

Presidency Statement on the situation at the EU's external borders with Belarus

1. The EU Ministers of Home Affairs held today a meeting in the framework of the Integrated Political Crisis Response mechanism to discuss, in the presence of the Schengen associated states, the situation as well as necessary action at the EU's external borders with Belarus and the increased organised/facilitated migratory pressure on the neighbouring countries.
2. The Presidency and the Member States express their solidarity with Member States affected by the current situation, in particular Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, and acknowledge their efforts to manage illegal arrivals and protect the EU's external borders. The current situation gives rise to concern and requires continued vigilance and urgent coordinated action to prevent further illegal crossings.
3. As also emphasized by the High Representative in his Declaration on behalf of the European Union of 30 July, the Presidency and the Member States once again strongly condemn and reject Belarus' use of migratory pressure, its contribution to the organisation of illegal border crossing to Lithuania as well as to Poland and Latvia, and its attempts to instrumentalise human beings for political purposes. This aggressive behaviour which emerges as a recurring practice by various third countries, is unacceptable and amounts to a direct attack aimed at destabilizing and pressurizing the EU. The European Union will need to further consider its response to these situations in order to increase its effectiveness and to deter any future attempts to instrumentalise illegal migration in this manner.
4. While acknowledging that since the beginning of the crisis Lithuania has received various forms of assistance through the established EU channels, such as the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), the support of the agencies, or bilateral assistance, the ongoing crisis shows the need for further assistance and solidarity with the affected Member States. This was expressed in a letter of the Commissioner Lenarčič as a response to the letter sent to him by the Slovenian Minister of the Interior Aleš Hojs. The Commissioner's letter lists numerous activities already taken by the Commission. The need for additional assistance was also expressed in a joint letter by the Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša and the Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda. Furthermore, support for common understanding of the challenging situation was showed in the Joint Statement of the Prime Ministers of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. It was further on raised by the Presidents of the European Council, Mr Charles Michel, and the European Commission, Ms Ursula von der Leyen, the High Representative/Vice President, Mr Josep Borrell, as well as Commissioner Ylva Johansson. Additionally, nine Member States expressed a great concern in a joint letter and condemned the instrumentalisation of migration of some third countries for their political goals.
5. The EU and its Member States remain determined to take all necessary measures to effectively protect all the EU external borders, by counteracting Belarus' aggression, fighting illegal crossings and strengthening Member States' capacities also with the aim to provide dignified conditions for asylum seekers and to return persons that have no right to stay while fully respecting fundamental rights. To achieve efficient return, the EU, particularly the Commission in collaboration with the EEAS and Member States, will continue to reach out to relevant third countries with the aim of enhancing their cooperation.

6. The Member States and the European Commission, supported by the EU agencies, already provided their support through deployment of Frontex rapid border intervention teams and additional technical assistance, deployment of EASO and Europol's experts and through providing additional funding necessary to increase reception capacities, facilitate the integrated border management and develop adequate legal framework to ensure effective protection of EU external borders and effectively tackle future situations, when migration is used for political purposes. The agencies still have capacities at their disposal and they will gradually send them to the affected Member States according to their needs.
7. The Presidency welcomes the European Commission's emergency assistance to be granted to the affected Member States, to address the first short-term needs for reception and asylum as well medium-term support, notably to extend the border surveillance system to cover the entire border with Belarus, in particular in the form of temporary technical barriers, and request the Commission to examine duly further requests for support from all affected Member States. In medium and long-term, Member States recognize the need to strengthen the entire external border of the European Union to prevent illegal border crossings in the future. The Presidency welcomes the response from Member States and Norway to the call for aid, following the activation of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, and expects additional financial aid from the Commission.
8. The Presidency acknowledges that comprehensive dialogues and partnerships with the countries of origin and transit are of crucial importance and for the benefit of all sides and underlines the need for these countries, to take necessary action, provide support and fully cooperate in readmission and returns. The situation underlines the need for a common EU return and readmission policy that provides full support to the Member States. In this respect the Presidency will prioritize discussions regarding the effective practical implementation of the Article 25a of the Visa Code.
9. The Presidency welcomes the dialogue and cooperation with Iraq and looks forward to further progress, particularly on readmission and return. Both the EU and Iraq stand to mutually benefit from enhanced and more effective cooperation. At the same time, the emergence of new migratory routes to Belarus using other transport hubs must be tackled as a matter of urgency, in cooperation with all countries concerned. In parallel, Member States call upon the EEAS and the Commission to intensify efforts to engage with other relevant third countries on return and readmission.
10. The Presidency and the Member States call on all countries to adhere to the principles of "Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation" and ensure that civil aviation is not instrumentalised by the international smugglers' networks.
11. The Presidency will reconsider engagement under the Cross-Border Cooperation Programmes implemented under the 2014–2020 European Neighbourhood Instrument, while continuing to support the Belarus civil society. However, the Member States and their beneficiaries need to be ensured the possibilities to complete the projects on its own territory to the maximum extent possible.
12. The Presidency will continue to monitor the situation, including assessing the medium to long-term implications of the evolving migratory situation and the relevant EU instruments to be engaged in order to ensure an effective and consistent EU action.

13. The Presidency is conscious of the evolving migration crisis in Afghanistan and its potential implications on migratory flows, which could affect us all. The ministers of home affairs will revert shortly to the situation in Afghanistan and will maintain close coordination on the matter.