

## Keynote speech

*[1235 words]*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here to discuss a topic that is seen by a majority of European citizens as the main challenge faced by the European Union. We are confronted with the greatest migrant and refugee flows since World War II. No country can deal with it alone. What happens in Lesbos is felt in Athens, and also in Paris, Rome and Stockholm.

Before I come to the impact of the migratory flows on the EU and how we dealt with it, I want to make one thing very clear: protecting the life and rights of migrants and refugees inside and outside the EU is at the heart of our agenda.

It is a fundamental value of the democracies that form the European Union to protect people in need. Migration is a part of our rich and diverse culture and it has always had a positive impact on the development of the continent. Refugees should always find a place in Europe.

Let me now turn to how we deal with the migratory challenge: in the beginning, responses have been uncoordinated and improvised at national level. We have seen strong mobilisation and welcoming attitudes, but also fences and attempts to make migrants someone else's "problem".

This has increasingly divided the Union and our citizens. It has put our core value of solidarity at stake. It has threatened a major achievement of the EU which we take for granted: the free movement of EU citizens.

Let's not underestimate our citizens' attachment to this. The four freedoms are an important achievement of the European Union and no one would like to see the EU back as national states only.

Since summer 2015, we have tried to improve coordination of our actions and reach common decisions. We have implemented pragmatic solutions to ensure solidarity and fair sharing of responsibilities between Member States.

*[outside the EU]*

In 2016, more than 5000 persons died while trying to cross the sea to reach Europe. This is not acceptable. Our operations at sea have rescued over 400,000 people in the Mediterranean and the Aegean in 2015-2016. But there are still too many deaths.

We have recently stepped up coordinated actions at EU level to replace dangerous migratory routes by organised, safe and legal pathways to Europe. Over 14,000 people in need of protection have been resettled to the EU since summer 2015.

To build on this, the Commission proposed last July a permanent Union Resettlement Framework, to provide for a more predictable and harmonised approach at EU level.

We are also working on a common approach to fight smuggling: 9 in 10 migrants have paid criminal organisations to reach the EU, often in inhuman conditions at the mercy of people which have no scruples. We have strengthened our judicial approach, but we also try to better prevent irregular migration through dedicated capacity building in third countries.

And we have reinforced our support in the countries outside the EU. The European Union is the number one donor of humanitarian aid. We are helping displaced people within Syria as well as Syrian refugees and their host communities in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and Egypt. More than EUR 9 billion have been mobilised.

*[inside the EU]*

Inside the EU, we are in particular supporting the frontline Member States – Greece and Italy. Not only financially, but also through staff deployed on the ground. We are also trying to relieve the pressure there by relocating refugees to other Member States. But Member States need to do much more.

We want to create an asylum system in Europe that is more humane, fair and efficient. The new system we proposed includes a fairness mechanism, allowing relocation of refugees every time a Member State is faced with intense pressure on its borders. Let's be clear about this: solidarity between Member States has to be built into the system.

*[Schengen + security]*

In parallel, we are reinforcing controls at our external borders. The European Border and Coast Guard can now count on a pool of 1500 border guards that can be deployed in five days. Teams can also intervene in neighbouring third countries. We are about to start negotiations with Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in this regard.

These measures should help us return to a normal functioning Schengen area. This is important. The cost of a reintroduction of internal borders over ten years would represent between €5 and €18 billion per year.

Reducing the number of persons arriving through irregular channels in EU Member States and agreeing on better cooperation on readmission and return is a necessary prerequisite for being more generous on providing legal pathways to protection. Our efforts to protect those in need must go hand-in-hand with increased efforts to return those who are not. Only such a set-up will ensure that the necessary solidarity between Member States will be created which will allow protecting those who are really in need of protection.

[The EU-Turkey Statement has delivered results - attempts to cross the Aegean have decreased to around 90 per day, by contrast with the 10 000 daily arrivals at certain peak days in 2015. In the ten-month period before the statement came into effect - from April 2015 to January 2016 - 1064 persons were reported dead or missing. In the same period after the statement, they were only 69: a difference of almost 1000 people.]

*[Migrants' positive contribution]*

And we should not forget the positive contribution migrants bring to the development of their communities of origin and to our societies. The Commission has calculated that the impact of the recent inflow of refugees on EU GDP should be positive - about 0.2% by the end of this year.

We need migrants. Europe is an ageing continent with increasing skill shortages in certain sectors. And the cost of non-integration would be higher than the cost of investment in integration policies.

A quick integration of legal migrants is therefore key for them, but also for us.

To support Member States, the Commission proposed a comprehensive action plan on integration and an ambitious reform of the Blue Card, the European response to the American Green Card. We want to attract and retain highly skilled third-country nationals.

The situation today is far from perfect – we are regularly reminding Member States about their commitments, in particular with regard to relocation and resettlement. They should also be more proactive when it comes to legal migration and integration. But the situation is improving. The tools are now in place.

*[long-term solutions needed]*

However, we also need structured, long-term solutions to address modern migration challenges worldwide and its root causes. Today, more than 65 million people are displaced from their homes by conflict, persecution or poverty.

With our new Partnership Framework approach we have started a genuine political dialogue with countries of origin and transit. We try to help them to better manage migration, including readmissions, and fight against criminal networks putting the lives of migrants at risk - and in this respect we've already seen some results in our cooperation with Niger.

The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, worth EUR 2.2 billion, helps to address the root causes of migration, by promoting economic and equal opportunities, security and development. And the Commission announced a new EU External Investment Plan last September, with the aim of unlocking at least EUR 44 billion of investments in partner countries.

The priority set by President Juncker that "*Europe needs to manage migration better, in all aspects*" – from the humanitarian imperative, the need for solidarity and the demographic and skills challenge – is valid more than ever. The Commission is therefore fully committed to achieving the important objective of shaping an integrated, sustainable and holistic EU migration policy.

Thank you.