**Margaritis Schinas,** *Vice-President of the Commission***.** – Mr President, honourable Members, in recent weeks, of course, the spotlight has been on the Central Mediterranean route, where over 90 000 migrants and refugees arrived only this year. These were departures mainly from Libya and Tunisia, and they were originating primarily from Egypt, Tunisia and Bangladesh. The increase on the Central Med route was over 50% compared to last year, and most of these arrivals reached the European Union after hazardous journeys, search and rescue operations at sea under difficult conditions.

At the same time, other routes such as the Turkey‑Eastern Mediterranean route and the Western Mediterranean‑Atlantic route also continue to face ongoing pressure – and in particular the Western Balkans route, which has seen a dramatic increase in numbers this year. Only yesterday, 500 people were rescued from a small fishing boat near Crete by the combined operation of a Greek navy frigate, coast guard ships of the Hellenic Coast Guard, a tanker, two cargo ships and two Italian fishing boats, all working together.

Honourable Members, all this shows that there will always be challenges and why our responses must not be *ad hoc*. We cannot continue working event by event, crisis by crisis, ship by ship. The time has now come for a sustainable, comprehensive, holistic European asylum and migration framework. Since two years ago, since September 2020, with my colleague, Commissioner Johansson, we have put on the table a comprehensive set of proposal that provides a response to these challenges: the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.

It is ironic that we have everything we need at our fingertips, but just seemingly out of reach. It is like having a parachute but choosing to jump out of the plane without it. It is the Pact that will improve our Member States’ ability to manage migration on a system based on EU law and the Community method – and if we have learned anything in recent years and this succession of crises, it is that flying solo is not an option. We now need a European agreement on the Pact.

This debate is therefore a great occasion to renew our call, on Parliament as well as on the Council, to advance on the roadmap towards the adoption of all the pending proposals of the Pact, starting most urgently with the Qualifications and Resettlement Framework Regulations and Reception Conditions Directive, where we already have political compromises as well as the screening and Eurodac proposals, where we already have Council mandates and where trilogues should now begin in earnest.

But in the meantime we cannot afford to wait to address the difficult situation at sea. Assistance to people in distress at sea is a legal obligation for EU Member States under international and EU law, regardless of how people ended in that situation. Everybody needs to work together on a common response, with saving lives being priority number one.

This Monday, we proposed an action plan with 20 specific actions to address the immediate challenges in the Central Mediterranean. First of all, we need to work with partner countries and international organisations who will never be able to sustain an EU migration policy in isolation. We will support Tunisia, Egypt and Libya to ensure better border management and migration management. We will boost the fight against migrant smuggling, step up our diplomatic engagement on returns and improve legal pathways to the EU. We will maximise the impact of all these actions by launching a Team Europe initiative before the end of this year. Other than working with partners, we also need a more coordinated approach on search and rescue, with stronger cooperation between our Member States and all actors involved.

Precisely in our Pact, we have put in place a European Contact Group on search and rescue. Let’s use it. We have also asked Frontex to assess the situation and to see whether we need to devote more resources and assets at Community level, and we will keep working closely with the UNHCR and the IOM on potential regional approaches while at the same time promoting discussions with the International Maritime Organisation.

Last, but certainly not least in this chapter, we need to make full use of the voluntary solidarity mechanism that we agreed under the French Presidency. We agreed a solidarity declaration in June. That was a big success of our French friends, and thousands of relocation places are already available. Of course, this is a temporary mechanism, but it is also possible bridge to the future permanent system grounded on EU law that we want to see under the Pact.

Frankly, we do not need to reinvent the wheel here. We have the tools, Member States have to use them. The Commission will continue to fully support. Honourable Members, history does not repeat itself often, but it often rhymes. We have to learn the lessons of the past when it comes to migration. We have first to enact immediate operational and practical measures to address the situation along all migratory routes, and the Extraordinary Home Affairs Council on Friday will allow Member States to achieve fast results. However, it will not remove the need for long‑term binding solutions.

We are in much stronger position now to cope with migration challenges than in 2015‑2016. We have a strong European Border and Coast Guard and a fully‑functioning asylum agency. We have resources, we have instruments and we have the political will, and we cannot wait any longer to equip ourselves with a future‑proof migration framework.

This is not a debate about one ship, one route or one part of the sea. It is a debate about our ability as Europeans to manage migration in a spirit of trust and solidarity. We will inform the Ministers on Friday of the latest developments and we will give them the necessary tools for solutions and we will call on them, like we call on you today, to secure an agreement on the Pact. Action plans, emergency meetings and emergency debates are useful but not sufficient, when we have the permanent solutions. The solutions are here at our fingertips. We can do it and we shall do it.