Keynote speech by Commissioner Avramopoulos on Europe's response to the challenges of migration and security at the London School of Economics

London, 23 January 2019

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be here at one of the leading academic institutions of the United Kingdom, Europe and the world.

Your "alma mater" is renowned for its research, knowledge, understanding of the political, and social sciences, with a view to contributing to the better governance of our democracies and societies. "*Rerum cognoscere causas*" is your university motto – to know the causes of things.

Well, what I have come to talk to you about this evening will demonstrate how difficult that aspiration may sometimes be.

I have been European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship for the past four and a half years.

I expect that most of you here follow the news regularly, so it will not come to your surprise when I say that things have been rather busy for us.

Things have been busy for us in the European Union for reasons that are precisely linked to the LSE's very own motto.

You see, sometimes you do know why things happen, but it is difficult to respond coherently, or in the right way at the right time.

Sometimes you know what should happen, but not everyone will want to listen or be on board in advance.

The migration and refugee crisis has been a prime example of that.

Other times you *don't* have all the reasons why certain things happen, but still you have to find solutions.

This has been the case with the threats against our security, and in particular terrorism.

We meet here under not the most auspicious of times in Europe.

As students, alumni and supporters of the LSE's European Institute, I am again not telling you anything new. The unity of Europe has been increasingly put into question over the past few years: first the financial crisis, then precisely the migration crisis, several terrorist attacks, including also in this beautiful city, disinformation campaigns targeting our elections and democracies, Brexit, and throughout all of that: the continuous rise of populism and nationalism.

All these geopolitical developments have given a pretext, have opened the door to nationalists and populists to barge in and start unravelling our social fabric and cohesion.

And yet, these are not the first or only difficult times that we have encountered in our shared history.

To some of you this may seem long ago, but Europe, and the European Union that we have today,

was precisely born out of very dire times more than 60 years ago.

Most importantly, it demonstrated how cooperation, solidarity and responsibility triumphed over rivalry, division and destruction.

Historical memory is critical to connect our past with our present to understand our present better, but also to shape our future.

Let me therefore go back a few years, bringing us to the topic of this evening.

In the year 2015, Europe was confronted with a large number of vulnerable and desperate people seeking refuge on its shores.

At that time, the European Union and its Member States were unprepared and taken by surprise.

However, we couldn't afford to stay unprepared and idle anymore. We had to act and we did.

In that same year already we took several concrete and immediate measures to respond to the crisis in the Mediterranean, as well as the necessary steps to better manage migration in all its aspects, both internal and external, now, but also in the coming years.

Ranging from hotspots in Italy and Greece where everyone arriving could be registered and fingerprinted, to closer cooperation with

countries such as Turkey and the Western Balkans, and creating a fully-fledged European Border and Coast Guard.

We have been working hard and with great determination from the very beginning on solutions based on solidarity and responsibility.

Because the essence of our objective is: in a European family, you help each other out.

Today, the results of our joint efforts over these past few years are very tangible.

The numbers are back to, and even below, the pre-crisis years.

To give you an illustration: arrivals have dropped by 95% on the sea crossing from Turkey to Greece, and by 80% on the route from sub-Saharan and Northern Africa through Libya.

On top of that, our EU operations have helped rescue over 800,000 people at sea since 2015.

An essential part of our policy has been international synergies. Beyond our effective cooperation with Turkey and the Western Balkans as I mentioned, we have stepped up our cooperation also with North and Sub-Saharan Africa, not only to intensify returns and readmissions, but also to build strategies to address the root causes of migration.

In this context, I am also very happy with what we achieved with the international community with the Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration.

It was the European Union that was one of the driving and inspiring forces behind these compacts, and behind the UN Summit on Migration, more than two years ago now.

For the very first time, we have managed to engage the global community to commit to work together on something that is indeed global: the movements of migrants and refugees,

how to better deal with those and share responsibility.

But our biggest challenge in the whole question about migration is of course not numbers.

It is attitude. It is perception. You see, migration is a phenomenon that has always been with us. People have been on the move for centuries, for different reasons.

Today, around 70 million people around the world have been displaced, and more than 250 million are more generally on the move, for a variety of reasons.

This means that we cannot just apply stop-gap or emergency measures. This means we have to be bold enough to think long-term.

Because we need a system that is truly shared, and future-proof at the same time. But this requires us to see that there is not only *irregular* migration, but also *legal* and regular migration and mobility.

It also requires us to continue defending the basic principles of the Geneva Convention and the essence of our common European asylum policy.

Those who have a well-founded fear, who are fleeing war and persecution, and who are in seek of protection should receive shelter.

Unfortunately, short-term thinking and alarmist discourses are poisoning our citizens on a daily basis. They instil fear and xenophobia.

We know fear has increasingly eroded the links and the trust between our citizens, making some of them believe that it is by turning inward that we become safer.

However, it is not by building mental or physical walls that we become safer; we become only more isolated instead.

You all know that we have European elections in five months. Many say that migration will have a decisive influence in the debate. And it will.

Only, it will not be *really* about migration. Migration is a vehicle used by populists and nationalists.

These elections will be about something bigger and more fundamental. About whether we want to close ourselves off, and build those walls.

The essence of the elections will be about whether we choose to revert to the past, and the illusion that we can live under closed borders again – ignoring and forgetting what the cost was.

In other words, this would mean turning towards what led the previous generations to the abyss.

Or it will be about another option. About whether we want to work together, to face common challenges together, and to create a safer and larger vital common space for our union.

The most recent terrorist attack last December, in Strasbourg, was another stark reminder, that the threats against our society and our security are still very real. Now it was Strasbourg, but before it was London, Berlin, Barcelona, Brussels, and several other of our European cities.

This also shows that these threats continue to be common and shared, and that we must tackle them together.

This is why in the last few years we have been working to build a Security Union, to better support and strengthen cooperation between Member States concerning various security threats, including countering radicalisation, boosting cybersecurity, cutting terrorist financing as well as improving information exchange thereby signalling a new era for security in Europe.

Because the security threats we know today, know no borders. No country can face them alone.

This is why in the European Union we are working to make our migration, border and security information systems interoperable. A safer and more secure Europe starts way beyond our European continent.

This is why we have been forging trustful partnerships to tackle terrorism with countries such as the United States, Canada, the Western Balkans, Turkey and the Middle East, as well as North Africa.

A safer and more secure world goes also beyond those physical borders, and must be extended to the virtual and cyber world.

This is why, for example, we have developed an unprecedented partnership with big internet companies: such as Facebook, Twitter, Google and Microsoft in the form of the "EU Internet Forum", to detect and remove terrorist content online.

Our approach has proven to be successful: Facebook recently announced that in the second and third quarters of 2018, it removed 99% of the terrorist content before even being detected by a user. Europe has been at the forefront of this issue too.

Our efforts have inspired the international community to set up the Global Internet Forum on Combating Terrorism. But we need to be quicker and more effective.

This is why we have taken it one step further, by proposing EU-wide legislation,

to ensure that terrorist online content is effectively taken down within just one hour by a company – whether small or big.

This is a game changer: we adapt to the changing world around us, without adapting or altering our basic principles: freedom of speech and the freedoms of the internet overall.

Because security is not and cannot be a final aim *per se*.

Security is a means towards the final goal of a good, liveable, well-ordered democratic society.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to come back where I started – and the importance of LSE's historic motto.

The importance of understanding, of knowing, of remembering.

Some tend to forget the dark past of our history and take the prosperity, democracy and all the progress achieved so far for granted.

There are voices in Europe telling their citizens to be afraid of "the migrant", of their neighbour, of the other.

And this is where nationalism appears as a road to follow. What a misconception! There is a big difference between being patriot or being a nationalist. The difference is clear. A patriot loves his or her country. But a nationalist hates the country of the other.

60 years ago with the creation of the EU we ended this anomaly of thinking. In Europe you can be both patriot and European. And the strong link between our citizens is precisely solidarity.

If we precisely look back in history to understand better, we see that we cannot let ourselves be guided by fear.

Europe was not built out of fear. It was built on aspiration and hope, on the commitment to work and live together, in a spirit of trust and solidarity.

This is the essence of Europe. Migration and security issues have tested that.

But they have also shown the only answer to that.

Thank you – now I am ready to listen to your ideas and questions, and to discuss with you.

Because our generation is working for your future, and you should be part of shaping it.