



# Speaking notes

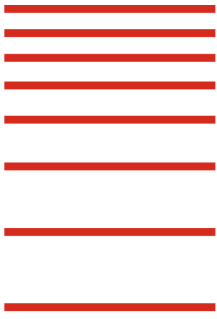
Speaking notes of Bert Koenders, the Dutch minister of General Affairs, during the press conference on the General Affairs Council.

16 february 2016, Brussels

- We gathered together today in the General Affairs Council, in the run up to the European Council at the end of this week. The main topics on the agenda were the migration crisis and the talks with the UK. The General Affairs Council, as the antechamber of the European Council, has an important role to play in assuring the follow up. Decisions are good, implementation is much better. And we **really** need to do **better** on implementation. That's why the Dutch presidency has taken an initiative to ensure at each General Affairs Council, that we have, on different issues, an integrated state of affairs and conclusions regarding where we are on implementation.
- I think it's very clear when we talk about the migration crisis that one of the main issues is the lack of implementation. And it's important to put this to all member states and to ensure through the facts that are being presented and the peer pressure that is necessary that we move from decisions to implementation. It is something that all our citizens expect from us as well.



- The meeting today reflected a very clear sense of urgency, the requirement of all countries to chip in, and the responsibility to overcome this. I had really the sense of a positive and constructive mood. We have seen in the last couple of weeks different positions both on the issue of the UK and on the issue of migration. But I felt very much that there is a priority in all member states. And also the sense of responsibility to overcome differences.
- Let me start with the United Kingdom. Positive on issues like migration and UK-proposals; we have a chance to move in a substantial way. This morning we started with discussing president Tusks proposals for the UK. We all want a compromise that settles the British concerns and makes the EU stronger at the same time. And it should be an acceptable deal for **everyone**.
- I trust the contours of the landing zone became clearer now for everyone involved. There are however issues that need further discussion. Much work has been done, but in view of the challenges, I urge everyone, and I underline '**everyone**', to put in a maximum effort on the few days ahead. We must focus on our strategic interests. That is, the EU is stronger with the UK in, and the UK is stronger inside the EU.



- The second main topic we discussed is migration; we are all working hard with our partners inside and outside the EU to come to grips with the refugee crisis. There are many issues we have to tackle as to get control over this great challenge.



- There is no one silver bullet. I think it's important to say that. No simple solutions, and no simple answers. It is important that we are transparent and open about this towards our citizens. But one thing is abundantly clear, and I was strengthened by that belief this morning, that we need a **collective** European solution and not **unilateral** solutions. And we all will be worse off when we are going in a direction of unilateral decisions. That was the consensus in the meeting this morning. And that created for me a positive sense about the possibilities to come to good and strong conclusions this week.



- In this respect, declarations as we have seen the last couple of days also from the Visegrad countries were discussed. And also I sensed the need for everybody in that discussion and also the sense of compromise that these are not declarations directed against one or more states

- Of course we all meet and discuss amongst each other to find a common solution, but separate



declarations are of course **nó**t the way out of this crisis. We are in this **together**, and the only way out is **together**.

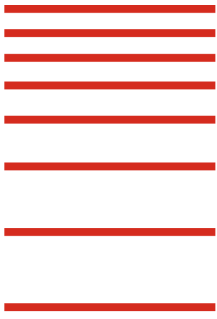
- Therefore, we need to strengthen our common approach. We need to act in a European framework, transparently, in communication with each other and based on mutual trust. For instance on relocation, finances and support.
- Today we had a debate about a Presidency report on migration, laying out all the elements that are in play and identifying where we really need to move faster and do more.
- I just want to underline that a lot of progress has been made the last couple of days along the three areas that are important in the work on migration.
- First of all :Create strong outer ring: work on the root causes of migration – in particular the Syrian conflict - improve reception facilities in the region with key partners (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan) and effective return policy through country packages (start with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Morocco);
- First line is dismantle the gateway. Make the Turkey Action Plan work by reducing numbers and improving prospects for refugees in Turkey. In



parallel, agree on broad scheme for readmission from Greece to Turkey and work at same time towards broader resettlement scheme. That is one part of the package we are all working on. And I see progress is being made on this. Which is important to note?

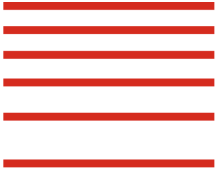


- Second line is support for EU's frontline state Greece. To pursue rapid setting-up of hotspots, support border management and get priority assistance for migrants in Greece. That requires again also two sides of the coin. I had the opportunity to visit Greece the day before yesterday. We see that progress is substantially made on many of the issues that I mentioned. At the same time its important that all the European member states chip in on commitments for FRONTEX, EASO and relocation. And I see this on all these different areas there is positive movement.
- The third line after the Turkey action Plan and the work with Greece is limit and control flows through transit countries in the Balkans. Again here I think it's important that we work on a European approach, prevent unilateral 'race to the bottom'. Border control in Balkan countries need to be strengthened – within European framework. I think the keyword there is: 'no registration, no rights'. That's something



else than completely sealing off a border. What we are talking about is screening, procedures according to international legal and Schengen standards in order to better control of the management of the borders.

- Migration is something we have always dealt with, and it will always be part of the ways of our world. And now there are so many people coming to Europe I think it's important we make progress on these three areas. I see progress in these three areas. And at the same time I see an increased willingness among the different groups of European states to chip in and take their responsibility. And therefore the work in preparation of the European Council remains important.
- Let me finish by saying that it's always important to realize when we talk about a migration crisis or refugee crisis that we are talking about real men, women and children. I have seen firsthand this weekend the plight of refugees at borders of Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The Syrian children were playing in their tents and containers, cutting out hearts for Valentine's Day. It must be clear for us, and I want to repeat it once more: **we are all in this together**. And it's also important to support Europe and states with each



other to do so and at the same time reach out the hand to people looking for protection.



- Thank you all for your time.

