

HARNESSING MIGRATION: Firm, Fair and Future-Oriented Approach

Introduction

The EPP Group stands for a Europe that protects its borders and tackles illegal migration. We seek to halt uncontrolled migration so that Europe's capacity to integrate those who have the right to stay is not overwhelmed.

The adoption of the Pact on Migration and Asylum marked a crucial step towards a more controlled European migration policy. Yet, challenges persist, requiring further action at EU level. The EPP Group will continue to be the driving force, steering Europe towards a firm, fair and future-oriented approach to migration.

We see the need for bold new measures to swiftly return those without a right to stay in the Union, strengthen our external borders and protect the Schengen Area, defeat the smugglers and counter the weaponisation of migrants by third countries or hostile non-state actors.

Our priorities are clear. We will deliver on a 9-point plan to overcome the main migration challenges that our continent is facing. We are taking the next steps towards a migration policy that works for our Union and its citizens.

Preamble

Migration presents a major challenge for Europe and continues to be a matter of concern. While in 2024, we have started to see a decrease in the number of irregular entries, which confirms the effectiveness of the policies pursued and implemented by the EPP Group, many Member States continue to face significant migratory pressure especially those on the front line and along the Eastern borders of the EU.

In light of that, while fully committed to a firm but fair migration and asylum system that complies with International and EU law, we see the urgent need to enforce stricter measures against those required to leave the EU as well as to prevent the entry of those who do not meet the necessary conditions. Rules are there to protect our citizens and, by adhering to them, we can also help those in genuine need for protection. For that, national authorities, in particular law enforcement, need to have the necessary funds, tools and legal certainty. We want to be firm in balancing the obligations and rights of those legally residing in the EU. We want to ensure all Member States have the capacity and the tools to manage migration efficiently and avoid over-interpretation in respect of the application of EU Law.

Section 1: Return Policies

So far, only 20% of return decisions are effectively enforced, although working return policies are vital to manage migration. Member States must have an effective legal and operational toolbox at their disposal to enforce return decisions and to discourage irregular arrivals and stays, supported by measures such as financial guarantees or detention for non-compliance. We will aim at facilitating the implementation of return decisions and avoiding unnecessary administrative burden for enforcement authorities. We call for a reinforced role of Frontex, also allowing its

participation in returns operations between third countries. The Commission has presented a proposal for a new Regulation on Return, focusing on: mutual recognition of return decisions, shortened appeal deadlines, stricter obligations for the persons to be returned and consequences of non-compliance, expedited procedures for suspected criminals, including enhanced grounds for detention and restriction of freedom of movement, better measures to fight against absconding as well as limited non-suspensive effects of appeals. Forced returns must remain a credible option and voluntary departures must be suppressed when they pose a serious obstacle to the effective implementation of returns

The consequences of non-compliance must be strict. It must also include an obligation for Member States to take all necessary measures to ensure that authorities are aware of the whereabouts of the individual to be returned and that the person remains available to the authorities until they have effectively left the territory of the Member State. A long-term ban to enter the EU must be imposed to individuals who are forcibly returned, including a permanent and indefinite ban for those posing a security threat. We welcome the Commission proposal for legal framework establishing return hubs outside the EU in line with international standards and we invite it to continue exploring innovative solutions to combat illegal migration in cooperation with third countries.

Section 2: Securing and Strengthening External Borders

Protecting the EU's external borders is essential for effectively managing migration. Within the EU and the Schengen area, Member States remain responsible for deciding who enters their territory. Efficient border management also involves our capacity to respond to a myriad of hybrid threats, including, but not only, the weaponisation of migrants. We must ensure stronger external borders with enhanced and more rigorous screening of irregular arrivals. Comprehensive electronic monitoring must be implemented at all EU external borders, supported by structural and technical border protections. Stepping up cooperation with agencies such as Frontex, Europol and Eurojust and supporting Member States is crucial. Frontex must be transformed into a fully operational European border agency equipped with state-of-the-art, advanced surveillance technologies such as drones, AI, and biometric systems. Frontex's deployment should extend to outermost regions, ensuring comprehensive border protection. Cooperation agreements need to be reached with African countries and other partner countries without delay. We commit to triple its personnel to 30,000 and to adopt the necessary legislation as soon as possible, including budgetary amendments. In a coordinated manner, and supported by EU funding, Member States should establish regional border security hubs in areas under migration pressure. We also need to provide European funding for physical infrastructure, electronic border security enhancements and other innovative tools for border surveillance. Given the geopolitical context, we need to shift the paradigm forward, from border security to border defence. Fresh financial resources to meet all needs in this area should be secured in the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework.

Section 3: Strategic Cooperation with Third Countries

Uncontrolled migration strains public services, disrupts local economies, and fosters social tensions, particularly in front line Member States like Spain, Italy or Greece and smaller and geographically vulnerable Member States like Cyprus and Malta, with effect also to secondary movement countries like Germany or France. Strategic partnerships with third countries are crucial to managing migration. Cooperation must focus on addressing root causes, improving capacity building and border management, combating irregular departures, smuggling and trafficking, and facilitating returns. The agreements reached with Tunisia, Egypt, or Lebanon show us the path to follow. The EU-Tunisia Agreement alone has delivered tangible results, cutting irregular arrivals to Italy by 60% this year alone. We urge the Commission to conclude negotiations with Morocco and to open new negotiations where possible. Structured dialogues, operational Frontex deployments, and targeted EU funding will strengthen these efforts. Agreements must also be concluded with non-neighbouring countries such as Senegal and Mauritania for the deployment of Frontex, critical to control the departure of irregular migrants towards the Canary Islands, the new entry door of illegal migration to Europe. Sharing responsibility for rescue at sea and the enforcement of maritime law must also be part of strategic partnerships, including safe ports for disembarking rescued migrants. All States involved, including those in Africa, must do their part. EU support for third countries should include the digitalisation of their administrations, the establishment of reliable civil status and the issuing of biometric and secure certificates, allowing us to exchange biometric data in secure conditions. The EU must use all available instruments — diplomatic, economic, and development cooperation — to build stronger, more effective and mutually beneficial partnerships. Development aid should prioritise countries showing commitment to migration management. Revised visa mechanisms should deter abuse and prevent threats. And there must also be consequences if there is no cooperation. Third countries that fail to cooperate in preventing irregular departures or in implementing readmission agreements or arrangements, whether at national or EU level, should not receive EU Funds or visas. Such decisions should be endorsed at EU level and applied uniformly across all Member States.

Section 4: Protecting the Schengen Area

The Schengen Area is one of the most tangible achievements of European integration and one of the main pillars of the European project. In recent years, the Schengen Area has faced extraordinary pressure due to threats posed by terrorism, radicalisation, organised crime and the unauthorised secondary movements of third-country nationals. The EPP Group stands for a safe and borderless Schengen Area, that, at the same time recognises the right of Member States to reintroduce temporary internal border controls as a last-resort measure, applied exceptionally, proportionately, for a limited duration and to be withdrawn as soon as the threats cease to exist. It is not the Member States, but the persistent and evolving threats themselves that pose a danger to the integrity of Schengen. The Schengen Area's resilience depends on effective external border management and robust IT systems and databases like SIS and VIS. We urge for the swift entry into operations of the EES and ETIAS. Streamlining visa application processes, digitalisation and increasing staff

capacity in high – demand regions and better cross border cooperation are important steps towards a more secure Schengen area.

Section 5: Implementing the European Pact on Asylum and Migration

The European Pact on Asylum and Migration, although historic, is only the baseline upon which we must build a fully comprehensive approach to managing migration in all its dimensions. It is a good commencement, but it is not enough. It requires coordinated, timely implementation reflecting the varying circumstances across Member States and effectively involving and supporting both regional and local authorities. Harmonised asylum systems must clearly differentiate between those in need of protection and economic migrants. Secured external borders and efficient procedures, are critical to ensure fair responsibility-sharing and solidarity among Member States. Member States, supported by the Commission, must fully operationalise adopted EU legislation and the application of existing legislation. We need to make a timely comprehensive review and full use of the safe third country concept in order to reduce the number of arrivals. The connection criteria, as established, do not fit to the purpose and need to be discontinued.

Europe is not, and cannot be seen as the sole destination for all illegal migration and asylum seekers. Finite resources and limited reception capacities must be taken into account. Likewise, the Regulation on qualification for refugee or subsidiary protection status must be updated in order to confront a different reality in the asylum claims. Within the framework of the Dublin mechanism, all efforts should be aimed at implementing transfers within effective and reliable time limits and thereby disincentivizing unauthorised secondary movements.

Complementary to the implementation of the Pact, the Union can establish measures to provide incentives and support for the action of Member States in the area of integration of legally staying individuals. Integration is a two-way process requiring migrants to learn local languages, respect the custom and the laws, and contribute to society. Family reunification should require demonstrated integration and financial stability prior to its authorisation . Integration measures should combat radicalisation and parallel societies.

Section 6: Combating Migrant Smuggling

Over 90% of irregular migrants rely on smugglers¹. It has been observed that migrant smugglers and traffickers have become more and more violent, being a danger to our border guards at all levels and a risk to our internal security. To dismantle smuggling networks, enhanced cross-border cooperation, intelligence and data sharing, the use of advanced technologies, and better coordination among Member States and other JHA Agencies are essential. Frontex, Europol and Eurojust must be strengthened to better support Member States in identifying, investigating, and prosecuting organised crime in all its forms, particularly migrant smuggling and human trafficking, including with non-coercive investigative powers. Likewise, we need to reinforce the legal framework to prevent the facilitation of unauthorized entry, transit, and stay

¹ Data from the European Commission.

with higher thresholds for minimum penalties, including transport operators. Smugglers and traffickers have found in SAR operations a method to exploit vulnerable individuals and the jurisdiction and responsibility of Member States and to perpetuate their illicit activities, using rescue efforts as a tool to sustain their criminal networks and endanger more lives. All actors, including civil society, must respect the law. A Code of Conduct for civil society organisations conducting search and rescue operations should ensure compliance with international law while discouraging exploitation by traffickers. A “follow the money” approach is critical to dismantling smuggling networks, making full use of AMLA and implementing effective rules on confiscation and the reversed burden of proof. We call for a revision of the EPPO mandate to include migrant smuggling, as part of organised crime, in its mandate.

Section 7: Addressing Instrumentalisation and Weaponisation of Migrants

The EU must counter the instrumentalisation and weaponisation of migrants by hostile actors. Using vulnerable people as a weapon against us, either for financial or political gains must be deterred. Protecting our borders against such hostile actions is also protecting human rights of the instrumentalised migrants. We must use the full capacity of our toolbox, including the possibilities provided by the Schengen Borders Code and the Crisis Regulation. Current asylum rules must be adapted to address new challenges, to avoid the exploitation of legal loopholes by authoritarian regimes. A more comprehensive definition of instrumentalisation and weaponisation is needed to combat these hybrid threats effectively both at the EU's external borders and intrastate. Better rules on obligations for transport providers, together with clear penalties for non-compliance, including the banning from operating in the EU, must be put forward. Moreover, we stress that it is the prerogative and the obligation of the Member States to ensure by all means its security and territorial integrity. Therefore, extraordinary measures already enshrined within the Treaties must be contemplated, including the temporary derogation from secondary legislation, such as the right to asylum when migrants are instrumentalised as weapons against the EU, the Member States and our societies. EU Rapid Response Teams should be created to manage instrumentalisation attempts at the borders induced by state-sponsored destabilisation efforts.

Section 8: Labour Migration

Well-managed legal migration can help in responding to evolving labour market necessities, to meet current and future skills needs and to ensure a dynamic economy. However, it can only compensate for the decline in native workforces if the talents and skills of the newly arriving people are compatible with Member States' needs helped by EU schemes such as the Blue Card. Differences in educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds can pose social challenges. To maximise the benefits of legal migration, we must pair talent attraction policies and migration pathways with robust short- and long-term measures to support inclusion and integration. These efforts empower legal migrants to contribute fully to the EU's development and shared prosperity. Legal migration should play a central role in the broader discussion, including cooperation with third countries of origin and transit to effectively manage migratory flows. In this regard, we will monitor the initiatives proposed by the European Commission, such as the EU Talent Pool and EU Talent

Partnerships, while respecting Member State sovereignty and helping to curb irregular migration.

Section 9: Looking ahead for a future-proof migration and asylum policies

The EU must adapt migration policies based on global best practices and trends, addressing not only immediate challenges but also future migration dynamics. Our two main priorities must be to stop illegal migration and to enforce return decisions. The Italia-Albania protocol is a first but decisive innovative step to dissuade illegal migration and to break the business model of smugglers as it demonstrates that the application for and processing of asylum in safe third countries as the main rule is possible. We urge the Commission to further pursue discussions on regional disembarkation platforms on both sides of the Mediterranean and other innovative solutions, where asylum seekers can be safely received, and their claims assessed in an efficient, dignified, and humane manner. Likewise, the Commission must work towards the establishment of EU-managed centres outside the EU where certain categories of third-country nationals subject to return decisions could be transferred while awaiting final removal (return hubs). The 1951 Refugee Convention has been instrumental in protecting those fleeing persecution. However, the global landscape has evolved significantly since its inception with scenarios that the Convention did not anticipate. Moreover, the concept of subsidiary protection has led to the creation of a dual system that undermines the effectiveness of the Common European Asylum System and challenges the solidarity within the EU. The EU must initiate a dialogue on adapting the Geneva Convention to the current world, working towards a more cohesive and comprehensive framework that ensures robust protection for refugees while addressing the legitimate concerns of Member States regarding security and migration management. Such proactive engagement would reaffirm the EU's commitment to human rights and its leadership in shaping a responsive international refugee protection regime. □