



HELLENIC REPUBLIC
MINISTRY OF MIGRATION AND ASYLUM
THE ALTERNATE MINISTER
tel: +30 213 212 8304 – 05 - 07
Email: aminister.office@immigration.gov.gr

Athens, 27 January 2020

N. 6205

Dear Commissioner,

Dear Viora,

It was a pleasure meeting you in Athens last December on the occasion of your first visit to an EU Member-State in your new capacity. During the meeting with Greek government officials, we had the opportunity to exchange some initial thoughts regarding the future migration and asylum pact that the European Commission is expected to table in the coming months.

In this context, I would like to reiterate that Greece looks forward to your proposals and is ready and willing to engage constructively in the upcoming negotiations.

I believe that these views, which provide an indication of our concerns, as well as our commitments, will help in finding a solution.

Our position rests on three fundamental principles: 1) a European solution to a European challenge; 2) a fair system that will stand the test of time; and 3) the preservation of the EU's core values as enshrined in the EU Treaty.

A European Solution to a European Challenge

The migration-refugee issue is a challenge that affects not only front-line states. In the current European context, it is a European Challenge that requires a European response, in which all Member-States will have to contribute, as well as benefit.

This is the reason why we believe that for a system to function we need an efficient solidarity coupled with an effective responsibility in which all Member States will have to actively contribute. A system in which some Member-States will be exempt, or a system that will be imposed on some Member-States against their will cannot succeed.

A fair system that will stand the test of time

Many have argued that the current Asylum system has proven to be inadequate to deal with the current challenges. Our position is, that it is not so much an issue of whether

it has failed, but rather that it has proved inadequate to address the challenges of today and especially the challenges of tomorrow.

In 2019, there have been more than 139.000 arrivals of migrants and asylum seekers in the EU. More than 77,000 have arrived in Greece alone. Still these numbers pale in comparison to the numbers of arrivals in late 2015 or 2016.

Rising tensions in many regions around the world, as well as long-term trends and factors including regional conflicts, as well as the effects of climate change entail that migratory flows will not be reduced any time soon. In the best-case scenario, they will remain constant.

The 2019 arrivals represent roughly 0.027% of the EU population (513 million on 1 January 2019 including the UK).

On the other hand, though, arrivals in Greece just for 2019 constitute 0.7% of its total population. If we imagine that Europe was to receive in just one year 0.7% of its population, that would amount to almost 36 million people.

These figures speak for themselves. Just as Europe would not be able to cope with such an influx, so Greece has reached way beyond the limits of its capacities.

The local population in the Greek islands, the same population that welcomed and provided its hospitality to people fleeing war and persecution in 2015-2016, is now showing an emerging mood of migration fatigue.

For these reasons, Greece should not be left alone. Europe should avoid the mistakes of the past, when front-line states in the Mediterranean were left alone to deal with an acute migration crisis. Unless a genuine European solidarity is shown, there can be serious economic, social and political consequences in these countries, and in Europe as a whole.

We see visible traits of this across the continent. What is at stake right now is not just a legal text on how responsibility and solidarity across Europe will be shared or not. The future of the European construct is at stake.

We believe that it is a fundamental principle that, under no circumstances a M-S shall be held responsible beyond its fair share and our policies shall be governed by the principle of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility, in accordance with Art. 80 of the TFEU.

When it comes to responsibility, Greece is ready and willing to assume its fair share. Since this government took office last July, it has shown a strong commitment in taking the necessary measures that will contribute to address the on-going situation.

New legislation has been passed in order to accelerate the procedures for granting asylum, as well as identifying who has the right to international protection and who has not.

The new law, which came into force on January the 1st, is contains concrete measures in order to ensure a more swift and robust policy of returns. This is a top priority for this government and we are determined to deliver concrete results.

We are also in the process of building new multifunctional camps in the islands, which will gradually and rapidly replace the existing structures. These camps will help us in

identifying those with a refugee profile, and those that should be returned in line with European rules and commitments.

We recently submitted, along with Bulgaria and Cyprus a non-paper on the Eastern Mediterranean Migration Route Initiative. We have thus raised awareness at the challenges that the countries in this region are facing.

More recently we submitted concrete proposals on a Common European Return Mechanism, where we argue, among other things, for a reinforced mandate for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, a policy of leverages and incentives for third states (more for more, less for less) and above all a reinforced solidarity when it comes to returns, given that this remains one of the most difficult tasks to implement for all European Member-States.

For all these reasons we strongly advocate for a solution that will ensure a balanced approach and a fair distribution of the burden among all EU Member-States, that will include compulsory relocations at its core.

We also believe that responsibility should be shared in a balanced way. That entails that one M-S should not remain responsible for a specific case permanently or for a very long period of time. This would add an additional and unbearable burden on front-line M-S.

Under manageable flows, front-line member states, with the support of the EU and other M-S, would be able to handle much of the pressure. However, given the volatile situation in Europe's vicinity and the ongoing migratory flows to Europe, no one can exclude the possibility that a new migration crisis will erupt, that no country in Europe-particularly the frontline member states- would be able to handle alone.

This is the reason why we believe there is also a need to develop an emergency mechanism that will respond to possible future crises. Europe cannot be caught once again unprepared as was the case in 2015. There is a need to devise a fair system that will be able to manage migration flows from wherever they may come. In this vein we fully support the relevant statements made by Vice-President Schinas on this issue.

The preservation of the EU's fundamental values

The new migration and asylum pact should fully respect the principles upon which the EU has been founded. These include the preservation and promotion of human rights. The European Union Member-States have to provide international protection to those that need it.

Just as Member-States need to protect those in need, they should also encourage the paths of legal migration and address illegal migration. This requires a robust policy of returns, as well as combating smuggling networks.

In order to ensure the EU fundamental rights, it is important that the burden of migration and asylum flows is shared among M-S in a fair manner. The idea that some Member-States will take the full responsibility for accommodating those arriving on the EU territory, while others will just contribute financial or humanitarian assistance but refuse to accommodate them is not only unfair but it is also inadequate. More than anything else it is going against our fundamental values.

We also believe that we should not mix policies that, as defined in the Treaties, are legally distinct and separate. Therefore, we see no connection between Schengen and asylum.

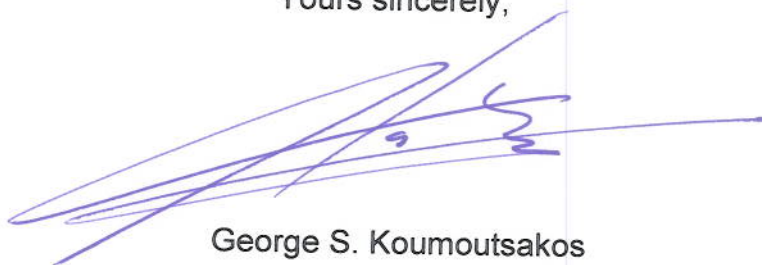
Our commitment is not just about a Common European Asylum Policy. We want also to contribute to the wider debate, including other issues such as legal migration pathways or the external dimension of the EU migration policy.

Encouraging well-organised legal migration includes both better use of existing pathways and exploring complementary ones. This approach would enhance the implementation of the EU *acquis* in the area of legal migration and would provide safe alternative pathways for those in need, taking into account receiving capacities and national labour market needs, in line with the relevant provision of the TFEU.

Moreover, it would offer an element of leverage in our migration dialogues with key third countries that can contribute to more effective migration management and, most importantly, better cooperation on return and readmission in line with the “more-for-more” principle.

In conclusion, let me reiterate once again that the Greek government is entering this negotiation with a result-oriented approach and we are looking forward to your proposals, as well as help build a consensus within the European Union that will make us stronger to address a challenge that will remain with us for the coming decades.

Yours sincerely,



George S. Koumoutsakos

*H.E. Ms Ylva Johansson
Commissioner for Home Affairs
European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200, 1049 Brussels*