

Outcome of informal European Council of 7 March 2016 and the informal meeting of the EU Heads of State or Government with Turkey

The informal European Council of 7 March 2016 focused on migration, assessing the state of implementation of previously agreed measures. EU leaders stressed the need to fully apply the Schengen Borders Code, thereby ending the 'wave-through' policy for migrants, providing humanitarian assistance to Greece and moving forward in the EU's cooperation with Turkey. The latter point was also the main focus of the informal meeting of the EU Heads of State or Government with Turkish Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu. Leaders agreed to accelerate the implementation of the EU-Turkey Action Plan and welcomed additional proposals made by Turkey. In particular, the lifting of visa requirements should be brought forward to June 2016 and disbursement of the €3-billion Refugee Facility for Syrians should be speeded up.

1. Informal meeting of the EU Heads of State or Government with Turkey

EU Heads of State or Government [met](#) on 7 March 2016 with Turkish Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, to take stock of EU-Turkey cooperation, in particular of the implementation of the [EU-Turkey Action Plan](#), and to set common priorities for the coming weeks. Prior to the meeting, European Council President Donald Tusk [visited](#) Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara. There he [advocated](#) 'a fast and large-scale mechanism to ship back irregular migrants arriving in Greece to Turkey', as this would 'break the business model of the smugglers'. At the informal meeting of EU Heads of State or Government with Turkey, leaders agreed that Turkey would take back all migrants apprehended in Turkish waters.

At the previous European Council, on 16 February 2016, EU leaders had already [stressed](#) the importance of the 'full and speedy implementation of the EU-Turkey Action Plan'. At that time, they acknowledged that some progress had been made, but called for more decisive efforts on the Turkish side to ensure its effective implementation. This time, leaders [acknowledged](#) 'good implementation of the Joint Action Plan on migration', but 'the flow of migrants passing from Turkey to Greece remains much too high and needs to be brought down significantly.'

After lengthy discussions, EU leaders [welcomed](#) 'bold proposals' by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, to complement the existing EU-Turkey Action Plan, agreed at the [meeting of Heads of State or Government with Turkey](#) on 29 November 2015, with additional elements. These include:

- the return of all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands;
- the acceleration of the implementation of the visa liberalisation roadmap;
- the speeding up of the disbursement of the €3 billion, and additional funding for the Refugee Facility for Syrians;
- preparation for the opening of new chapters in the accession negotiations;
- the possibility of establishing in Syria areas which will be safer; and
- resettlement of Syrian refugees on a one-for-one basis.

The decision on other Turkish requests, such as an [additional €3 billion](#), on top of the existing €3 billion for the [refugee facility for Turkey](#), and the acceleration of talks on Turkish membership of the EU, were

postponed. The European Council President, Donald Tusk, was tasked to 'work out the details with the Turkish side before the [17-18] March [2016] European Council.'

EU leaders also discussed the situation of the media in Turkey with the Turkish Prime Minister. Prior to the meeting with Heads of State or Government, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu met with the European Parliament President, Martin Schulz, discussing among other things the [situation of the freedom of the press](#) in Turkey. After the meeting of EU leaders with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, President Schulz [outlined](#) the European Parliament's role in, and views on, the ongoing process. He argued that one should not link the Turkish negotiations on accession to the EU with Turkey's role in solving the refugee crisis, and called on the Turkish government to restart the peace process with the Kurds.

2. Informal European Council

Immediately after their meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, EU Heads of State or Government convened for an informal European Council meeting to discuss a common European approach to the migration crisis. Prior to the meeting, the European Council President, Donald Tusk, [spoke](#) of the emergence of a European consensus, for the first time, around a comprehensive strategy regarding the migration crisis. The main decisions at the informal European Council revolved around restoring the Schengen area, cooperation with Turkey and providing (humanitarian) assistance to Greece.

2.1 Restoring the Schengen area

Prior to the European Council meeting, Mr Tusk had told migrants, 'Do not come to Europe'. At the European Council meeting, EU leaders declared that 'irregular flows of migrants along the Western Balkans route have now come to an end.'

Following the mandate from the February 2016 European Council 'to restore the normal functioning of the Schengen area', the European Commission published a [communication](#), 'Back to Schengen – A roadmap' (see table 1) on 4 March 2016. In this document, the Commission [stressed](#) the need for a 'coordinated European approach to temporary border controls within the framework of the Schengen rules instead of the current patchwork of unilateral decisions.' The Commission also highlighted protection of the external borders, and the particular role for Greece and the need to support Greece (see below). It also called for the European Border and Coast Guard to be made fully operational by November 2016 at the latest.

At the 7 March 2016 informal European Council, these messages were supported by EU leaders, who called for all the elements of the Commission roadmap to be taken forward as a matter of priority. They also repeated their message from the recent European Council, of 18-19 February 2016, stressing the need to putting an end to the ['wave-through'](#) approach, whereby potential asylum-seekers are allowed to travel on to the Member State of their choice.

The Commission has recently [estimated](#) that the potential [cost of non-Schengen](#) (namely a full re-establishment of border controls within the Schengen area) would involve direct costs of between €5 and €18 billion annually.

2.2 Cooperation with Turkey

EU leaders also further discussed the EU's cooperation with Turkey (see above). The European Council called, in particular, for the implementation of the existing resettlement commitments and to continue work on a credible [voluntary humanitarian admission scheme with Turkey](#). Heads of State or Government called for ensuring comprehensive, large scale and fast-track returns to Turkey of all irregular migrants not in need of international protection. They also underlined the importance of the NATO activity in the Aegean Sea, and called on all NATO members to support it actively.

2.3 Providing (humanitarian) assistance Greece

Due to the closure of the borders on the Western Balkans route, tens of thousands of migrants are stranded in Greece, turning the country into what the country's Prime Minister and subsequently President Donald Tusk have called '[a warehouse of souls](#)'. EU leaders confirmed European Council President Donald Tusk's earlier [promise](#) that 'the European Union will not leave Greece alone', and expressed their conviction to 'stand by Greece in this difficult situation' as 'this is a collective EU responsibility requiring fast and efficient mobilisation of all available EU means and resources and of Member States contributions.'

EU leaders welcomed the European Commission's [proposal](#) for an 'Emergency Assistance Instrument', following the [European Council's conclusions of 18-19 February 2016](#), in which the Commission was tasked with making proposals to develop the EU's capacity to provide humanitarian assistance internally, in cooperation with organisations such as the UN Refugee Agency. This [proposal](#) for a Council Regulation is based on Article [122](#) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), and would enable the EU to provide emergency support in response to exceptional crises or disasters within EU Member States, which give rise to severe humanitarian consequences, including helping Member States cope with large numbers of refugees.

The European Council asked Member States to provide more places for relocation and to accelerate the implementation of relocation. In order to support Greece with relocation, managing the external border, and the proper functioning of the hotspots, EU leaders called for further assistance to Greece. Frontex and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) will launch additional calls for national guest officers, and Member States are asked to 'respond rapidly and in full'.

The European Council will [come back](#) to the migration file in all its aspects at the next European Council meeting, on 17-18 March 2016.

Table 1: Deadlines in the Commission communication 'Back to Schengen – A roadmap'

Date	Objective	Actor
4 March 2016	Report on its progress in implementing the actions identified in the Recommendation on resuming Dublin transfers.	Greece
12 March 2016	Provide an action plan to implement the Council recommendations to restore external border controls.	Greece
16 March 2016	First Report on Relocation and Resettlement.	Commission
16 March 2016	Issue a proposal on reform of the Dublin Regulation.	Commission
22 March 2016 at the latest	Launch additional calls for European border guard teams and technical equipment to support Greece.	Frontex
1 April 2016 at the latest	Deadline for responding to Frontex call for human resources and technical equipment.	Member States
12 April 2016	Present its assessment of the action plan presented by Athens on 12 March.	Commission
16 April 2016	Second Report on Relocation and Resettlement.	Commission
11-17 April 2016	Evaluation of the effectiveness of the Greek sea, land and air borders.	Commission and Member State experts
12 May 2016 at the latest	Report on its implementation of the Council recommendations.	Greece

Date	Objective	Actor
12 May 2016	If the serious deficiencies in external border control were to persist, make a proposal under Article 26(2) of the Schengen Borders Code	Commission
13 May 2016	If the serious deficiencies in external border control were to persist, adopt a recommendation under Article 26(2) of the Schengen Borders Code for a coherent Union approach to temporary internal border controls.	Council
16 May 2016	Third Report on Relocation and Resettlement.	Commission
June 2016 at the latest	Reach agreement on the EU border and coast guard and adopt the legal act.	EP and Council
June 2016	Present its assessment on sending migrants back to Greece using the Dublin agreement.	Commission
August 2016	To be operational.	EU border and coast guard
September 2016 at the latest	To be fully functional.	EU border and coast guard
December 2016	Target date for bringing to an end the exceptional safeguard measures (i.e. the internal border controls).	Member States

To contact the European Council Oversight Unit, please e-mail: EPRS-EuropeanCouncilOversight@ep.europa.eu

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