

**VIENNA DECLARATION**  
**on effectively combating irregular migration**  
**along the Eastern Mediterranean Route**

**Ministerial Conference**

**22/23 July 2020**

We, the Ministers and representatives of the Western Balkans, the Salzburg Forum, Denmark and Greece (hereinafter: the Ministers), in the presence of Germany as the current Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Switzerland as Schengen partner, the Vice-President of the European Commission for Promoting our European Way of Life, the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, the Executive Director of EASO, the Deputy Executive Director of Frontex, as well as the Director General of ICMPD, have met in Vienna in order to discuss strategic issues and operational measures on how to effectively combat irregular migration along the Eastern Mediterranean Route.

The number of irregular arrivals along the Eastern Mediterranean Route had been on the rise until the outbreak of COVID-19. We are currently witnessing increasing migratory challenges along the Eastern Mediterranean Route including in the Western Balkans. Given the volatile situation and the continuous pressure at the external Greek sea and land borders, we have to be prepared for a situation comparable to the one witnessed this February and March that led the EU Council to adopt the “Statement on the situation at the EU’s external borders” on 4 March 2020. In a post-COVID-19 pandemic context, an already complex and challenging situation will be exacerbated and require further joint, concerted and pro-active efforts.

Recognising that partners under migratory pressure have already achieved positive results in tackling irregular migration and in protecting borders, and that bilateral support is already being provided by a number of partners, the Ministers stress that it is indeed of common interest to ensure coordinated cooperation and effective support.

Recognising the strengthened mandate given to Frontex in the new European Border and Coast Guard Regulation, the progress made by the European Union in concluding status

agreements with the Western Balkan partners, having resulted in the deployment of European Border and Coast Guard teams by Frontex on the territory of Western Balkan partners, progress achieved by Joint Operations and the progress made by the Western Balkan partners in establishing national coordination centres for border control with similar competencies as the EUROSUR national coordination centres in the Member States, time has now come to further enhance cooperation and coordination in the region.

The Ministers emphasize the need for a pro-active, permanent and structured joint approach, based on concrete steps and delivering concrete results, involving all stakeholders, such as the Western Balkans, EU and Schengen states, the European Commission, responsible EU agencies, ICMPD as well as other relevant international partners. The common goal is to effectively protect our borders, combat irregular migration, save lives, prevent new migration crises, improve the situation in countries of origin, strengthen asylum systems and contribute to security and stability along the Eastern Mediterranean Route.

In view of the pressure that is again building up we are called upon to join forces in order to tackle irregular migration and protect the EU's external borders, showing solidarity with frontline EU Member States, and supporting the Western Balkans in protecting their borders, as part of a comprehensive approach to migration. Irregular border crossings will not be tolerated. Likewise, encouraging migrants to endanger their lives by attempting irregular border crossings by land or sea is not acceptable. These messages should be relayed. Countering the dissemination of false information and reducing the exploitation of vulnerable persons is a common challenge.

Regarding return policies, the Ministers agree that best possible support is to be provided to partners that have come under pressure along the Eastern Mediterranean Route. Returns of persons not in need of international protection to the respective countries of origin must be carried out without delay. The promotion of voluntary return and the exchange of best practices are essential elements for further cooperation. The Ministers welcome the European Commission's intention to step up its activities in relation to third countries and create win-win partnerships, including cooperation in the area of return/readmission, using all available incentives and leverages.

It is also necessary to continue strengthening operational cooperation and exchange information in order to definitively break the business model of the smugglers. The EU Policy

Cycle provides an effective framework for cooperation in this area between EU Member States, EU agencies, third countries and other external stakeholders.

The Ministers highlight their determination to actively contribute towards further implementing both the Whole-of-Route approach and the comprehensive approach to migration *“which combines more effective control of the EU’s external borders, increased external action and the internal aspects, in line with our principles and values”*, as defined in the European Council Conclusions of 28 June 2018. They will build on agreements, such as the *“Council conclusions on enhancing cooperation with Western Balkans partners in the field of migration and security”* of 5 June 2020.

With a view to effectively preventing and combating irregular migration, operational cooperation with and practical support to particularly affected partners are of crucial importance in key areas such as border management, return, tackling migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, and asylum. The Ministers are committed to working towards establishing a coordination structure making best use of all existing systems in order to better match strategic priorities, needs and actions along the Eastern Mediterranean Route and avoid duplications of existing activities. They entrust the experts of interested partners with quickly drawing up a concept and a working method for an *“Operational Platform – Eastern Mediterranean Route”*, taking into account all existing initiatives and suggesting a concrete set of coordinated operational measures. As a precondition existing structures are to be evaluated in this context. Close cooperation among all stakeholders should be ensured. In order to avoid duplications of existing structures the current mandates of Frontex, EUROPOL, EASO, CEPOL, the Joint Operational Office in Vienna as well as other existing entities, projects and tools have to be fully taken into account. The results should be aligned with ongoing discussions at EU level, in support of and complementary to the activities of the EU and in full respect of the EU acquis and international law, including fundamental rights.

What is decisive in this context is real practical added value, coordination and close interaction between the European Commission, EU agencies and services, Western Balkan partners, participating EU Member States and Schengen partners, ICMPD as well as other relevant international partners.

The Ministers take note of the continued development and deepening of all forms of regional cooperation, such as the Salzburg Forum, the Brdo Process, the Police Cooperation

Convention for Southeast Europe, the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center etc. as integral and quintessential components towards integrating the Western Balkans into the European Union. A clear European perspective for the Western Balkans is essential to ensuring stability, security and prosperity in Europe.

The Ministers will review progress on the above at a follow-up Ministerial Conference in autumn.