ We will immediately exchange information via the contact points on the size and movement of flows through our countries, in particular the number of refugees and migrants belonging to vulnerable groups, and where requested on all arriving refugees and migrants on our territories;

8/ We will work with EU agencies in particular Frontex and EASO to swiftly put in place this exchange of information; these EU agencies are invited to provide technical assistance in this endeavour and to advise on the information to be exchanged and on the frequency of exchanges;

9/ We commit to step up our national and collectively coordinated efforts to swiftly return migrants not in need of international protection. This is vital in particular at the point of first entry into the EU. Frontex and EASO are invited to provide technical assistance;

10/ We will work with the European Commission and Frontex to step up practical cooperation on readmission with third countries; cooperation will be intensified with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq and Pakistan, in particular in the area of returns.

Secondary Movements

11/ We commit to refrain from facilitating the movement of refugees or migrants to the border of another country of the region without the agreement of that country. A policy of waving through refugees to a neighbouring country is not acceptable. This should apply to all countries along the route.

Border Management

12/ We commit to immediately increase our efforts to manage our borders and increase the coordination of our actions relating to border management. This will include our strong support to the following measures to be decided and agreed in the relevant institutions and in accordance with the relevant procedures:

- Full implementation of the EU-Turkey Action Plan, in particular as regards cooperation between coastguards, border management and readmission;
- Upscaling the Poseidon Sea Joint Operation in Greece, in particular Frontex's presence in the Aegean Sea, and strengthening significantly Frontex support to Greece in registering and fingerprinting activities;
- Reinforcing Frontex support at the border between Bulgaria and Turkey;
- Immediate bilateral border-related confidence-building measures between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;
- Setting up a new Frontex operation at the external land border between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania, to focus on exit checks but also on the registration of refugees and migrants who have not yet been registered in Greece;
- Increased UNHCR engagement at the border between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;

- Working together with Frontex to detect irregular border crossings and support registration and fingerprinting in Croatia;
- The deployment within a week of 400 border guards and essential equipment through bilateral support and, in addition, the activation by Slovenia of the Rapid Border Intervention Team (RABIT) mechanism which should be equipped appropriately;

13/ We reconfirm the principle that a country may refuse entry to third country nationals who, when presenting themselves at border crossing points, do not confirm a wish to apply for international protection (subject to a prior *non-refoulement* and proportionality check).

Tackling smuggling

14/ We commit to enhance police and judicial cooperation and to step up actions against migrant smuggling. We call on Europol and Interpol to support Western Balkans route-wide operations to combat people smuggling.

Information on the rights and obligations of refugees and migrants

15/ We commit to make use of all available communication tools to inform refugees and migrants about their rights and obligations. We call on the UNHCR to support us in this regard.

Monitoring

16/ We invite the European Commission to monitor the implementation of these commitments on a weekly basis, in coordination with the national contact points."