

“Strong Borders, Safe Europe”

An Obstacle to Political Cooperation or the Best Tool in Fighting Illegal Migration

Budapest Conference on Migration

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Dear Peter, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to open today's Budapest Conference on Migration together with you, Peter. It is a real privilege to address a room that gathers so many distinguished speakers and discussants in times when travelling and personal meetings have become a challenge for all of us. The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us once more of the dependencies in our globalised world, of the value of mobility and free movement in the EU but also of the essential role that strong borders have to play in protecting our safety and security.

We know that the crisis is not over. Still, our systems have become more resilient and we have learned to cope with extremely challenging situations. In this regard, much is owed to our border guards who stood at the frontline from day one together with the health services and other essential workers. Without their professionalism, their determination and their know-how we would have faced a situation much more dangerous than the severe crisis we anyways have to cope with.

This is a key lesson of the pandemic, and it is a key lesson for our discussion today. Border management is a core state function and strong borders are needed for effective national governance but also for effective cooperation between States at the regional and the international level. The European Union has lifted border controls between the Member States and many EU citizens see the freedom of movement and unhindered mobility as one of the greatest achievements of the European project. But this area of freedom, wealth and security is very close to the major conflict zones on the globe and located in a region where major prosperity gaps persist. Migration pressures are the logical consequence of this situation. Maybe we have not paid enough attention in the past and have not been serious enough about securing the external borders of the Union.

This picture has changed quite significantly in recent years. The strengthened mandate of Frontex, the build-up of the European Border and Coast Guard Standing Corps but also the readiness of Member States to come together quickly and support each other when new crisis situations emerge are expressions of this increased seriousness about European borders.

This new seriousness has to be welcomed. It is needed to lift us out of the permanent crisis mode. And it is needed to meet the expectations of the European citizens towards their governments and the EU as a whole. In reference to the title of this Conference, we must conclude that strong borders are by no means an obstacle to political cooperation on migration but an inevitable precondition for this cooperation, in addressing irregular migration but also in achieving other migration-related goals.

But when we emphasise the crucial role of strong borders in migration governance we also have to admit that border control alone will not be sufficient to solve all migration challenges. Due to conflict, the number of globally displaced continues to rise every year. And the other major drivers of migration, such as economic disparities, demographic imbalances or the effects of climate change gain in significance as well. On the basis of strong borders and functioning border management, we need the full range of instruments at our disposal to address the resulting challenges. We have to promote migration partnerships with countries of origin and transit. We need intelligent return policies that combine reintegration with investment and job creation in countries of origin. We must invest in skills development and Talent Partnerships to channel labour migration from irregular flows to regular movements. And we have to bring in new partners and the private sector to address the root causes of migration and to reduce the related migration pressures. At ICMPD we are very grateful that our Member State Hungary has always supported us in following these priorities and in promoting these partnerships as well.

Ladies and gentlemen, the recent events in Afghanistan and at the border between Poland and Belarus remind us once more that migration holds many challenges for us, at the political, the security and the humanitarian level. We rely on strong borders, on well-equipped border authorities and on good European and international cooperation to steer through these difficult situations. We cannot solve the related challenges with strong borders alone. But we need strong borders as a fundamental basis for all our attempts to address the challenges and to seize the opportunities linked to international migration, in Europe and beyond.

I look very much forward to the discussion and all your thoughts and insights. I am sure that we will learn a lot today and I wish all of you an interesting and inspiring conference.

Thank you.