

20 October 2015

Outcome of the European Council of 15 October 2015

The one-day European Council meeting held on 15 October 2015 again focused on the issue of migration, as indicated in the [EPRS Pre-European Council Briefing](#). While assessing the [state of implementation](#) of the migration 'orientations' agreed upon by the informal European Council on 23 September 2015, EU Heads of State or Government concentrated on working to secure the European Union's external borders. The main decisions taken in this respect were: the agreement to work on an integrated border management system, and also the enhancement of Frontex's mandate in relation to the development of a European Border and Coast Guard System. The European Council also considered further cooperation with third countries regarding migration issues, welcomed the agreement of an [EU-Turkey joint action plan](#), and looked at how to best 'respond to the influx of refugees in Europe and ensuring returns'. Other agenda points addressed by Heads of State or Government were the situations in both Syria and Libya, the 'Presidents' report' on completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union and the state of play concerning the UK referendum on EU membership.

1. Migration

The European Council assessed the implementation of the migration orientations agreed by the informal European Council on 23 September, based upon the European Commission's [report on progress in implementation of priority actions](#). In his [invitation letter](#), European Council President Donald Tusk argued that 'the exceptionally easy access to Europe is one of the main pull factors' and that the European Council should address 'the future of the Dublin system'; 'the specific role of the hotspots' and 'the strengthening of the EU's external borders, including a possible EU border guard'.

1.1. External Borders

The discussions on migration concentrated on 'securing the Union's external borders', with President Tusk [remarking](#) that progress on genuine border security was an important achievement of the European Council meeting. As mentioned in the [EPRS Pre-European Council Briefing](#), EU Heads of State or Government agreed in their [Conclusions](#) on the gradual establishment of an integrated external borders management system. They also called for enhancing Frontex's mandate in relation to the development of a European Border and Coast Guard System, including the deployment of Rapid Border Intervention Teams. In his speech to the European Council, European Parliament President Martin Schulz recalled that the European Parliament had already included a 'pilot project on the issue of a European Border and Coast Guard System in this year's budget'. He also [called upon](#) European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker to swiftly draw up a legislative proposal on this topic. The Commission is expected to rapidly present a package of measures regarding the improvement of the management of the EU's external borders, indicating already in its [report on progress in implementation of priority actions](#) that it will bring forward proposals to develop a fully operational European Border and Coast Guard before the end of the year.

1.2. Cooperation with Third Countries

Another area examined by the European Council was the EU's 'cooperation with third countries' on migration issues. While also calling for an effective and operational follow up to the [Declaration of the High-level Conference on the Eastern Mediterranean - Western Balkans Route](#) of 8 October 2015 and addressing the [Valetta Summit](#) on 11/12 November 2015, the main focus was on Turkey-EU relations. Following previous [statements from European Council President Donald Tusk](#) as well as from [European Parliament President Martin Schulz](#), the European Council expressed its condolences to the people of Turkey following the Ankara bomb attack on 10 October 2015, where over 100 people were killed and over 400 injured, and pledged its support to fight terrorism. In recent weeks, Turkey has been repeatedly identified by the European Union as a fundamental cornerstone to address the migration crisis, most notably in the European Commission's [Draft Action Plan on support of refugees and migration management](#). In parallel with the European Council meeting, European Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans and Commissioner Johannes Hahn held discussions with the Turkish government regarding the ongoing migrant crisis. The draft action plan was [endorsed](#) by the EU Heads of State or Government in their Conclusions. The successful completion of this cooperation agenda was conditionally linked to accelerating the fulfilment of the EU visa liberalisation roadmap with Turkey. In his [statement before the European Parliament in preparation of the 15 October European Council](#), European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker acknowledged that there are currently considerable problems in Turkey and supporting the European Parliament's calls for democratic reforms, press freedom and respect for other fundamental principles whilst also stressing that 'we need Turkey'.

1.3. Financial Support

The European Council also asked the Member States to further contribute to the UNHCR, the World Food Programme and other agencies as well as to support the 'EU's Regional Trust Fund responding to the Syria crisis' ('[Madad Fund](#)') and the [EU Trust Fund for Africa](#). In his [statement before the European Parliament in preparation of the 15 October European Council](#), European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker criticised the lack of implementation by (a number of) Member States of the [23 September European Council decisions](#)¹ who are not delivering on their pledges to provide personal and financial assistance. He emphasised that the 'European Institutions delivered, but the Member States failed to do so'. The Council in its [session of 8 October 2015](#) and the European Parliament in its 14 October 2015 mini plenary session agreed on another [amendment of the 2015 budget in order to manage the migration crisis](#). The criticism regarding Member States' follow up to their financial commitments was repeated by the [President of the European Council](#) as well as European Parliament President Martin Schulz and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in a joint press conference preceding the European Council. On this occasion, President Schulz and President Juncker [announced](#) that henceforth the President of the European Parliament and the President of the European Commission will meet prior to every European Council meeting to discuss and align, as far as possible, their positions. President Schulz [stressed](#) that this decision is based on inclusive cooperation between the two institutions who share the joint project of strengthening the community method for the functioning of the European Union. At the press conference President Juncker also [indicated](#) that the revision process of the Dublin rules, originally foreseen for March 2016, will be 'speeded up'.

1.4. Management of migration flows

A third aspect the European Council addressed under migration policy was how to 'respond to the influx of refugees in Europe and ensuring returns'. The EU leaders called for a continuation of the previously agreed objectives for setting up 'hotspots' to ensure the identification, registration, fingerprinting and reception of migrants, as well as ensuring their relocation and return. Emphasising the need for a rapid and full implementation of the decisions taken on relocation, resettlement and 'hotspots', the European Council also

¹ For an in depth analysis of the 23 September informal European Council see [Eurocomment](#).

called upon Member States to fully support these efforts. Experts and the necessary resources should be provided to both Frontex and [EASO](#) for the Migration Management Support Teams working in the hotspot areas.

Regarding the issue of 'returns', the European Council also called for the full application, before the end of the year, of the Return Directive by Member States and for the effective implementation of all readmission commitments. It also decided to create a dedicated return office within Frontex. In order to include the right to organise joint return operations, the Council concluded that the mandate of Frontex should be enlarged and its role 'enhanced' regarding the acquisition of travel documents for returnees. With the aim of increasing the leverage of return and readmission, the '[more-for-more principle](#)' should be applied where appropriate and the Commission and the High Representative were asked to propose within six months comprehensive and tailor-made incentives to be used vis-a-vis third countries.

1.5. Syria and Lybia

Also as part of the discussion on migration, EU Heads of State or Government addressed the situations in both Syria and Libya. Regarding Syria, the European Council discussed political and military developments and assessed that 'the Assad regime bears the greatest responsibility for the 250,000 deaths of the conflict and the millions of displaced people' and that 'there cannot be a lasting peace in Syria under the present leadership'. The European Council also expressed its concern about Russian attacks on Syrian opposition groups and civilians and the risk of further military escalation; it concluded that the focus should be on the fight against DAESH and other UN-designated terrorist groups in the framework of a united and coordinated strategy in tandem with a cogent political process on the basis of the [Geneva Communiqué of 2012](#). The European Leaders reiterated the EU's commitment to a full engagement in finding a political solution to the conflict in close cooperation with both the UN and regional countries, and called on all parties involved to work to that effect. On 9 October 2015, the UN adopted its [Security Council Resolution 2240](#), which politically endorses the EU military operation 'to Intercept Vessels off the Libyan Coast Suspected of Migrant Smuggling'. Regarding Libya, the European Council welcomed the UN's proposals for a national unity government in Libya and called on all parties to swiftly endorse the [political agreement](#). The EU reiterated its full support for the Government of National Accord as soon as it takes office.

The Conclusions of this European Council should also be seen in conjunction with the 12 October 2015 Foreign Affairs Council [Conclusions](#), the [Declaration of the High-level Conference on the Eastern Mediterranean - Western Balkans Route of 8 October](#) and the Justice and Home Affairs Council [Conclusions](#) of 8 October 2015, which go into greater detail on some of the aspects addressed by EU Heads of State or Government on 15 October. The European Council acknowledged that the overall migration and asylum policy of the EU requires further discussions and continuing reflection. It plans to keep developments under review.

Using a new and unprecedented format and in view of the unfolding emergency in the countries along the Western Balkans migratory route, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called a '[Leaders' Meeting](#)' in Brussels on 25 October 2015 to discuss the refugee flows along the Western Balkans route, 'to be held at the level of Heads of State or Government'. The objective of the meeting will be to agree common operational conclusions which could be immediately implemented.

Attending the 'Leaders' Meeting' are the Heads of State or Government of Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia. The President of the European Council, the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the EU and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have also been invited to attend this Leaders' Meeting. The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (Frontex) will also be represented.

2. 'Presidents' report' on completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union

The European Council also took stock of the discussion on the [Five Presidents' report](#) on completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union and EU Leaders reiterated that the process of completing the Economic and Monetary Union must be brought forward in full respect of the single market and in an open and transparent manner. The Leaders will return to these issues at their 17/18 December 2015 meeting. By that date, the Commission [will have tabled](#) specific proposals with a view to completing the EMU: (i) for the review of the six- and two-pack; (ii) for a more efficient Euro area external representation in multilateral organisations and bodies (e.g. IMF); and (iii) for a re-insurance system at EU level for national deposit guarantee schemes, which is expected to initiate the completion process of the banking union.

3. State of play on the UK referendum

As indicated in the [EPRS Pre-European Council Briefing](#), this agenda point was mainly for information purposes and the main discussion is expected to take place at the European Council meeting in December 2015. At the 15 October meeting, European Council President Donald Tusk reported on the preparatory discussions between his officials and the UK over the course of the last few months and [announced](#) that Prime Minister David Cameron has committed to setting out the UK's specific concerns in writing by early November.

4. Flight MH17

The European Council also welcomed an independent international report, conducted by the Dutch Safety Board, on the downing of flight MH17. The European Council welcomed and supported the ongoing efforts to hold accountable those responsible, in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2166.

5. UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) preparations

While it was not officially on the agenda or featured in the European Council Conclusions, the Paris COP21 preparations were nevertheless [addressed](#) by French President François Hollande during the European Council meeting as indicated in President Tusk's [invitation letter to the members of the European Council](#).

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