

STATEMENT | 28 April 2016

Remarks by First Vice-President Timmermans – European Parliament Plenary Debate 28 April 2016 – Council and Commission statements on the legal aspects, democratic control and implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement

Opening remarks

It is important to recall the hand we were dealt in this crisis.

Borders had been closed in the Balkans, smugglers were in full operation; and if we did nothing, we would have condemned Greece to become a huge refugee camp, with hundreds of thousands of refugees. That is what we needed to solve. We needed to do two things immediately: to break the business model of the smugglers and to prevent Greece from becoming the victim of this situation.

I want to recall this as our starting point. Because had the situation been different, had Member States done what we proposed last year, we would obviously not be in this situation – but this is the situation the Commission had to deal with.

Of course I would have liked another situation. Of course I would have liked all Member States to share the burden. Of course I would have preferred the borders not to be sealed off. Of course we would have preferred a different situation – but we don't have that situation. And there is no use to continue pretending as though we could bring it about immediately, so we have to solve the problems we face now, and the agreement with Turkey in my view is the only way forward to solve that problem. Those who criticise the agreement have never presented an alternative we could work with under the conditions we are in and cannot change, which is the closing of the borders in the Balkans.

So we need to do two things.

We need to make sure that the business model of the smugglers is broken. Initial results show that we have succeeded in that. But at the same time, we need to make sure we comply with our humanitarian and legal obligations as European Union, which means creating legal pathways for people to come to Europe, and which also means making sure that people are treated according to the rules and that we help Turkey provide for them in the camps and in the cities where they are. It is important to recall that Turkey takes care of almost 3 million refugees, which is an incredible burden for a country, and that they are dealing with it rather well.

Since the agreement is in force, unprecedented resources have also been provided by Member States to support Greece in dealing with the issue, in terms of logistics and of expertise on the ground. Calls made

by EASO and Frontex have been answered and already around 1.000 staff have been deployed to Greece. Greece is not alone – all Member States are working together to help Greece and also to work with Turkey. I have to say that Greece is making an incredible effort, and I really want to commend our cooperation as Commission with the Greek authorities. With all the problems that we face, I think this cooperation is of an unprecedented quality. The cooperation between Greece and Turkey is also unprecedented, and something we should build upon.

Another important contribution and a result of this agreement is a better burden sharing with Turkey in protecting those fleeing war in Syria. I was in Turkey on Saturday and explained the Commission's ambition to identify support programmes – I think we can reach a level of 1 billion euros of identified projects by the end of July, which would send a clear indication that we are able to set up these programmes.

When you speak to refugees as I did last Saturday, it is clear: what they want first and foremost is for their children to be able to go to school. That is what they want. Many children have not gone to school for two or three years, and just imagine the problem you create for families if their children cannot go to school. We all know that with a decent education, once there is peace in Syria, they can go back and build up Syria again. So my primary objective is to make sure that all Syrian children can get education. Indeed, the Syrians you speak to in Turkey have one dream, and that is not going to the European Union, that is going home. So our efforts to support the international community to find peace in Syria should be doubled to make sure that people can start rebuilding their own country.

I want to repeat that we are acting in strict accordance with EU and international rules. This means that we need a number of legal guarantees, both on Greek and Turkish side. Both sides have taken all

necessary changes, and additional efforts are in place to ensure that asylum seekers receive the protection warranted by international law. This, I think, is also a welcome development in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement. Turkey has amended the legislation on temporary protection to ensure that Syrians who are returned from Greece can benefit from temporary protection in Turkey. Incidentally, we are now seeing the first voluntary returns of Syrians to Turkey. We have also reached an agreement with Turkey on additional individual assurances for other nationals, non-Syrians, on a swift treatment of their applications for protection and an effective granting of the benefits that come with this status, and an unequivocal guarantee against refoulement. Yesterday Turkey agreed to grant non-Syrians access to their labour market, which is also a positive development.

Still a lot needs to be done. We are nowhere near finished. We need to make sure that Member States increase their efforts to take in Syrian refugees via legal ways into the European Union. That is the other side of the coin. If we are to have a sustainable deal with Turkey, we also need to do our share in making sure that Syrians who flee from war and prosecution have a safe harbour, also in the European Union and in Member States. There, Member States should double their efforts, because it is not going, in my view, fast enough. We have a lot of work to do.

One remarks on visa-liberalisation. I have seen a lot of comments also in the press about this. What we are doing is speeding up something that we were doing already, namely working towards the possibility for Turks to travel without visa to the European Union. The onus is on Turkey. They have to comply with the 72 benchmarks, and say they can do that. We will see, and we will draw our conclusions and submit these

conclusions also to your Parliament. But we will not play around with those benchmarks. They are clear, they are legally framed, and we will report on them with precision.

But – I also add – I would welcome the situation where those Turks travelling to the European Union travel with modern biometric passports. And I would say that it is probably better to check who comes to the European Union with modern biometric passports than with an old fashion passport with a paper visa. The idea that we will squander our security by granting visa-free access of Turks to the European Union, I think, is misjudged.

Thank you very much madam President.

Transcript of closing remarks

Of all the criticism of the agreement reached with Turkey, one almost forgets that since the implementation of this agreement people are no longer drowning in the Aegean sea. One almost forgets that this uncontrolled irregular arrival of refugees in Europe is no longer happening at the scale we saw before. There are many things that need to be improved, there is a long way to go, but let at least acknowledge that human suffering has been limited through joint action with Turkey.

Yes, we need to do more as I said in my introductory remarks. One aspect I would like to come back to you that was not mentioned by all of you is the need for member states to do their part. It is now that member states should take in people in a legal way, who have the right to asylum and should be coming to Europe. There is still war in Syria, people are still fleeing and people deserve international protection. And it is our

moral duty and legal duty to provide that protection and now we have ways of bringing people to Europe in a safe and legal way. Member states should deliver on what was agreed.

On Turkey, should we engage, should we not engage. Even without the need to tackle this issue jointly – which we could not tackle without Turkey and by the way Turkey could not tackle without us – what have those years – the past years, the years of not engaging with Turkey, the years of standing back to back, the years of not talking to each other – what have those years done for human rights in Turkey, for the position of press in Turkey? Nothing. We need to engage.

I think opening chapters 23 and 24 would be a huge opportunity for us to take the Turks to task on human rights, on the judiciary and the independence of the judiciary, on the freedom of the media etcetera. This is what we need to do. If they want to come closer to the European Union so badly, let them prove that they can. Because now, let me be very clear on this, the distance between us and Turkey is not decreasing, it is increasing because of human rights, the media and what is happening in civil society. And if they want to come closer to the European Union, which is what they state, they should improve the situation of the media, of human rights, of civil society – let us be very clear about this. But all those years, that we sort of felt comfortable by ignoring them but not engaging with them, have done nothing to improve the situation in Turkey, on the contrary. So I would say, let's engage with them.

And let's not forget that we are dealing with a much, much wider issue than just the relationship with Turkey on the handling of the refugee problem. The refugee problem is a global problem, it is a huge problem and it will be with us with a generation at least. And the only way forward is to make agreements with our neighbours; the only way

forward is to look more intensely at what is happening in Libya, at what is happening in the North of Africa, at what is happening in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The question for us is, are we going to help bring stability to other parts of the world or are we going to sit and wait for instability to come to Europe. I would argue let's engage with the rest of the world, let's bring development to Africa, let's bring stability to our wider neighbourhood. That is the only answer to come to terms with this huge question and step one is to engage with Turkey. But have no illusions; Turkey is only one part of the issue. The problem is much wider, much deeper, much more complicated if you look at places like Libya, and perhaps Egypt and Sub-Sahara Africa.

So let's take our responsibility jointly and let's continue this extremely productive cooperation between the Commission and the European Parliament; jointly we might be able to get the Council to stay on the right track.

Thank you very much Mr. President.

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