

“New Pact on Migration and Asylum” Keynote, German Ambassador’s residence, Sofia

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Mr. Ambassador, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to join you today and to deliver a keynote on the “New Pact on Migration and Asylum” of the EU. Of course, I would have liked to join you in person in beautiful Sofia and in the German Embassy; unfortunately this is not possible at the moment. The last time I enjoyed Bulgarian hospitality was about a year ago when I had the honour to speak before the National Assembly. Little did we know then what 2020 would have in store for us. The Covid-19 pandemic has its grip on the world, but we have learned to use our digital tools to meet and to work together, even when there is some distance between us.

There are two reasons that make this afternoon a special occasion for my organisation and me. The first reason is that in May of this year, Germany has joined ICMPD as 18th Member State. Of course, we are very happy about that. Germany is one of the key actors in the European and global cooperation on migration. Its membership to ICMPD will strengthen our possibilities to develop new and better solutions to meet one of the biggest challenges of our time. Bulgaria, by the way, is a Member of ICMPD since 2003 and we have always enjoyed the excellent cooperation we had in many joint initiatives.

The second reason lies in the fact that I have the pleasure to share some good news on the topic of today, namely the new Migration Pact. The Pact was presented by the Commission on 23rd of September and is now passed to the Parliament and Council to examine, to discuss and to – hopefully – adopt by December of this year.

Why do I think that I can report good news on the Pact? Well, we have to go back to 2015, the year of the so-called refugee crisis, when more than a million of refugees and asylum seekers entered the territory of the EU in a largely uncontrolled and chaotic way. This massive inflow was triggered by the situation in Syria, but included many other nationalities as well. It included individuals who fled from war and conflict but also individuals who tried to escape the bleak economic conditions in their home

countries. At the same time, the refugee crisis made obvious that the existing system was insufficient in dealing with such situations.

At the core of the so-called “Common European Asylum System” is the “Dublin Regulation”. It makes the Member State of first entry responsible for handling the asylum procedure and hosting the asylum applicant. From the beginning, this system put the highest pressure on the Member States at the external borders. Consequently, it never really worked and resulted in large-scale secondary movements of asylum seekers within the EU. In face of the millions of applicants that came in 2015, the system more or less collapsed. Figures went down after the peak of the crisis, but also last year the EU recorded a total of 700,000 asylum applications, again a number the Dublin System was never designed for and cannot take care of.

Since 2015 the Commission, the Member States and all EU Presidencies have tried to overcome this situation and reach consensus on a new system. The main issue always was the question of a mandatory distribution of asylum seekers within the EU. The Member States at the external borders insisted on such a distribution key to relieve them from their heavy burden. The majority of other Member States rejected such a concept because they worried that this would create additional incentives for migrants to come to Europe in an irregular way. The result was a political gridlock that blocked any progress on the system.

The new Commission under President Von der Leyen and the German Presidency of the EU took a different approach. For a whole year they visited the capitals, they listened, they promoted intensive discussions between the institutions and the Member States before the final text was completed.

The proposal presented now is probably the most holistic attempt the Commission has ever made to address Europe’s migration challenges and opportunities. It integrates the interlinkages between different migration policy areas and between the internal, external and the border control dimensions better than ever before. Moreover, the text is not the end of the process; it is a milestone in a joint effort that will continue throughout 2020 and beyond.

A first important aspect is that the Pact puts a strong focus on all aspects related to the external dimension and on the interlinkages with other policy areas like trade, development and economic cooperation, also involving public-private-partnership.

We as ICMPD can only welcome this focus. The European migration challenges have their origins outside of Europe. Of course, the internal dimension is highly important, but the real change has to be made where these challenges arise, and the new Pact caters for that.

As regards the dominating discussion point of the last five years', namely the question of solidarity and responsibility sharing, the Pact includes promising new proposals as well. A return dimension should enrich the scope of solidarity. Member States would assume a "return sponsorship" as an obligation to support the return of rejected asylum seekers from another Member States' territory. In this regard, Member States should have the flexibility to decide whether they engage in return sponsorships or in the relocation of asylum seekers. Other forms of solidarity like the provision of staff and financial support will be part of the toolbox as well.

Finally, there is the idea to conduct a pre-screening of asylum seekers directly at the external borders of the EU. Those with very low prospects of getting a positive asylum decision should enter a fast-track procedure at the border. In case of a negative decision, they should be immediately returned to their home country. This is an ambitious plan. But if it works it will definitely reduce the number of irregular arrivals because migrants would assess their chances of reaching the EU more carefully and before they pay money to the smugglers.

If we look into the future, it is safe to say that the next immediate crisis in Europe will have its origin outside of Europe as well. The Beirut harbour disaster, for instance, has displaced and estimated 300,000 people in a country plagued by severe political and economic challenges and hosting large-scale refugee populations. Nobody should be surprised if this situation triggers significant migration flows, but everybody should be prepared to cope with them. Another example is the recent upsurge in irregular arrivals from Tunisia. As a consequence of the break-down of tourism in the country due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many young Tunisians see no other option than leaving their country and trying to find work in the EU. This pattern will repeat itself many times in the future. Together with its own economic recovery, the EU will have to support its partners in the neighbourhood, in the Middle East, in Asia and in Africa in their efforts to overcome the health and economic crisis.

In this context, it has to be welcomed that the Commission strongly emphasises the aspect of crisis preparedness in its proposal. It will be crucial to better prepare, to think ahead and to try to address crisis situations in their early stages.

As I have said before, the joint work on the Pact will continue this year and the following years. However, there is a solid basis now. This time it might really be possible to find common solutions and a good compromise.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude with another important remark. The recent events in Moria remind us in a dramatic way that such solutions must be found despite all the existing differences. In addition to the legitimate aim of combating people smugglers and irregular migration, they also must do justice to the fundamental values of the European Union. We have to find better ways to assure protection for those who really need it. The joint work on the Pact must try to ensure this as well.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Ambassador Eichhorn again for the kind invitation to speak to you today and thank all of you for joining the discussion.

Thank you very much.