

An Extraordinary Summit of the Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group Countries

Prague, 15 February 2016

Joint statement on migration

The Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries gathered at an extraordinary summit in Prague on 15 February 2016 on the occasion of 25th anniversary of the Visegrád Group cooperation. In the presence of the President of the Republic of Macedonia and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries exchanged their views on the migration challenges Europe and the Balkans region in particular are facing. They expressed their full support for measures adopted at the European Union level with the aim of a more effective protection of the external borders, including reinforced cooperation with third countries while repeating their negative stance on automatic permanent relocation mechanism. They also discussed possible next steps and practical actions leading to the stabilization of the situation on the Western Balkans migration route, intensification of communication among the countries concerned, strengthening security and preventing tensions in the region.

The year 2015 was a time of testing for all European Union Member States as well as for the countries in our neighbourhood: specific impacts of the migration crisis may differ across European countries but the challenge as such is shared by whole Europe. For this reason, it is essential to seek common solutions, to focus on tackling the root causes of the current migratory pressure, including ending of war in Syria, and to regain control over the situation. With the spring coming, the pressure on Europe is likely to increase. Given the complex nature of this challenge, the Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries call for a most effective use of all relevant instruments, frameworks and resources available at the European Union, NATO or, where appropriate, bilateral levels to support the management of migration flows, including in its humanitarian aspects, and to improve the protection of external borders.

First of all, a swift implementation of measures agreed at the European Union level to strengthen external border protection must remain the top priority if we are to prevent the 2015 scenario from repeating. Unless we put the decisive steps rapidly into practice and thus improve the management of the most exposed parts of the European Union's external borders and stem the migratory flow, the situation risks deteriorating beyond our control. Such a development would put the cornerstones of the European integration, especially Schengen and the principle of free movement, at risk. Stepping back in this area would question the very foundations of the European Union and would have strong negative economic, social and symbolic impacts. Moreover, it would also produce harmful effects for

the security and stability of the Balkans region.

The Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries therefore underline the importance of steps aimed at protecting the external borders for the success of the complex European Union's approach to migration. Some of these measures have already been adopted at the European Union level but many of them are far from being fully implemented, others remain to be discussed and agreed.

The Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group call for progress especially in two areas: firstly, for a swift adoption of the Council position on the "European Border and Coast Guard" under the Dutch Presidency, based on the principle of the right balance between the EU powers and Member States' sovereign competences; secondly, for a rapid and credible results of the implementation of the European Union-Turkey Joint Action Plan. In this regard the role of Turkey in stemming the migratory flows and combating human trafficking is crucial.

Progress in these two areas will be decisive in the management of migration flows in the upcoming weeks and the Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group declare their commitment and support in this respect.

The Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries are convinced that the joint effort, especially in those two key areas, of all the European Union Member States and institutions as well as by countries along the Western Balkans migration route will soon bear fruit: providing assistance to those in genuine need of international protection while reducing illegal and uncontrolled migration, and stabilising the situation in the Balkans region. Our activities should also entail the dismantling of organised criminal groups involved in human smuggling so as to stop facilitating mass migration and not only diverting routes. However, given the limited time, it is crucial to act without delay.

The weeks before the March European Council will indicate whether the specific measures taken produce satisfactory results so as to avoid repeating the events of 2015. The Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries confirm their commitment to contribute to measures aimed at a proper control of the European Union's external borders in Greece while acknowledging the specific challenges connected to migration flows management on sea borders. In this light, the Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries appreciate the contribution of FRONTEX, through the Poseidon-RABIT operation, to effective border management in the Aegean. The latest NATO involvement in related activities should upgrade the efforts in that regard. At the same time, an alternative back-up plan – ready for implementation – should be developed in case the progress in border protection and cooperation with Turkey falls short of expectations. The March European Council should then decide on the next steps.

The idea of an alternative back-up plan for the Western Balkans migration route arose from a related

exchange of letters between the Prime Minister of the Republic of Slovenia and the President of the European Commission in January. Following up on this correspondence, the Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries fully embrace the view that an alternative back-up plan should build on the existing frameworks of European and bilateral cooperation, and should use the European Union instruments and agencies, including FRONTEX. It should also include a more effective sharing of relevant information such as the data received from the EURODAC with third countries where necessary. The execution of such a plan would require an active approach of all the countries and institutions concerned and the Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries affirm their readiness to take an active part in this endeavour. To facilitate the implementation of related measures, the Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries therefore declare their willingness to provide the most exposed countries of the Balkans region, in general, with adequate means of practical support based on the actual needs.

The role of the Hellenic Republic remains pivotal for migration flows management in the Balkans region. The Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries acknowledge all the efforts by the Greek authorities in that respect and stand ready to provide them with continuous support. If implementation of further measures aimed at strengthening external border protection in the Balkans region prove necessary, it may bring additional impacts on the Hellenic Republic and would, therefore, necessitate a corresponding level of complex assistance, including humanitarian, to be provided to the Hellenic Republic through all relevant channels. The Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries would actively participate in aligning this assistance with the relevant European Union instruments.

With the very foundations of the European Union at stake, the Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries call on all European Union Member States to take common, rapid and decisive action: the key strategic objective now is to preserve Schengen, which can only be achieved by regaining control over the European Union's external borders. Pursuing these goals will also significantly contribute to easing tensions and support stabilisation of the situation in the Balkans region. These efforts thus represent the way forward in order to preserve the European Union and its benefits for citizens.

In the context of the debate on common EU solutions to the migration challenge, the Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group countries reiterate their longstanding support of European Union enlargement process with Macedonia as well as with other Western Balkans countries and of the Schengen area enlargement for those who fulfil the necessary conditions.