

“Migration Management in the Context of the European Elections”

National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, 12 March 2019

Keynote by Dr. Michael Spindelegger

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Sofia, 12 March 2019

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I want to thank the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, and personally Mrs Tsvetanov for inviting me and initiating this important meeting, an invitation, which I have gladly accepted. I think that title and topic of today’s event are highly relevant not only in terms of the European elections but also with a view to the future of joint European approach to migration policy and migration management.

The refugee crisis from 2015 has led to a deep rift between European governments and their populations. It shook the confidence that governments are able to maintain control in times of crisis and can respond to existing challenges.

Thus, it is safe to say that the EU and its Member States have achieved significant progress since 2015. They started the reform of existing policies and systems, have created new instruments and invested significantly in cooperation with the non-European partners.

This progress is also reflected in the statistics. The 150,000 irregular arrivals in 2018 are the lowest number since 2013 and less than 10 per cent of the arrivals in 2015. However, routes have shifted to the Western Mediterranean, and the number of asylum applications is still above 600,000. This is a significant reduction in comparison to 2015 but it is still the fifth highest number in the last 25 years. The crisis is not over. We are only in a calmer period.

Despite of all progress, European voters continue to punish the political systems at elections because they think that these systems have failed on migration. This basic fact will also influence the election of the European Parliament in May. The latest projections suggest that the big pro-European parties like the European Peoples Party and the Socialists and Democrats will suffer losses and euro-sceptic parties but also the Liberals will gain votes. If we trust these projections, we do not have to expect a landslide victory of the euro-sceptics but an increased influence of their positions also on the mainstream parties. In any case, the election results cannot resolve the contradictions and different viewpoints among the Member States, regardless of the outcome.

What should we do now against this background? First of all, the challenges of flight and migration can be dealt with only in the long term. Secondly, these challenges originate

primarily outside Europe. This framework also determines the measures that should be taken after the May election. First, the main causes of flight and migration must be addressed even more effectively: conflicts, demography, socio-economic transformation processes and economic inequalities. The initiatives Europe has launched over the past three years, like the Valletta Action Plan, the Trust Funds, the EU - Turkey Statement or the External Investment Plan, are heading in the right direction. But more of these initiatives will be needed. And they will work only if they entail close cooperation with the partners outside Europe and a recognition of these partners' needs and interests.

Second, Europe must move toward a rule-based migration system with clearly defined objectives. It is a question of being able to decide who may or should come and under what conditions. And it is a question of being able to enforce these rules. The European systems and policies must be able to control legal migration and labour migration and to enforce strict and effective migration control at the same time. On the external borders, we have a clear and common commitment to increase the operating staff of Frontex to 10,000. We should be very serious about this commitment. Our citizens expect us to deliver on border security. This will reduce irregular arrivals and it will create a precondition for a renewed discussion on solidarity, responsibility and labour migration.

When it comes to the Common European Asylum System, we know that the concept of "mandatory solidarity" did not find a majority. Now we should focus on the less spectacular but also less disputed aspects of our common system. We should work towards a further harmonisation of our asylum systems and towards swift but legally sound asylum procedures. We have to engage even more in functioning return policies. We should think of incentives, maybe also financial ones, to increase the number of Dublin transfers. And we should continue with relocation and resettlement programmes, even when they are limited in scope and participation. They are an expression of solidarity. But they also tackle a major aspect of the business model of the migrant smugglers, namely that they can ensure that their clients will be able to stay in the destination of their choice.

Finally, policy-makers and politicians must be aware of one fact. Critical attitudes about migration can be found in particular among those who are afraid of losing their job, their livelihood and their social standing. Greater acceptance of migration can only be achieved with a policy that seeks to ensure that no one feels left behind, with policies that create jobs, opportunities and perspectives for all parts of society. And this should be the third aspect of the political agenda in Europe. What is needed is a European vision and agenda for innovation, economic growth and access to opportunities for all. If the EU and the European governments try harder to implement this agenda successfully, the citizens and voters will begin to trust the current and future migration policy of the EU as well. Thank you.