



Remarks of Commissioner Avramopoulos at the Press Conference on 4 March 2016 Ahead of the Meeting of EU Heads of State or Government on 7 March 2016

Brussels, 4 March 2016

Dear all,

Things have been moving quickly in the last few days – both on the ground, but also here.

As more than 10,000 people are stuck at the border between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and hundreds continue to arrive, it is more than time for quick but also substantial actions.

That is why we have presented an emergency humanitarian assistance instrument on Wednesday to support those Member States that are particularly affected by the refugee crisis.

That is also why the Commission has been working extremely hard and closely with Greek authorities and UNHCR on a comprehensive contingency plan, but also – together with other European Member States – to make sure massive relocations pick up in the next few days.

Several pledges have been done in the last few days, and I count on Member States to deliver on these.

However, we cannot lose sight of the bigger picture, and what is at stake: Schengen and our unity.

That is why today, we are presenting a Roadmap towards a return to a normal functioning of our Schengen area, without internal border controls.

While the exceptional and temporary controls that are happening now in eight countries of the Schengen zone are according to the rules, we cannot forget the objective: that they are indeed exceptional and temporary, and that we should return to a border-free internal Schengen zone as soon as possible.

Of course, that means that we have to address serious deficiencies at our external borders. As you all know, we are working very closely with the Greek authorities, to help them address these challenges comprehensively.

Because we cannot have free movement internally if we cannot manage our external borders effectively.

This of course also means that we count on the Member States and the European Parliament to make swift progress on the European Border and Coast Guard. Member States should already now start the necessary preparations for the mandatory pooling of resources.

The EU should be able to manage its external borders under this new system by the summer already.

Let me be crystal clear on the ultimate objective of today's roadmap: it is to move from unilateral decisions on the reintroduction of border controls towards a coordinated approach and to lift ALL internal border controls by the end of this year.

Schengen itself is of course only one piece of the larger migration puzzle. And this goes even beyond the European Union.

That is why our cooperation with Turkey and the summit on Monday are so crucial.

President Tusk and my colleagues, First Vice-President Timmermans and Commissioner Hahn were in Turkey yesterday and today where the meetings were constructive and fruitful, to prepare the summit on Monday.

Progress was made on a few crucial items to stem irregular migration such as readmission from Greece and fighting against smugglers.

With the acceleration of returns of irregular migrants from Greece to Turkey over the last few days, the EU-Turkey Action Plan is starting to bear fruit.

But we need to see the flows from Turkey go drastically down soon.

The EU is committed to supporting Turkey. Today we present the second report on the visa liberalisation roadmap for Turkey and I want to commend the visible progress made by our partner.

Furthermore, today we also allocate €95 million for the first projects under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey to be provided for immediate educational and humanitarian assistance.

The summit on Monday with Turkey will be decisive and concrete steps need to be taken to:

- stem the flows from Turkey to Greece
- step up returns and readmissions
- fight the ugly smuggling business

At the same time, we are in constant contact with Member States to start delivering soon on the Humanitarian Admission Scheme with Turkey, and transfer refugees directly and safely from Turkey to Europe.

Better external border controls and cooperation with Turkey will also result in fewer flows.

But we also have to open up legal channels, for people in need of protection to come safely to Europe.

Monday will also be the moment to come together and decide to speed up massive relocations as well as resettlement in the days and weeks to come.

Ladies and gentlemen, yes, we are at a critical moment, but it is not the first one and we will have many more, as long as people continue to flee to our region. Neither Turkey nor Greece are at the root of this problem.

That is why we continue to work towards a solution and stability in Syria and Libya.

We should not spare efforts to achieve this.

The European Union was built on solidarity and resilience, out of fragmentation.

It is precisely in testing times like these, that we should rely on that solidarity and that resilience, and deepen mutual trust because it is the only way to move ahead.

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