

## Achievements and Developments in the Area of Home Affairs during Bulgaria's Presidency of the EU

---

Check speech against delivery

*Sofia, 17 July 2018*

Mr. / Ms. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

First of all I would like to thank Mr. Tsvetanov and our Bulgarian hosts for organising today's conference and for inviting me as a speaker. I feel very honoured about this invitation and have gladly accepted it. As Director General of the ICMPD I will focus on aspects related to migration and asylum. And I am very happy that there is a lot to talk about in terms of achievements and progress of the Bulgarian Presidency but also a little bit to say about the cooperation between the Presidency and the ICMPD during that period.

Without a doubt, there have been times less challenging when it comes to the main tasks of an EU Presidency, namely to drive forward the the Council's work on the Acquis, to ensure that the agenda of the Union progresses and that cooperation between Member States works. I think it is safe to say that Bulgaria has done an excellent and truly remarkable job when it comes to these tasks.

I am not giving away any secrets when I tell you that the Union is going through difficult times. The refugee crisis in 2015 has made obvious that the EU and its Member States had underestimated the importance and disruptive power of the migration and refugee issue.

Thus, it is largely irrelevant whether the situation should be seen as a real crisis or not. The total number of refugees represents less than 0.1% of the world population and one could argue that the term "crisis" does not really fit the situation. Notwithstanding this, from the perspective of political systems the crisis is more than real. Three years after it started, it still puts in question the legitimacy of governments, the functioning of international cooperation and the existence of supranational institutions like the EU. The resulting political pressures triggered a number of responses that go in the right direction: They involve the highest levels of government, work on a joint global agenda and try to shape this agenda from a perspective of partnership between all countries involved.

Nobody should have expected that this would be a straight process leading to quick results. It is a principle dilemma of political systems that they need time to achieve progress, which is even more the case in a policy area which does not allow for simple answers. Unfortunately, time is the last thing an impatient public is ready to give. Nevertheless, many positive developments have

happened. In the European context there are a number of examples like the Valletta Declaration, the EU Trust Fund, the Migration Partnership Framework or the EU–Turkey Statement. At the global level, the most important initiatives are the New York Declaration and the two global compacts on migration and refugees that should be agreed in the near future. We can be optimistic that all these initiatives are a starting point for new and enduring cooperation on migration and displacement. We also know, however, that it will take many additional efforts and many years of joint work before we reach our common goal of making migration a matter of choice rather than of necessity.

The Bulgarian Presidency understood very well the complexity of the migration issue and addressed it in a well balanced approach. It also made clear that this approach has to take into account the concerns of the European voters. And I think it managed quite well to achieve progress in a situation where the European Union is under immense political pressure. The Presidency defined the security of European citizens and the issue of migration as its main priorities. It gave priority to the protection of borders but it also emphasised the full respect for the rights of persons in need of international protection. It stressed the need to work more effectively in the field of return and readmission. But it did not forget about those migrants in a vulnerable situation and those who have become victims of criminal networks benefitting from these situations. Consequently, it put a strong focus on the fight against trafficking in human beings and the smuggling of migrants.

The Sofia Declaration from the 17<sup>th</sup> of May welcomed the commitment of the Western Balkans partners to take firm action against human trafficking. Already two months earlier the Ministers of the Interior of South-East Europe had come together in Brdo to reaffirm their commitment to the strengthening of regional cooperation to combat trafficking.

Another major achievement of the Bulgarian Presidency was to return the focus on the European perspective for the Western Balkan countries. In recent years the issue had slipped down on the European agenda and the Presidency deserves a lot of credit for putting it up there again. The Sofia Declaration reaffirmed the full support of the EU for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. And this is extremely important also from the migration perspective. Strong regional cooperation is a vital factor. Displacement, irregular migration, trafficking and smuggling have no national boundaries. Effective policies will always require a comprehensive, coordinated and international approach. There won't be solutions for the European migration challenges without involving the Western Balkans countries and the Bulgarian Presidency reminded us of the importance of the European perspective in this regard. Closely linked is another major achievement, namely the resolution of the name dispute between Athens and Skopje, which has built the bridge for the much needed deepening of cooperation in the region.

Maybe we can call the “building of bridges” as one of the overriding achievements of the Bulgarian Presidency, the building of bridges within the EU and between the EU and its partners, but also the building of bridges into the future. Against the background of the heated debate in Europe, it was no small achievement that the European Council managed to adopt a number of joint conclusions in the area of migration in June. And these conclusions did not forget to thank the Bulgarian Presidency for its tireless efforts. We might have hoped that the conclusions would have contained more of the progressive ideas of the Presidency on solidarity and responsibility sharing. But we should still appreciate that there are a number of strong commitments and promising new approaches in the text, like the reconfirmation of the EU-Turkey Statement, the focus on partnership with Africa, the concept of disembarkation platforms or new ideas on rapid and secure processing of asylum claims.

Last but not least I would like to highlight some of the concrete initiatives where we as ICMPD had the honour to support the Bulgarian Presidency. In the area of border management we had joint events in Brussels in January, in Warsaw in March and a big conference on Border Security in May here in Sofia. We jointly discussed asylum and return policies in the framework of the Budapest Process Black Sea Working Group together with Turkey and Silk Route countries. In the area of trafficking we partnered with the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings in organising a big conference on systems for Combating Trafficking in South East Europe in the context of the accession process. Mr. Tsvetanov, let me again thank you and all your colleagues for the opportunity and the pleasure to work together so closely and so fruitfully during Bulgaria’s Presidency. We at ICMPD have really benefitted a lot from this cooperation.

Ladies and gentlemen, one week ago, Prime Minister Borissov and the Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz emphasised that the Austrian Presidency will continue to pursue the topics and priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency. This means that Bulgaria has managed to lay a strong foundation for future cooperation and for policies that bring us closer to solving one of the biggest challenges of our time. As Europeans we should sincerely thank you for that.

Thank you.