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Time to build a future proof migration and asylum policy

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In living memory, we have gone from surviving two World Wars to a European Union that has been delivering peace, security and prosperity for its citizens for more than 60 years already. Today, some take all these accomplishments for granted or even question the very existence of the European Union. However, the need to stand together and find solutions to the shared problems we face is nowhere more apparent than in the portfolio under my responsibility: migration and security.

FIGHTING DESINFORMATION

Citizens have genuine concerns about the impact of migration on their communities. We must listen, act and explain. Because populists and nationalists are already exploiting the issue of migration, spreading fear and disinformation. In 2019, citizens will vote for the next Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). For the Commission, the European Parliament has long been a trusted and respected interlocutor, and defender of the European project. It is urgent to mobilise and prevent sinister external forces influence our European debate with phony posts and fraudulent tweets. It is our responsibility to ensure a high-quality debate and clearly explain the difference between facts and fiction. In this context, we should erect a wall against populist and nationalist forces that seek to isolate and divide us.

Let us not forget that during the dark times of war many Europeans found shelter and safety in other parts of this world. They found a place to rest and regain their strength until they were able to return home and build the united Europe of today. At the same time, we should also not forget that people who flee or are displaced often seek shelter closer to home. It is usually the more fortunate ones who make it to Europe.

EUROPEAN AGENDA ON MIGRATION

The European Union should continue to live up to its principles and values in offering protection for those in need, whilst managing and controlling migration so that it can bring benefits to our economy and society. We need to acknowledge migration and human mobility both as part of our history and a reality of our future.

A few years back some predicted that the financial crisis would bring down the European Union. In fact, it was the migration crisis that put into question the unity of our Union. However, while it is true that the European Union was taken by surprise when faced with such uncontrolled mass migration, we came together to forge a common response.

The European Union's comprehensive approach on migration is delivering on all fronts: deeper cooperation with partner countries; better-protected external borders; and more effective and operational tools to manage migration inside the European Union. We have learnt from the past few years that our actions are interconnected and that all the pieces have to fit together. The work that has gone into the [European Agenda on Migration](#) is starting to pay off as we replace unsafe and uncontrolled migration with safe, orderly and regular migration.

Following the peak in arrivals to the European Union in 2015, flows are now below pre-crisis levels. For example, the Central Mediterranean Sea route – the primary entry point to Europe at the start of the crisis – has fallen by 80% since summer 2017. The number of asylum applications so far in 2018 have also decreased by more than 10% compared to the same period last year. In total, last year's asylum applications dropped by almost half compared to 2015. In parallel the number of deaths at sea has continued to fall, and European Union search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea have helped to rescue over 690 000 people at sea since 2015.

Strong mutually beneficial co-operation with third countries of origin, transit and destination has proved

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key to tackling the root causes of migration, cracking down on migrant smuggling, reducing pressure on our borders, assisting refugees in need and returning people without the right to stay in Europe. Co-operation with committed governments such as Niger, as well as with international partners such as IOM and UNHCR, has enabled the evacuation and resettlement for nearly 2 500 vulnerable persons in need of international protection, as well as 40 000 persons to return home voluntarily mostly from Libya and Niger in the past two years.

BORDER PROTECTION

On top of that, we have strengthened our external borders, with the establishment of a European Border and Coast Guard Agency ([Frontex](#)), which is becoming more and more operational every day. Recently, we proposed to strengthen the Agency even more, with the intention of creation a standing corps of 10,000 border guards, as well as an expanded mandate to operate in third countries beyond our immediate neighbourhood and offer more assistance on return operations. In addition, following all the efforts and actions undertaken to better protect our external borders and to ensure security, we believe the time has come to take steps to lift the temporary reintroduction of internal border controls and fully restore Schengen. Almost 70% of our citizens believe that the Schengen area is one of the EU's main achievements – we cannot ignore the Europeans' opinion.

Return is another such issue, where we have made important improvements. We already have 17 existing readmission agreements and 6 arrangements, and we want to conclude more in the near future. Together with our strengthened rules on return, we want to improve the return rates significantly, because the European Union has been lagging behind on this.

We have found common solutions to migration challenges by working together, both externally and internally. But we must remain vigilant, and continue to build on what we have achieved. We must finish what we started in order to build a genuinely future-proof system, able to withstand a future crisis.

A COMMON EUROPEAN ASYLUM SYSTEM

While we have made important collective improvements when it comes to our external border management and engagement with third countries to reduce irregular migration, we still have some homework ahead of us on the reform of [our common European asylum system](#) as well as legal migration channels.

The Commission has made seven proposals to improve our current asylum system, each of which has a real added value on its own. For example, new rules on who qualifies for asylum will take away the incentive for people to go asylum shopping, because applicants will have the same chances of getting asylum in every Member State. Likewise, clearer rules on reception conditions will ensure that asylum seekers are treated alike in a dignified manner in all Member States helping also to prevent secondary movements. Five out of these seven proposals are in the final stages and we have called on the Council and European Parliament to adopt these soon. Work must continue on finding a balanced solution also on the two other core pieces however - the reform of the Dublin Regulation and of the Asylum Procedures Regulation. The new Dublin Regulation should bring genuine added value, and should embody the direct assurance of relief to Member States under pressure, balanced with the effective exercise of responsibility. Member States should contribute, on a voluntary basis, to all components of the comprehensive approach to relieve Member States under pressure. However, for times of particular pressure, a safety net should be built into the system, ensuring that in the absence of sufficient voluntary pledges, real support can be guaranteed to the Member State concerned.

AN INTERNATIONAL ISSUE

We all know that we live in an era that will be qualified by historians as the era of human mobility. This is why we must continue to endeavour to better manage migration globally – reducing irregular migration, but also allowing for safe and orderly migration that serves the interests of all. The recent adoption of the [Global Compact for Safe, orderly and legal migration](#) was a

milestone in that respect for multilateral cooperation on migration. More than 164 states have signed and adopted it, retaining their full sovereignty on designing and implementing migration policies, but with the political commitment to cooperate internationally.

We have also made a clear call to our Member States to enhance legal pathways to Europe, both for protection but also for labour migration. Legal migration channels to the European Union have increased for people in need of international protection, and since 2015, resettlement programmes have offered safe and legal pathways to almost 44 000 people. Member States have also committed to offer more than 50,000 additional resettlement places by autumn 2019. Now we also need to step up efforts to better manage labour migration, based on the needs of our economies. That is why the Commission is calling on the European Parliament and the Council to agree on a reform of the [EU Blue Card Directive](#) with clear added value before the European Parliamentary elections.

BUDGETARY RESOURCES

To implement all the needed migration and border

management measures, we have proposed to almost triple the European Union budget for migration and border management to reach nearly €35 billion for the next 7 years. These durable solutions based on solidarity and responsibility are ambitious but they are possible if the political will is there and necessary without a doubt. We have a small window of opportunity in front of us, and we cannot let it close. There is no time to lose.

We have to complete the architecture of the migration strategy that we developed and launched in 2015, almost from scratch, in the wake of the unprecedented occurrences. It is a strategy that seeks to prepare our Union in view of any possible similar situation that might occur given the volatile international environment: a future-proof, functional, effective and stable policy fully responding to international and European law, and our humanitarian ethical duties.

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