

Joint Statement of the Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group

9 July 2021

The Prime Ministers of the Visegrád Group (V4) countries met on 9 July 2021. Celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2021, Visegrád Cooperation has stood the test of time and continues to provide a successful framework for regional cooperation in Central Europe. The challenges and crises affecting Europe and the world, including the COVID-19 pandemic further increased the importance of the V4 format. The Visegrád countries have helped each other in various challenges, which demonstrated the strength of regional solidarity and cooperation. Collaboration during the current crisis and the following recovery can be a solid basis for successful cooperation during the Hungarian V4 Presidency.

After the COVID-19 pandemic it is the shared goal of the Visegrád countries to be among those who benefit from the global economic and political changes. With its population of 64 million, the V4 is an indispensable actor in the post-Brexit European Union, representing one of the most dynamic regions in the Union, based on robust economic growth and high employment. The V4 countries feel responsible for Europe's future, preserving its values and principles and supporting the EU's further enlargement. Continuing V4 cooperation in addressing current global challenges, such as climate change, digital transformation or migration also contributes to a stable, secure and globally competitive European Union.

Beyond representing common goals and constructive ideas in the EU the Visegrád countries also strive for strengthening V4+ partnerships. It is in this spirit, that the V4 leaders met with the Prime Minister of Slovenia in Ljubljana who presented the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union providing them with an opportunity to exchange views on the most important issues on the EU's political agenda. In this context, the V4 leaders agreed to cooperate closely in the following policy areas during the Hungarian V4 Presidency:

1. Conference on the Future of Europe

The V4 leaders welcomed the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe on 9 May 2021 aiming to address Europe's challenges and priorities and to provide an opportunity for citizens to express their views and thereby influence Europe's future. The V4 countries feel responsible for the future of Europe as their own success and prosperity depend to a large extent on the success and prosperity of the European Union and the European project.

A successful Conference on the Future of Europe must give space to an in-depth debate. It is a unique opportunity to engage citizens in a substantial dialogue on what they expect from the

EU, which is the best way to strengthen the EU's democratic legitimacy and popular support. Pluralism and full transparency of the process should be at the core of the Conference.

It is not only important for each of the V4 countries to express their views in the debate but - since one in seven European citizens is a national of the Visegrád countries - it is also essential that the voice of the citizens from the region is heard. Therefore, the Prime Ministers encourage their citizens to join the conversation and have their say on the future of the European Union. The upcoming Bled Strategic Forum will provide an excellent opportunity for leaders to exchange their views on the future of Europe.

2. Migration and Asylum

The V4 leaders discussed the situation along the main migratory routes into the EU, in particular the Western Balkan and the Eastern Borders route and noted with concern the significant increase of illegal border crossings reported in the first half of 2021. The deteriorating security situation in the EU's southern and eastern neighbourhood and especially in Afghanistan give rise to serious concerns. They stressed that uncontrolled illegal migration represents one of the most serious threats to the security and cohesion of the European Union and that citizens expect credible actions in tackling this phenomenon.

Given the volatile migration situation, they emphasized that the protection of borders of Member States and third countries located along the relevant routes is an effective way to combat illegal migration. The Prime Ministers supported the increased EU attention on the external dimension in order to better handle the migration-related challenges which has helped to reduce the number of migrants attempting to enter the EU illegally. In this context, the EU should continue working on tailored migration partnerships based on conditionality in various areas and responding to EU priorities and the needs of third countries as well. Concrete actions for priority countries indicating clear objectives are needed to prevent illegal migration and address its root causes, encourage better border protection, efficient fight against smugglers and human traffickers as well as effective implementation of returns and readmission. These activities should aim at strengthening their capacity to combat external threats and to prevent future migration crises.

The EU should continue to provide ample support to the cooperation with third countries, in particular to the Western-Balkan partners in their efforts protecting borders and returning illegal migrants. The Visegrád countries reaffirmed their readiness to increase their commitments, in a pro-active and coordinated manner, should the number of illegal border crossings increase further in the region. The Visegrád countries also called on the Commission to put forward without delay a proposal for the continuation of financing for Syrian refugees and host communities in Turkey. Furthermore, the concept of disembarkation platforms should be revisited, in line with the 2018 June European Council Conclusions.

The Visegrád group Prime Ministers restated their conviction that the main goal of the reform of the Common European Asylum System is to set up the framework in a comprehensive, sustainable, efficient, safe and crisis-resilient form in order to stem illegal migration on all existing and emerging routes. It is important for a well-functioning EU asylum and migration policy to anticipate migration developments and focus all the efforts on truly strengthening the external dimension, improving border management and providing international protection to those in need while ensuring rapid return of others.

The V4 leaders recalled that the reform of the EU asylum policy has to be based on a consensus among all Member States and has to be adopted as a package, ensuring proper balance between responsibility and solidarity. They reiterated the position shared by a number of Member States that with a view to avoiding further pull factors, mandatory relocation is not a viable solution to stem illegal migration flows. Instead, solutions that provide meaningful impact, especially in the field of border protection and external dimension, should be recognized as part of solidarity contributions.

3. Climate Policy

The V4 leaders welcomed the agreement of the European Parliament and the Council on the European Climate Law, which anchored the EU 2030 climate target to a net greenhouse gas emission reduction of at least 55% compared to 1990. Although a conclusive and comprehensive evaluation and position will only be drawn up once the legislative proposals and impact assessments are published, the Visegrád countries would like to highlight the following points in view of the upcoming “Fit for 55” package of the European Commission:

In general, the V4 countries expect the Commission to deliver a balanced legislative package based on the principles of fairness and solidarity, as well as respecting different starting positions, specific national circumstances and the right of Member States to decide on their own energy mix in full compliance with the principle of technological neutrality. The proposals have to be accompanied by thorough, comprehensive and substantiated impact assessments at the level of Member States with regard to the environmental, economic and social impacts, which also analyse the impacts on individual sectors.

The Prime Ministers are convinced that decarbonisation of the energy sector must go hand in hand with secure and affordable supply of energy which is essential to ensuring the EU's long-term competitiveness. Therefore, due to the considerable differences in the income level of households between Member States, no EU-wide uniform carbon price can be introduced in the residential sector and in road transport. In this context, any new regulation should be designed in a way to prevent additional financial burdens on households and take into account the competitiveness of economic actors.

As regards the Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR) the same methodology and reference levels shall continue to be applied as agreed previously, with efforts distributed on the basis of relative GDP per capita taking into consideration fairness and early achievements as well. More specifically, for the reasons of ensuring investment predictability and avoiding negative impacts on the EU markets, the scope of the Emissions Trading System (ETS) Directive shall only be extended to include the maritime sector with a revision of the aviation sector, while the scope of the ESR should remain unchanged by 2030.

The V4 leaders recalled that since a higher 2030 target would lead to significantly higher investment needs in low-income Member States, the size of the Modernization Fund should be increased to 6% of total allowances of ETS in the ‘Fit for 55’ package. The scope of the Modernisation Fund should also be revised in order to provide for technological neutrality and respecting the importance of the transitional role of natural gas while also allowing investments in generation and use of heat from renewable sources as priority investments. The V4 leaders additionally reaffirmed the need to adequately address Article 18 of the European Council conclusions of 10-11 December 2020 in the upcoming legislation without burdening the Modernisation Fund beneficiaries.

It is of utmost importance that the contribution of nuclear energy to decarbonisation is recognised in the EU policies, including taxonomy of sustainable investments. Therefore, the Commission should present as soon as possible the complementary delegated act covering nuclear energy on a scientific basis and respecting the existing robust EU nuclear regulatory framework. The complementary delegated act should also duly reflect the important transitional role of natural gas and its substantial contribution to greenhouse gas emissions reduction and energy security.

The Prime Ministers of the Visegrád countries recalled, that in order to ensure ownership of and public support for the green transition the European Council must continue to give its guidance in determining the path towards climate neutrality and its implementation, including intermediate targets and legislation implementing them.

4. Enlargement

The V4 leaders reiterated their unequivocal support for the accession of the Western Balkans and their firm belief that the future of the region lies in the EU. Reunification of Europe cannot be complete without the region joining the European Union. The enhanced enlargement methodology laid the foundations for further strengthening the cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans. It reaffirmed that a firm, merit-based prospect of full EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's very own political, security and economic interest and that enlargement remains more than ever a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe.

It is in this spirit, that Prime Ministers called on all EU stakeholders to maintain and consolidate the positive momentum by adopting the Negotiation Frameworks without further delay and to hold as soon as possible the first Intergovernmental Conference with Albania and North Macedonia. Furthermore, they expressed their expectation that the on-going accession negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro will be accelerated during the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union with the aim of opening and consequently closing as many new chapters / clusters as possible.

The V4 leaders urged the EU to make full use of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans in order to better connect the economies of the region with the EU and to ensure that the EU will be ready to welcome the first countries meeting the conditions of accession already during the current (2021-2027) Multiannual Financial Framework.

Taking into consideration the common European future of the current EU Member States and the Western Balkans, they welcomed the inclusion of the Western Balkan partners in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe. They underlined the need for effective communication on the benefits of the enlargement process for the candidate countries and also for EU citizens. Appropriate attention needs to be paid also to countering disinformation.

The Prime Ministers looked forward to supporting and to working closely with the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union in order to successfully organise the EU-Western Balkans Summit on 6 October 2021 in Brdo with a view to holding a strategic discussion on enlargement providing a new momentum to the EU accession of the region.
