European Council

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COVER NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	European Council meeting (17 and 18 March 2016) – Conclusions

Delegations will find attached the conclusions adopted by the European Council at the above meeting.

I. MIGRATION

1. The European Council confirms its comprehensive strategy to tackle the migration crisis. Several elements of our common European response are in place today and are yielding results. Work on other elements is being taken forward diligently, so that they can be implemented as soon as possible. Priority will continue to be given to regaining control of our external borders.

2. Following the decisions of the Heads of State or Government of 7 March, and in the context of the Joint Action Plan with Turkey and its expansion, the European Council calls for:

   - more work to be done on hotspots; much progress has been achieved in making all hotspots fully operational and increasing reception capacities; this effort should be continued, with the full assistance of the EU, including support for Greek asylum structures;

   - the use of all means to support the capacity of Greece for the return of irregular migrants to Turkey in the context of the Greek-Turkish readmission Protocol and the EU-Turkey readmission agreement as of 1 June 2016. Member States declare their willingness to provide Greece at short notice with the necessary means, including border guards, asylum experts and interpreters. The European Council asks the Commission to coordinate all necessary support for Greece, for the full implementation of the EU-Turkey statement, and to develop an operational plan. The Commission will coordinate and organise together with Member States and agencies the necessary support structures to implement it effectively. The Commission will regularly report to the Council on its implementation;

- emergency support to be provided to help Greece cope with the humanitarian situation. The rapid adoption of the Regulation on emergency support is an important step in that respect. The draft amending budget presented by the Commission should be adopted without delay. Member States are invited to make immediate additional contributions under the Civil Protection Mechanism as well as to provide bilateral humanitarian assistance;

- accelerated relocation from Greece, which includes conducting the necessary security checks; the number of applications now being larger than the number of offers, as shown in the Commission report of 16 March, Member States should swiftly offer more places, in line with the existing commitments.

3. The European Council takes note of the Commission Communication "Next operational steps in EU-Turkey cooperation in the field of migration", in particular as to how an asylum application from a migrant crossing from Turkey into Greece can be declared inadmissible, based on the concept of "first country of asylum" or "safe third country", in accordance with European and international law.

4. The European Council reiterates that the EU-Turkey Statement does not establish any new commitments on Member States as far as relocation and resettlement are concerned.

5. The EU reiterates that it expects Turkey to respect the highest standards when it comes to democracy, rule of law, respect of fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression.

6. The European Council reaffirms its support to Jordan and Lebanon. It calls for pledges to be disbursed promptly and EU Compacts to be finalised to enhance support to refugees and host communities in both countries.

7. The European Council calls for strengthening of cooperation with the Western Balkans countries in tackling the migration crisis and contributing to the objectives of the European Council.

8. Further to its February 2016 conclusions, the European Council invites the European Investment Bank to present to its June meeting a specific initiative aimed at rapidly mobilising additional financing in support of sustainable growth, vital infrastructure and social cohesion in Southern neighbourhood and Western Balkans countries.

9. The European Council is extremely vigilant as regards possible new routes for irregular migrants and calls for taking any measures that may become necessary in that respect. In this context, the fight against smugglers everywhere and by all appropriate means remains key. The EU stands ready to support the Government of National Accord, as the sole legitimate government of Libya, including, at its request, to restore stability, fight terrorism and manage migration in the central Mediterranean.

10. The European Council reaffirms its previous conclusions on the various elements of the comprehensive strategy and is pleased with progress on the European Border and Coast Guard proposal, which should be adopted as soon as possible. Work will also be taken forward on the future architecture of the EU's migration policy, including the Dublin Regulation.

II. JOBS, GROWTH AND COMPETITIVENESS

11. To steer the Council's discussions on the 2016 European Semester, the European Council endorsed the policy priority areas of the Annual Growth Survey: re-launching investment, pursuing structural reforms to modernise our economies, and conducting responsible fiscal policies. Member States will reflect these priorities in their forthcoming National Reform Programmes and Stability or Convergence Programmes. Such policies will contribute to placing the current recovery on a more sustainable basis and to fostering growth and employment. The European Council notes the Commission consultation on social issues and stresses the importance of well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems.

12. At its June meeting, the European Council will discuss the progress achieved in the work towards completing the Economic and Monetary Union. It will also adopt an Agenda for the implementation of all aspects of the Single Market, including delivery of the Commission's Single Market, Digital Single Market and Capital Markets Union strategies, with a view to exploiting in full its untapped growth and productivity potential.

13. In the light of the difficult situation of the European steel sector, in a context of overcapacity at global level, the European Council calls on the Council to rapidly examine the Commission's communication with a view to taking strong action in response to this challenge.

14. The European Council notes the situation of farmers, notably in the dairy and pig sectors, who are seriously affected by the drop in prices. It invites the Commission to quickly act upon the outcome of the Council (Agriculture) meeting of 14 March. It will closely follow the evolution of this sector of such importance for Europe.

15. The European Council notes that the Commission intends to publish shortly a communication on an action plan on VAT. It welcomes the intention of the Commission to include proposals for increased flexibility for Member States with respect to reduced rates of VAT, which would provide the option to Member States of VAT zero rating for sanitary products.

III. CLIMATE AND ENERGY

16. The European Council welcomes the submission by the Commission of the package on energy security as well as of the Communication "Road from Paris". It encourages the legislators to proceed with work on the proposals to reinforce the EU energy security as a matter of priority on the basis of its previous conclusions and the relevant strategies endorsed by the European Council. It also recalled the importance of a fully-functioning and interconnected energy market. Based on the Climate Communication, it underlines the EU's commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions domestically and to increase the share of renewable energies and improve energy efficiency as agreed by the European Council in October 2014. Adapting the legislation in order to implement this framework remains a priority. The European Council invites the Commission to rapidly present all the remaining relevant proposals to this end so as to swiftly engage the legislative process. The European Council looks forward to the signature of the Paris Agreement in New York on 22 April and underlines the need for the European Union and its Member States to be able to ratify the Paris Agreement as soon as possible and on time so as to be Parties as of its entry into force.