

MIGRATION CHALLENGES ALONG THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN / WESTERN BALKAN ROUTE

03 May 2019, Vienna

JOINT STATEMENT

We, the Ministers of the Interior and/or representatives of the Western Balkan 6 and the Salzburg Forum¹, and in the presence of Germany, Denmark, Greece, Switzerland as well as the European Commission, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Europol, ICMPD, IOM and UNHCR, participating in the Ministerial Conference on “MIGRATION CHALLENGES ALONG THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN / WESTERN BALKAN ROUTE” held in Vienna on 03 May 2019

EMPHASISING the significant role of the Western Balkans with regard to security and stability in Europe and acknowledging the efforts made and progress achieved by them in improving their capacities in the area of home affairs as well as their readiness to cooperate efficiently among each other and with the European Union as well as other relevant international actors

WELCOMING the progress achieved in negotiating the Status Agreements between the European Union and the Western Balkans countries with a view to the implementation of the actions to be carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency

BUILDING on lessons learned and cooperation mechanisms put in place since the unprecedented number of migrants illegally crossing the EU borders in 2015 and 2016, particularly along the Eastern Mediterranean/Western Balkans route, and the measures taken in response by all participating parties

DETERMINED to prevent irregular migrant flows along the Eastern Mediterranean/Western Balkans route by taking early and proactive action in order to stem migration flows and avoid an emergency situation similar to the one we faced in 2015

APPRECIATING the efforts made by all participating countries and partners at international level in the field of migration over recent years

ACKNOWLEDGING that migration routes may change quickly and that the migratory pressure on the region as a whole remains very high

HAVING IN MIND the EU-Turkey Statement, the European Council conclusions from 28 June 2018 and other relevant documents as well as the ensuring comprehensive and operational set of measures already put in place

¹ Bulgaria participated as observer in the conference

REFERRING to measures envisaged in the EU's Western Balkans Strategy from 6 February 2018

TAKING INTO CONSIDERATION the EU perspective of the Western Balkans, which is strongly supported by all participating parties

RESPECTING our obligations pursuant to international law, including the European Convention on Human Rights and the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees

DISCUSSED gaps, needs and plans in the areas of border management and border protection, asylum, return policy, fighting against criminal networks, violent extremism and terrorism as well as necessary measures to address the causes of irregular migration

EXPRESSED their readiness to cooperate closely with the aim to ensure efficient management of migration and coordinate supportive measures through mutual cooperation, with special emphasis also on cooperation with other third countries

UNDERLINING the need of proactive and emergency planning

As regards proactive planning the ministers agreed to:

1. further strengthen and ensure regular, timely and relevant information exchange between relevant actors via video or phone conferencing and – if necessary – strategic meetings, making best use of already existing platforms, such as the IPCR and the Western Balkan Risk Analysis Network, and video conferences, such as regular Sherpa video conferences organised by the European Commission;
2. strengthen cooperation among the existing networks of liaison officers - also in line with the recently adopted recast of the ILO Regulation - in order to enhance the efficiency of the information and data exchange by harmonising and accelerating the procedures;
3. strengthen cooperation and applying a comprehensive 'Whole-of-Migratory Routes Approach' in order to address the root causes of irregular migration;
4. reinforce cooperation in fighting criminal networks in the field of human trafficking and migrant smuggling, in line with the EU Action Plan against migrant smuggling, and the comprehensive set of operational measures approved by the JHA Council on 6 December 2018, for example through making best use of the EU Policy Cycle for organised and serious international crime as well as of operational tools like the Joint Operational Office in Vienna and the exchange of operational information and support to investigations provided by Europol;

5. strengthen the coordination of measures, operational cooperation and logistic support in the area of border protection and border management, such as the secondment of officers and the exchange of best practices and the organisation of joint patrols;
6. ensure proper support for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Europol and other EU Agencies e.g. through making available, respectively seconding national experts;
7. intensify cooperation and provide concrete assistance on return and readmission policies and return operations, including through exchange of best-practices regarding sustainable cooperation among competent national authorities and with third countries outside Europe; relevant EU agencies should provide concrete support in this context;
8. while respecting the national sovereignty principle, seek to make best use of the current and future mandates of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency as well as of the European Asylum Support Office in the fields mentioned above and also in cooperating with third countries outside Europe;
9. enhance protection capacities in the region as well as in other countries with the support of relevant EU agencies and EU Member States;
10. enhance exchange of data inter alia on the basis of the Prüm Decision and the Prüm-inspired Agreement for Southeast Europe in line with EU law;
11. enhance information exchange and operational cooperation to counter the evolving threat posed by returning 'foreign terrorist fighters' and their dependants and other related phenomena directly affecting security of the region in particular in the framework of the Joint Action Plan on Counter-terrorism for the Western Balkans signed on 5 October 2018 by enhanced information exchange with and via Europol and monitoring of social media via the EU Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU);
12. coordinate communication strategies targeting relevant countries of origin, based on best practices, in order to stem the influx of irregular migrants by providing targeted, accurate information on the risks of migrant smuggling and human trafficking as well as on the legal consequences of illegal entries to and stays on the territory of another country, taking into account the experiences of IOM, UNHCR, EASO and ICMPD.

As regards contingency planning for cases of emergency the ministers agreed to:

1. update and promote existing contact point networks in the relevant countries and organisations;
2. plan and conduct joint exercises in order to be prepared for an emergency situation;
3. explore ways to rapidly and effectively coordinate necessary measures for the prevention and/or management of migration crises.

The Ministers instruct their respective experts to elaborate necessary implementation measures. The Ministers seek to support further cooperation and joint efforts between the Western Balkans and the European Union, also within existing regional cooperation, such as the Salzburg Forum, the Brdo Process and the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe and make best use of existing initiatives, aimed at strengthening internal security in the region, such as the Integrative Internal Security Governance Initiative. The Ministers will actively promote a common understanding of the significant challenges in the field of migration to prepare inputs for the work of the current and future European Commission.