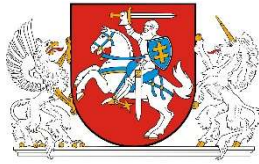




THE PRIME MINISTER



The Prime Minister



Prime Minister of the Republic of Latvia



GOVERNMENT OFFICE
OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC



GVERN
TA' MALTA



REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA
PRIME MINISTER



Federal Chancellery
Republic of Austria

Copenhagen, Vilnius, Athens, Riga,
Bratislava, Valetta, Tallinn, Vienna

February 6th, 2023

Dear Ursula, Dear Charles,

Irregular migration has once again become one of the most pressing issues in the EU. During 2022, irregular border crossings increased significantly, and the number of asylum applications is soaring in several Member States. Some Member States even face levels of arrivals and applications equivalent to, or higher than, those seen during the migration crisis in 2015 and 2016. National and local authorities are struggling to cope with the influx. The situation is deeply concerning and calls for urgent political attention as well as concrete action, also in order for Member States to **give priority to people in need of international protection**, including the Ukrainians that have been displaced in light of the Russian aggression.

Without renewed and successful efforts at EU and Member State level, irregular migration to Europe can only be expected to continue and increase in the coming years. The socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which are now being fueled by higher energy prices, inflation and a potential economic downturn, could exacerbate irregular migration. In addition, structural factors such as climate change, population growth and conflicts, as well as the hybrid attack and the instrumentalisation of migration by authoritarian regimes, are likely to increase migratory pressures in the future.

As long as the European **asylum system and its very low rate of returns constitute a pull factor**, third country nationals who are not in need of international protection will keep risking their lives on the dangerous journeys towards Europe. Today, more than half of asylum applications filed in the EU, and in some Member States more than 80 percent of the asylum applications, are deemed unfounded and are thus rejected. As a result, Member States spend

significant and unnecessary resources on case processing, returns and reintegration. Furthermore, less than one-third of rejected asylum seekers are successfully returned. This leads to further strain on public finances and erodes public support and credibility for the asylum system as a whole.

We stress the importance of making progress on the entire EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and the revision of the Schengen Borders Code as soon as possible, and agreeing on legislative proposals aiming to address situations of instrumentalised migration. The Commission's action plans for the Central Mediterranean and Western Balkans as well as the Team Europe approach are also welcome contributions.

However, in our opinion, the **current asylum system is broken** and primarily benefits the cynical human smugglers who take advantage of the misfortune of women, men and children.

We believe that it is high time for an innovative, open-minded and effective response focused on removing the incentives to embark on perilous journeys to Europe and decisively breaking the business model of the criminal smuggling networks.

We invite the Commission to present a **comprehensive European whole-of-route-approach for all relevant migratory routes**. Such an approach should aim to address pull factors, including through the necessary legal and technical adjustments. In this regard, we should be open to explore new solutions and innovative ways of tackling irregular migration and prevent flows, including by looking into new and effective approaches with partner countries. In addition to the core task of ensuring returns, better protecting refugees in their regions of origin, addressing instrumentalisation and combating human smuggling along the migratory routes, focus should be on addressing root causes of irregular migration by promoting economic and social opportunities in countries of origin and key host/transit third countries.

It should build, among other things, on the following:

- **Further strengthening the protection of external borders, taking into account the differences between land and sea borders, and supporting Member States in their endeavours, including the deployment of infrastructure and pre-frontier aerial surveillance for maritime borders.** Frontex must fully assume its central role in European border management, including in the area of returns and through Frontex measures in third countries with the purpose of preventing and detecting unauthorised border crossings at land and sea borders, in full compliance with our international obligations. Furthermore, EU external border protection standards should be set up and additional financial support within the existing MFF should contribute to implementation of relevant operational and technical measures for effective border control.

- **Significantly increasing swift returns of third country nationals without legal stay in the EU.** The extremely low rate of successful returns constitutes a pull factor in itself. To ensure returns and readmissions from the European Union to the safe countries of origin and transit, the EU must assertively use all leverage tools – notably visa, trade and development policies – to improve and maintain cooperation. Existing resources should be urgently directed to ensure the swift and full implementation of return action strategies. In this regard, the capacities of Frontex should also be used for the organisation of joint return operations from the territory of Member States to the respective countries of origin. Expedited and increased returns from the EU, must go hand in hand with swift processing and rejection of unfounded asylum claims by nationals from safe countries of origin. Additionally, rejected asylum seekers should be further disincentivized from applying for asylum in other Member States.
- **Developing new partnerships and safe third country arrangements.** We should continue to explore new partnerships and build capacity in the areas of asylum, border management and returns in relevant third countries along the major migratory routes. With interested third countries, and inspired by the EU-Turkey statement including its 1:1 mechanism, we suggest developing, and where relevant legally enabling, safe third country arrangements with relevant countries along the EU's external border and beyond.
- **Ensuring the alignment of visa policies of priority third countries.** It is crucial that visa policies of priority third countries are swiftly aligned with the EU in order to reduce the potential of irregular migratory flows entering the territory of the Union. In this regard, EU candidate countries should be called upon to harmonize the visa policy with the European Union as a matter of urgency.
- **Further strengthening strategic communication capacities to prevent the dissemination of information related to irregular crossing of EU external borders.** It is important to make efforts to combat disinformation through targeted communication. Timely awareness campaigns aimed at potential irregular migrants and providing information about the dangers of irregular migration should be fostered. Fighting against disinformation and working with social media platforms should form part of these efforts.

As political leaders, we need to act decisively to prevent another large-scale migration crisis. We look forward to discuss these ideas and achieve tangible progress at the upcoming meeting in the European Council.

Yours sincerely,



Mette Frederiksen



Gitanas Nausėda



Kyriakos Mitsotakis



Krišjānis Kariņš



Eduard Heger



Robert Abela



Kaja Kallas



Karl Nehammer