

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos' intervention at the European Parliament Plenary on the issue of the Syrian refugees arriving at the Bulgarian border

The migratory pressures facing Bulgaria are closely linked to the deterioration of the political situation in Syria. Because of its geographical position, Bulgaria, which is hosting a large number of persons in need of international protection, is one of the Member States most exposed to the consequences of the Syrian crisis, like other countries on the Union's external borders, particularly on the south-eastern periphery.

The Council is aware of the Report issued by UNHCR in January this year, which refers to the difficulties that persons in need of international protection are encountering in Bulgaria, in particular in relation to the conditions under which they are hosted. Similar issues have been raised by some NGOs.

I should underline that all Member States have an obligation to ensure that adequate reception conditions are in line with the international and EU standards for persons in need of international protection.

We fully recognize the challenges facing those Member States which are confronted with this unprecedented inflow of persons in need of international protection. The Bulgarian authorities in particular have stated at the highest political level their willingness to respond appropriately and adequately. However, with only limited facilities, which are already overcrowded, providing an adequate response to the needs of those persons arriving from Syria is clearly a significant challenge.

The UNHCR Report underlined the various initiatives being undertaken to identify suitable facilities to accommodate additional persons in need of protection and to make them functional. It acknowledged that these initiatives have helped improve the situation.

The Commission organised a mission to Bulgaria last week to assess the situation and will, I am sure, be able to provide further information on its findings. We also appreciate the interest and concern of the European Parliament about this issue. I know that several members visited Bulgaria recently in order to see for themselves the challenges which it faces.

Particular attention also needs to be focussed on entry points for those fleeing Syria. We know that there are a number of initiatives being taken in this area, and that these will provide an important contribution to the rescue and assistance facilities.

The EU is also providing practical assistance to Bulgaria. A total of 20 million Euros has been earmarked to assist those EU Member States particularly exposed to migratory pressures and flows to help them improve their national capacities. This funding – limited, of course – has the objective of improving reception capacity, processing capacity, screening and registration capacity, as well as support to border management activities.

President Honourable Members,

The Council will continue to take any action which is required to help alleviate the suffering of those Syrian nationals seeking protection and support within the EU. Bulgaria is one of the Member States most exposed to these migratory pressures, and we are ready to consider any measures which might assist the authorities there in coping with these pressures and help them provide the appropriate conditions to receive those seeking protection.

I thank you for your attention.

Reply

I am certain that the Members of the European Parliament perceive the particular sensitivity that the Hellenic Presidency of the Council of the EU has on this issue. We neighbour on Bulgaria, we have a very long coastline. Like all the European Mediterranean countries, we are under great, daily pressure on our maritime and land borders.

Bulgaria truly is facing an acute problem on its land borders. This problem leads us to understand how critical it is for the cooperation between Europe and Turkey to function effectively on the management of migration flows. Now we can understand the importance of the Readmission Agreement signed a few weeks ago by the EU and Turkey.

Now I think we all understand how important it is for the principle of burden-sharing among member states to be implemented in practice. This is interwoven with solidarity as a fundamental principle of European integration. Of course, in the debates on the level of the Council, the management of migration flows is confronted, on the one hand, as an acute humanitarian problem – as the management of an ongoing, acute humanitarian problem – but also as a security problem.

Because behind the humanitarian pressure, behind those who truly have need of help, those seeking asylum, those who can really be characterized as refugees in accordance with international law, there are also cases of persons who raise an issue of European security.

It is also very important to stress that the handling of this issue is moving on two parallel levels. The first level is the immediate measures. Confronting the situation on the ground right now, when there is a problem, because this problem cannot wait. And here you need practical forms of solidarity and support for countries like Bulgaria.

There is also another level – that of overall planning for the management of migration flows. The Presidency of this semester, which has already worked with the next Presidency – the Italian Presidency – has set this issue as a priority. Because Europe really has to show its capability of effectively managing these issues.

I remind you that, at the October European Council, there was an initial in-depth discussion of this problem, under the pressure of the humanitarian crisis, the tragedy, that is, of Lampedusa. At the December European Council, the results of the action group for the Mediterranean were presented.

A few days ago, in Athens, on 24 and 25 January, an informal meeting of Justice and Home Affairs Minister was held, with the participation of Ms. Malmstrom, and there was an initial evaluation of the situation, in a follow-up to the conclusions of the action group on the Mediterranean. We have a good, credible foundation for shaping strategic guidelines for the period following Stockholm. Of course, we are awaiting the relevant Commission announcement – we hope in March – so that later, at the June European Council, we can adopt strategic guidelines on these issues.

The day-to-day management of the problem in Bulgaria – as in Greece, in Italy, in Malta – naturally cannot wait even until March, let alone June. It is something that is happening every day, often under conditions of extremely high pressure. So I think we have understood, from the statements made today during the debate, what has to be done. The Commission gave its response. I want to assure you that I will convey to the Council all the observations and concerns expressed here today by all the speakers – not just those who are experiencing the problem as Bulgarian citizens, but from the whole of the EU, because our common European conscience is being tested here.