

# European Parliament Plenary - Opening statement to debate on situation at Greek-Turkish border - European Commission

Thank you,

Honourable Members

We are faced with an urgent and serious situation at our external borders.

I am worried about the situation. And I know I share these concerns with you

It's absolutely necessary that we, the European Union protect our external borders. But it is also absolutely necessary that we defend our fundamental rights and values, including the right to asylum.

It's our legal and moral duty, to do both. And I can hear sometimes in the debate that there is a contradiction between the two. This is not true. It's absolutely possible to do both. To defend our external borders. Of course – It's not Turkey, who decides about our external borders. But it is possible to combine this with the right to asylum and to stand up for fundamental human rights and our values.

I think that our most urgent concern is: people. Human beings. We need to support and protect people, who are right now living under unacceptable conditions.

In this situation there are three things that we must deliver at the EU level.

First, as I mentioned support for people. We have a lot of people who are already in a difficult situation, who have been brought to the border on false pretences, and are now in a very difficult situation.

Even worse I should say, is the situation for the people on the islands, on the Greek islands: people in overcrowded hotspots, living under unacceptable conditions and have been doing so for quite a long time. Vulnerable people, also families with children, unaccompanied minors, people with sickness and disabilities.

But let me also mention the islanders themselves. Greek citizens that also are under high pressure living on the islands

People who are already in a difficult situation. Who have been brought to the border and are now in a desperate situation.

Second, support for Greece of course. Greece manages entry at our common EU border. We are now facing politically motivated pressure at the European external border. It's necessary to support Greece and we are supporting Greece. We are now taking urgent measures in all these areas.

And third, of course, we must share responsibilities for supporting Syrian refugees, also in Turkey.

As you also know last week, the Presidents of the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council and the Commission visited the Greek-Turkish and

Bulgarian-Turkish borders, stressing our unity, commitment and solidarity.

Last week also, the Commission presented an Action Plan of measures to be taken by the Union and the Member States together to provide critical support to Greece.

As a result, together with the Member States and our Agencies, we agreed on a number of concrete steps.

First: we agreed to support Greece and other countries to handle this situation, to protect our external borders and support people

Greece is obliged to protect their borders and the EU external borders, but they also have to do with proportionate measures.

With the launch of two rapid border intervention operations by the European Border and Coast Guard, at the land and sea borders between Greece and Turkey, an additional 100 border guards will be deployed as well as assets like helicopters and boats.

Frontex stands ready to coordinate a new programme for the quick return of irregular migrants from Greece to countries of origin.

The European Asylum and Support Office also is ready to accelerate the deployment of experts to support Greece.

At the request of Greece, the Civil Protection Mechanism has been activated.<sup>16</sup> Member States so far pledged support to Greece – that's European solidarity in action, and it's in action quite quickly.

Member States are assisting Greece by sending medical equipment, medical teams, shelters, tents, blankets, and a lot of other items that are needed.

We also need to give financial support.

The Commission will immediately make available 350 million euro – with a possibility to increase by another 350 million through an amending budget. And this will be used to

- increase the reception capacity [and improve] living conditions for the migrants on the islands and the mainland;
- it will be used to support the provision of services, such as health care, food provision and transportation;
- to support the Greek asylum service;
- and to strengthen the ongoing assisted voluntary return programme.

Tomorrow evening I will go to Greece, and on Thursday I will meet with the Greek minister and authorities to discuss how we should implement this action plan. And of course, I will also ask the Greek government how they will act to make sure they comply with EU law and the right of asylum, and also to the principle of non-refoulement.

Second, our relationship with Turkey.

The EU-Turkey Statement remains valid. We must continue our dialogue. We must de-escalate the rhetoric and decrease the tension. That involves finding a path forward with Turkey.

The lines of communication with Turkey remain open and active.

With Turkey we share a joint responsibility for refugees, and a joint commitment to the Statement. That is why we are continuing a constructive engagement.

As you all know, yesterday evening, President von der Leyen and President Michel had a constructive dialogue with President Erdoğan .

The two Presidents expressed very clearly to President Erdoğan their commitment to move forward with a perspective for migrants and stability for the region.

On our side, we are delivering on our commitments in the EU-Turkey Statement.

By having provided safe and legal pathways to Europe for almost 26,500 Syrian refugees. By supporting schools, health care and basic services for Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Honourable Members,

We must relieve the pressure that has been brought on the border. And the main way to do that is of course a dialogue with Turkey. But we also must make sure the right to asylum is respected.

To conclude let me say: The situation at the European border is worrying. But I also must say this is not 2015.

We are much much better prepared now, to manage the situation. Because we know better what to expect.

Because have reinforced agencies. We have frontex. We have the European Asylum and Support Office. We have more willingness to cooperate between Member States. And we have stronger structures between Member States.

That's why it was possible for the European Union to react so quickly, in support to Greece and to the external borders of the European Union.

But let me also say: even if we are much better prepared than 2015, we are not well prepared enough. And what we are lacking is a common European Migration and Asylum System. This is really a problem for us, and this has been my task since I took office. I have had constructive dialogues with all the 27 Member States and a lot of dialogues here in the European Parliament on this topic. To find a compromise forward, to find a common approach, so that together, we will be better prepared to face migration and asylum together in the European Union.

And I must say that these dialogues have been constructive. We all know that it is a difficult task, of course. But I am more optimistic now, than before I started the dialogues. And I am preparing now the proposals and you can expect them to be presented after Easter.

Let me conclude with one aspect.

It's the situation of children, and maybe especially those that are without their parents. Unaccompanied children, minors, teenagers. One third of all children arrive in Greece without parents or family. Around 5500 children and teenagers in total according to Europol. Ten percent are younger than 14 years old.

They face violence, abuse and exploitation.

Many of them just disappear from the asylum and reception centres. And we don't know where they are. I'm afraid that many of them fall in the hand of criminals. Sometimes the same criminals who traffic migrants also traffic people for sexual

exploitation.

Just imagine being a fifteen year old. Fleeing. Searching for a better life.

Imagine how afraid you would be. Alone under these circumstances. And under the risk of being a victim of abuse and trafficking.

My mission is – together with the Greek government – to put in place a process to protect and care for these vulnerable children and teenagers.

I want to find solutions that will help unaccompanied migrant minors, in particular on the Greek islands. With relocations to other Member States. With medical aid. With housing. With safety. Protecting them, from being victims of trafficking.

On Thursday I am going to be in Greece together with President von der Leyen. This is our aim, our purpose: to develop new ways to protect these unaccompanied minors

I call on all Member States to help these children and these youngsters. And to welcome them.

That's the spirit of solidarity we need, that will see us through these difficult times.