



Joint Statement of the Heads of Governments of the V4 Countries

Bratislava, 16 September 2016

The outcome of the British referendum, though undesired, opens an opportunity to improve the functioning of the EU: relations between European institutions, relations between European institutions and Member States and the EU's political agenda. Improvements are necessary to restore common trust in the European project and its institutions and empower the voice of Member States.

Launching the Bratislava process

Today's informal meeting in Bratislava marks the beginning of a process of reflection that shall culminate next March when we commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties. We believe in the importance of such a strategic political reflection that will enable us to assess the current state of the EU and identify the major priorities for the future. Our ambition is to reassert the vision and principles enshrined in the Treaties and win back the trust of our citizens.

Throughout this process, we are determined to uphold the unity and resolve of the 27 Member States and, within the framework of the EU, seek for the best solutions in the interest of our citizens. Therefore, we declare our readiness and commitment to work intensively in the upcoming months on the priority areas where our citizens expect us to deliver.

Strengthening democratic legitimacy

Current challenges of the Union prove that Europe can only be strong if the Member States and their citizens have a strong say in the decision-making process. To make this happen, we should focus on two priorities. First, it is necessary to uphold the principles of sincere cooperation and institutional balance between the EU institutions as defined by the Treaties, including the role of the European Council to provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and define the general political directions and priorities. Second, it is necessary to strengthen the role of national parliaments underlining respect for the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. By means of this, the Union will be better equipped to deliver legislation and actions that have added value for the European citizens.

Value of diversity

The biggest advantage of the EU is its scale. Hence, we have to work together and overcome divisions. Integration within smaller groups of Member States will only weaken the EU both internally and on the global stage. At the same time it is fundamental that the diversity of the Member States is maintained and respected and the EU legal rules are executed in equal manner. It is necessary to work out a solution that will enable all countries to feel comfortable in the EU. For this reason, the Visegrad Countries insist that the European integration is a common project and all negotiations should therefore be inclusive and open to all Member States.

Security

The EU is facing today a problem of decreasing sense of security among its citizens. Recent terrorist attacks in Europe are proof that there is a new challenge which the EU must deal with: the growing terrorism and cross-border crime. Hence the cooperation between Member States and relevant EU institutions is of vital importance. This cooperation, to bring fruits, should be flexible and focused on practical action.

The Visegrad Group countries point out that the efforts should be channeled to fully implement the already undertaken commitments aiming at strengthening security in Schengen area as well as the protection of EU's external borders. In this context, it is essential to make the European Border and Coast Guard operational as soon as possible. To perform effectively, further development of the FRONTEX Agency will need additional resources. The Visegrad countries stand ready to contribute.

The EU should also make a better use of available instruments in the fields of information exchange, such as SIS II, and systemically use them. If border checks are to be efficient, standardized practice in using IT tools is necessary.

We shall initiate a discussion at European level on how to improve the EU data management architecture. First, we should strive to improve the level of interoperability of various IT systems, while respecting personal data and fundamental rights. We will be able to fight better not only illegal migration but also organized crime and terrorism, by making the IT systems more efficient. We shall equally support the steps towards developing a common approach to cybercrime. Second, we shall ensure the quality of data inserted into IT systems. Third, we shall enhance efforts to implement the PNR Directive as soon as possible. Fourth, we shall support the adoption of the necessary measures to ensure that all persons, including nationals from EU Member States, crossing the Union's external borders will be checked against the relevant databases. Fifth, we shall support setting up a Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS) to allow advance check and, if necessary, deny entry of visa-exempt travelers. Sixth, we shall support a systematic effort against radicalization, including through expulsions and entry bans where warranted. Seventh, we shall support the Membership aspirations of the Western Balkan countries and their further progress towards the EU. The pace of their accession should continue to be based on their own merits.

Vis-à-vis the geopolitical challenges the Union must do its part also on external security and defense. Our approach has to be comprehensive, focused and effective. We should strengthen practical cooperation in defense to give it more substance without duplicating NATO and implement without delay the Global Strategy with particular focus on making the key elements of Common Security and Defense Policy truly functional. The December European Council should decide on implementation plan in this respect.

Migration

Concerning migrations, it is necessary to halt the number of irregular migrants and to guarantee the security of the EU, the Member States and individual citizens. The countries of the Visegrad Group have therefore been underlining that enhanced cooperation with third countries, including with Turkey, whether transit or origin, as well as protection of EU external borders are key tools. The unstable situation in the EU southern and eastern neighborhood should lead the EU and Member States to unity and coherence when it comes to their activities in relations with third countries. We shall continue works on Migration Compacts setting individually shaped relations with third countries. These activities should aim at strengthening their capacity to combat external threats and to prevent migration crisis.

Protection of borders of Member States and third countries located on the routes of illegal migration is an effective way to combat the illegal migration. Therefore, the Visegrad Group Countries are ready to increase their commitments, in the case of necessity, by active contribution to joint efforts, including an offer of an immediate assistance to Bulgaria.

Migration policy should be based on the principle of the “flexible solidarity”. This concept should enable Member States to decide on specific forms of contribution taking into account their experience and potential. Furthermore any distribution mechanism should be voluntary.

The Visegrad Group countries call for full and timely implementation of the roadmap Back to Schengen.

Single Market

Effective EU needs to improve the communication of the benefits of the single market and genuine potential of its four freedoms, including free movement of people. The single market is a project of integration, which benefits all EU countries and contributes to social and economic cohesion, renewed convergence and thus to the welfare of the citizens offering growth and jobs. This is however taken today for granted, therefore it is no longer recognized as one of the major benefits attributed to the European Union membership. Therefore, it is necessary to inform more effectively the public opinion about the positive outcomes of the Internal Market meanwhile improving the enforcement of its rules to eradicate intra-EU protectionism.

As the Visegrad group countries we are firmly determined to our commitment to boost competitiveness, investment, innovation and liberalization in the area of four freedoms in a balanced way. Only by developing modern infrastructure, pursuing new common approach towards industrialization and digitalization, promoting digital skills and creating regulatory ecosystem friendly to new business models, we will be able to embrace the benefits of digital era and compete with global players. An effective EU trade policy based on reciprocity and mutual benefits is key. Common initiatives at the EU level should aim at boosting competitiveness. This shall happen in line with sound fiscal policies and discipline, respecting the Stability and Growth Pact. At the same time, we shall not neglect existing common policies that bring added value to the whole EU, like cohesion and common agricultural policy, properly financed by the EU budget.

The countries of the Visegrad Group feel a special responsibility for the process of reflection on the future of the EU. Our nations remain at the forefront of supporters of European integration while standing ready to tackle all the challenges faced today by the EU. With this in mind we are convinced that a Union that is more effective, more democratic and more responsive to the needs

of its citizens is indispensable to guarantee our security and prosperity in today's volatile and unpredictable world.