

## EPP LEADERS' STATEMENT 17 October 2024

### EPP Political Priorities on how to stop irregular immigration

Irregular immigration is one of the most important challenges Europe faces today. The number of asylum applications to the EU has risen over the past few years. More than 350,000 of those seeking protection entered the EU irregularly in the first 11 months of 2023. For decades, the EU has been struggling to create workable common policies on irregular immigration and asylum. Stopping irregular migration is finally on the top of the European agenda, and EPP was at the forefront to achieve that. The EU-Tunisia Agreement already shows successful results: this year, there were over 60 percent fewer irregular arrivals coming from Tunisia to Italy while further efforts with regards to return are needed. Until recently, we witnessed the same effect with the EU-Lebanon Agreements with nearly no irregular arrivals coming from Lebanon to Cyprus. On Greece's land border with Turkiye a combination of effective surveillance, physical barriers and cooperation with Turkiye on anti-smuggling has reduced pressure of illegal border crossings. Nevertheless, we must further pursue our efforts using all available tools, and shall in particular focus on the following steps:

1. **The new Migration and Asylum Pact** needs to be implemented. The implementation shall not affect the exercise of the responsibilities incumbent upon Member States with regard to the maintenance of law and order and the safeguarding of internal security. At the same time, we want to continuously improve it by working on innovative solutions.
2. **To have a functioning Schengen Area, we need to strengthen our external border protection. For this, Frontex' staff has to be tripled to 30 000 personnel** as coast and border guards to support the Member States securing the European external borders. The EU shall support and finance stationary infrastructure in frontline Member States. We cannot allow Russia and Belarus to use our own values, including the right to asylum, against us and undermine our democracies. A functioning Schengen Area also means it has the legal tools to tackle security threats such as the instrumentalization of irregular migration used in hybrid warfare, and that the integrity of the Schengen Area is protected from security risks presented by national schemes, such as the Hungarian National Card, where Russian nationals are invited into the Union without additional security checks. Lastly, for us, the Schengen Area is not complete without Romania and Bulgaria in it, we ask for their full admission.
3. **A new Mediterranean Pact**, with a dedicated European Commissioner, will upscale Europe's ambitions in the world and recognize the particular importance of the Mediterranean, from Africa to the Middle East. Our renewed partnerships should include all strategic fields that matter to Europe, starting from migration - including preventing irregular migration, fighting smuggling, and enhancing returns – but also stands alongside shared interests such as economic growth in North-Africa, security, energy, and critical raw materials. At the same time, migratory developments across all routes need to be monitored and stemmed.
4. **We need to explore options for comprehensive partnerships with third countries.** Abuse and loss of life are directly linked with smuggling and illegal border crossings. The EU should work with international organisations to support third countries with their capacity to process asylum applications and return to countries of origin or safe countries. The EU as such should use the leverage of all other policies, including visa conditioning. We should also be ready to draw lessons, now we enter the implementation phase of the agreement between Italy and Albania. In the same spirit, we should explore options for return transit-hubs that will relieve pressure from our reception and asylum systems.
5. **We need a more robust return policy.** The Directive dating back to 2008 continues to be valid until it is replaced by a new regulation that we call for as a matter of urgency, ensuring a uniform application of the effective return of individuals without the right to stay in the EU. One important tool to improve the efficiency of the EU on returns would be the mutual recognition of return decisions, by establishing common standards, procedures and forms. We also need to reassess the "safe third country" concept by 12 June 2025 to relieve

the pressure on EU countries, also in the area of return we need further possibilities with regard to cooperation with third countries to make sure that whenever a person is subject to a return decision, such decision is implemented quickly and effectively, making full use of the global leverage Europe has in its relations with third countries. A common approach is also needed as regards returns of criminals and posing a security threat. In addition, the EU needs to present a white paper on alternative measures for the effective execution of return decisions and expect full compliance of third countries with the pledges they have made towards the EU within the context of comprehensive partnerships.