

European Council – December 2024 – Migration State of Play

Key objectives	Key actions under way and next steps
<p>Implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum</p>	<p><u>Steps taken in line with the Common Implementation Plan of June:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ National Implementation Plans: Ongoing Commission support to Member States for the preparation of their Plans. Needs assessment shared with Member States in October. Almost all Member States subsequently shared with the Commission draft versions of their Plans for feedback. Over half of the Member States communicated their National Implementation Plans to the Commission by the 12 December deadline, in line with the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation. ➤ Meetings of contact and expert groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Asylum Procedure Regulation (APR) Contact Committee on 11 October: discussion on rights and obligations of applicants, monitoring of fundamental rights, implicit withdrawal and safe third country concept. ○ Joint Reception Conditions Directive (RCD)/Dublin III Contact Committees on 15 October: discussion on the planning for adoption of all Implementing Acts by mid-2025. Discussion included the withdrawal of reception conditions for persons subject to Dublin transfers and the possibility to restrict freedom of movement for applicants subject to incoming or outgoing Dublin transfers. ○ Resettlement Expert Group on 15 October: exchange on the implementation of the Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework Regulation, notably the eligibility criteria and grounds for refusing admission, the common admission procedure, and the 2-year Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Plan. ○ High-Level Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Committee on 7 November: the first/constitutive meeting discussed maximising the impact of the Regulation through a more strategic use of resettlement and humanitarian admission, embedded in comprehensive partnerships. ○ 11th meeting of the HOME Informal Expert Group on Children in Migration on 25 October: discussion on child-related aspects in the Pact, in particular legal interpretation issues and implementation challenges. ○ Eurodac Advisory Group on 12 September and 26 November and the Eurodac Project Management Forum on 28 October: discussion on the implementation of the new Eurodac system at central and national level.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interoperability Committee on 5 December prepared the Implementing Act on Eurodac cross-system statistics. ○ Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR) Contact Group: on 12 November and 16 December: discussed the draft template for the national strategies presented by the Commission. ○ AMMR Contact Group on 5 December: discussed draft implementing rules on take-back notifications. ○ 1st meeting of the AMMR Regulatory Committee on 15 October discussed the planning envisaged for the adoption of all relevant implementation acts by mid-2025. ○ Informal expert groups under AMMR with volunteering Member States were created on take-back notifications (1 October, 26 November), implementing rules on the form and uniform methods of relocation (15 November, 17 December). ○ Reception Contact Committee on 25 November: discussion on the transposition process of the Reception Conditions Directive, its provisions on healthcare, education and vulnerable people, and its applicability in different situations. ○ Commission Expert Group on the views of migrants in the field of migration, asylum and integration on 25 October: discussions focused on resettlement; consultation of civil society on the implementation of the Pact in Member States; their possible contribution to the independent mechanism for fundamental rights monitoring; practices for effective information provision to applicants for and beneficiaries of international protection; alternatives to detention; and involving applicants in managing reception and preventing misbehaviour in reception centres. ○ The joint meeting of the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR) Contact Group, Asylum Procedure Regulation (APR) Contact Group, Recast Reception Conditions Directive (RCD) Contact Committee, the Schengen Borders Code Committee dealing with the Screening Regulation, and the Contact Group on the Return Directive and the Return Border Procedure Regulation on 6 December discussed the operationalisation of the screening and border procedures. ➤ Pact Coordination Platform - virtual portal: the IT tool went online at the end of September. The tool includes a calendar of relevant meetings, their agendas and minutes where available, as well as key related documents. ➤ Implementing and Delegated Acts: Preparation ongoing in the framework of the AMMR Regulatory Committee. The Implementing Act on adequate capacity under APR was adopted on 5 August.
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- **Guidance and models:** Draft guidance for the screening process being prepared (ongoing interactive process with Member States experts within the Schengen Borders Code Committee on 13 September, 18 November, planned for 17 January 2025, and future meetings/dedicated workshops).
 - **Annual Migration Management Report preparation:** discussion on the lessons learnt of the dry run of 5 November focused on the ways to avoid duplication and fragmentation in the data collection and analysis, as well as unnecessary administrative burden on Member States. The Commission and the Agencies, in line with their respective mandates, will support and guide Member States in plugging data collection gaps and facilitate sharing.
- EU Agencies' support to Member States in the implementation of the Pact:**
- **EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA):** guidance on alternatives to detention adopted by the EUAA Management Board on 27 November; work ongoing on a model for the border procedure, template for information to applicants, template on contingency planning and an accompanying manual.
 - **Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA):** guidelines on the monitoring of the Fundamental Rights Independent Mechanism issued on 19 September.
- Five-year European Asylum and Migration Management Strategy:**
- **Template for the national strategies:** ongoing preparation; discussion in the AMMR Contact Group (see above).
- Dublin Roadmap:**
- The Dublin III Contact Committee discusses the issue of Dublin transfers. On 15 October, the Committee discussed the withdrawal of reception conditions for persons subject to Dublin transfers, the possibilities to restrict freedom of movement of applicants subject to incoming or outgoing Dublin transfers.
 - The specific actions envisaged under the Dublin Roadmap ended in December 2023. The Commission continues monitoring the progress achieved and the ongoing measures.
 - The results achieved under the Dublin Roadmap and good practices identified during its implementation will serve as basis for the new implementing rules to be adopted in 2025 in the area of Dublin transfers, in line with the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation.
- Relocation:**
- The Commission continues to implement the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism, which is designed to support Member States most affected by migratory challenges through relocation and financial support.

	<p>Up to 25 November, 6012 persons have been transferred under the Mechanism (<i>2533 from Cyprus, 1802 from Greece, 1221 from Italy, 237 from Spain and 219 from Malta</i>) out of 8289 pledges made available.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Under the Pact, the solidarity mechanism provided in the AMMR will apply and become operational in mid-2026. The Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism can continue channelling solidarity contributions until then, including in times of specific needs that might arise. <p><u>Frontloading the Pact:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A letter sent to Member States on 13 November was followed by the presentation of the proposed measures in the SCIFA meeting of 14 November. The Commission is in close contact with those Member States that have expressed interest and others that are already engaged in actions to frontload efforts. The Commission’s outreach is ongoing regarding pairing selected Member States to frontload measures relating to the Dublin system. The Commission will support Member States that require technical assistance to decide on their participation. <p><u>NEXT STEPS:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Contact and Expert Groups: AMMR Contact Group meeting on 16 January. Informal expert groups under AMMR with volunteering Member States on implementing rules on the form and uniform methods of relocation: third meeting on 21 January; and on implementing rules on the lists of proofs and circumstantial evidence: first meeting on 18 December and second meeting on 20 February. ➤ First meeting of the Pact Implementation Coordination Platform beginning of 2025. ➤ Adoption of the template for the national strategies in Q1 of 2025. ➤ Commission to inform Council and Parliament of state of play of the implementation by April 2025. ➤ Review of the safe third country concept in the APR by June 2025; internal preparations ongoing. ➤ Preparation of the AMMR Implementing Acts tentatively by mid-2025.
<p>Stronger external borders</p>	<p><u>European digital border management - steps taken since October:</u></p> <p>Entry/Exit System (EES) start of operations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Following the invitation of eu-LISA’s Management Board on 25 September, the Commission assessed the possibilities and modalities to start deploying the EES on a progressive basis. This approach was discussed in the Home Affairs Council (10 October) and represents the best way forward for swift

progress to a reliable entry into operation. On 4 December, the Commission made a proposal to allow for a progressive start of operations of the Entry/Exit System.

ETIAS/Interoperability

- While the timing of entry into operations of ETIAS will have to reflect developments on the EES, the Commission continues to actively support eu-LISA and Member States in preparing to implement the system and addressing existing challenges.
- The JHA Council discussed the implementation of interoperability on 12 December.

Dedicated funding for EES/ ETIAS

- In April, DG HOME made available dedicated funding under the Specific Action ‘Support to Member States for Smart Borders’ to contribute to the preparations at national level for the entry into operation and functioning of EES and ETIAS. In July, all 26 applications submitted by 23 Member States and 3 Schengen Associated Countries were approved, for a total of EUR 52.1 million.

Digitalising border management and visa procedures

- The Commission’s package of legislative proposals on the digitalisation of travel documents is now being examined by the Council in the relevant working party.

European Border and Coast Guard:

Implementation of the multiannual strategic policy for European Integrated Border Management (EIBM)

- The Frontex Management Board (MB) Working Group on EIBM (EIBM WG) developed in June a governance model to monitor the implementation by the Agency and the Member States of the Technical and Operational Strategy for EIBM, which was adopted in September 2023 by the Management Board. The EIBM WG is instrumental in exercising governance and reports annually to the MB, in support of the decision-making process related to EIBM.
- Alignment of the National Strategies for EIBM with the multiannual strategic policy adopted by the Commission and the Agency’s technical and operational strategy is being verified under the Schengen monitoring and evaluation mechanism. The outcome of this exercise is to be finalised in January 2025.
- Under the Specific Action to support Member States' national strategies for a European integrated border management, in October, 8 Member States (Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Hungary, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland and Romania) and 2 Schengen Associated Countries (IC and NO) were granted support for a total amount of EUR 8.2 million.

Responding to instrumentalisation of migrants at the EU’s external borders:

Financial support

- A call for expressions of interest under the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy (BMVI) (Specific Action ‘Enhancing border surveillance capabilities for countries at the borders with Russia and Belarus’) was launched on 31 July, for an indicative amount of EUR 170 million. The call invited Member States bordering Russia and Belarus to strengthen their border surveillance capabilities. The notification letters to the 6 Member States that submitted applications were sent on 11 December.

Operational support

- Ongoing operational support from the EU Agencies can be stepped up, as needed.
- Situational awareness is supported through Migration Preparedness and Crisis Blueprint network and the Integrated Situational Awareness Analysis (ISAA)¹.

Legal measures

- The Crisis Regulation, which sets out a comprehensive framework at EU level addressing situations of crisis, including instrumentalisation of migrants, will start applying in June 2026.
- The Commission has published a Communication underlining the exceptional nature of the security threat currently at the EU’s eastern border, and outlining the scope in the existing legal framework for response by the EU and the Member States, including temporary measures that may affect fundamental rights in certain circumstances, in order to preserve national security and the integrity of the EU external border.

A complete and fully functioning Schengen area / Schengen governance:

Schengen evaluation and monitoring mechanism

- The Commission adopted Schengen country reports for Croatia and Poland, and the evaluations of Hungary, Slovakia and Czechia were concluded. In the first half of 2025 Switzerland, Slovenia and Austria will be evaluated. The Schengen Coordinator continues to engage with Member States to ensure key remedial actions and structural reforms are undertaken to address priority recommendations.

¹ In the context of the Integrated Political Crisis Response arrangements on the migration crisis.

- In the margins of the Schengen Council in December, individual Schengen Scoreboards were delivered to Member States, highlighting the progress made with the implementation of the recommendations flowing from Schengen evaluations.
- In line with the 2024-2025 Schengen Cycle priorities, strategic and operational measures remain focused on strengthening border management, increasing the effectiveness of returns, developing whole-of-the route Schengen cooperation frameworks, increasing security through digitalisation, and preventing abuse of EU visa policy.

Bulgaria and Romania

- Following the decision to abolish controls at the internal air and sea borders between Bulgaria, Romania and other Schengen States as of 31 March, the Schengen Council took the decision on 12 December to also abolish controls at the internal land borders as from 1 January 2025.
- Bulgaria and Romania have been successfully implementing specific steps to address irregular migration and security threats. The reinforcement of external borders, including through Frontex and regional initiatives with Member States and third countries with the support of the Commission, has resulted in intensified anti-smuggling activities and an important year-on-year drop of 80% in irregular border crossings on the Western Balkan route. An increased number of migrant smuggling cases, as well as of identified regional coordinators of high interest (high-value targets) acting on the Western Balkan route, have been registered, with the support of Europol.

Internal Border Controls

- The revised Schengen Borders Code entered into force on 10 July. It contains an updated framework for the reintroduction of internal border controls, with clearer deadlines and stricter monitoring and reporting obligations for Member States and the Commission.
- Currently, eight Member States have internal border controls in place. Germany has extended the reintroduction to all its internal borders, and the Netherlands has reintroduced internal border controls for the first time. The entry into force of the revised Schengen Borders Code is considered as the start of the new legal framework, meaning that deadlines and obligations under the new Code will be calculated from the time of the first notification since its entry into force. The Schengen coordinator remains in close contact with all Member States concerned, to ensure that the impact of these controls on the free movement of people in the area of free movement, and on the functioning of cross-border regions, remains as limited as possible.

Enhanced national capabilities at the EU external borders:

- The Commission on 4 March invited **Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Hungary** to apply for the Specific Action ‘Enhanced national capabilities at the EU external borders’ under the BMVI, for an indicative amount of EUR 85 million. The action supports equipment, means of transport or upgrades to electronic border surveillance systems, to support effective application of the Schengen *acquis* in Bulgaria and Romania, at the external land borders with Türkiye and Serbia, and reinforce border surveillance capabilities of Hungary and Croatia, in accordance with the EU *acquis*, at the external land borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. The applications were assessed and in October support was allocated as follows: EUR 9.7 million for Croatia, EUR 23.7 million for Romania, EUR 23.4 million for Hungary and EUR 27.4 million for Bulgaria.

Stronger coordination of rescue operations, including with neighbouring countries:

- The Commission continues to support cooperation between Member States to better coordinate search and rescue and save lives at sea. The Commission will continue to work towards improving information sharing and coordination among Member States in the context of the **European Contact Group on Search and Rescue** (6 meetings so far; next meeting scheduled for early 2025).

NEXT STEPS

Schengen

- The ninth Schengen Barometer+ will be issued for the March 2025 Schengen Council, presenting the key achievements of 2024 and areas for continued improvement in 2025.
- The next State of Schengen package will be adopted in Spring 2025, setting out the 2025-2026 Schengen Cycle priorities.

European digital border management

- Adoption of a Commission Recommendation establishing a practical handbook to be used by Member States’ competent authorities when carrying out tasks related to ETIAS (‘ETIAS Handbook’).
- Revision of the timeline for the interoperability roadmap implementation.

European Border and Coast Guard

- Frontex and Member States must swiftly contribute human resources and technical equipment to the Standing Corps and to the technical equipment pool, as well as implement integrated planning, and proper reporting on the border situation.

<p>Fighting migrant smuggling</p>	<p><u>Ongoing legislative proposals to crack down on smuggling of migrants:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Regulation on enhancing Europol’s support to preventing and combating migrant smuggling and human trafficking: Council position on the proposal endorsed by Coreper II on 19 June. European Parliament position still to be adopted. ➤ Directive laying down minimum rules to prevent and counter the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and stay in the Union: the JHA Council agreed on its position on 13 December. European Parliament position still to be adopted. ➤ Regulation on measures against transport operators that facilitate or engage in trafficking in persons or smuggling of migrants in relation to illegal entry into the territory of the EU: negotiations should resume and be swiftly concluded, as a key legal instrument in this area. <p><u>Working with international partners in the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The Global Alliance forms a key component of all bilateral/regional discussions with partner countries. ➤ To implement the Global Alliance, by the end of 2024 over 30 events will have been organised by the Commission or with the Commission’s active participation. These include the thematic Conference on tackling migrant smuggling in the digital domain co-organised with Europol, the Annual Meeting of Heads of Migrant Smuggling Units co-hosted by the Spanish National Police and Europol’s European Migrant Smuggling Centre, and the Annual Meeting of Prosecutors on Migrant Smuggling hosted by Eurojust in partnership with EU4FAST and EUROMED Justice projects. All these events promoted active engagement with law enforcement and judicial practitioners, social media companies and third country partners. ➤ UNODC, in the framework of an EU-funded project, organised a regional conference on migrant smuggling in Pakistan and another one in Kenya, both in April, as well as the Working Group on Smuggling of Migrants in Vienna in July. The Global Forum of Prosecutors specialised in investigations related to the fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, convened by UNODC in Vienna on 4-6 December under the EU-funded PACTS project (“Promoting Action and Cooperation among countries at global level against Trafficking in Human Beings and the Smuggling of Migrants”, EUR 5 million (NDICI)). ➤ Cooperation in international frameworks to counter migrant smuggling, such as within the framework of the G7 Anti-Smuggling Action Plan adopted by relevant Ministers of Interior endorsed on 4 October, and regional processes, including the Niamey process. The Global Alliance was promoted at the regional conference of the Niamey process in Rome (Italy) on 19-21 November. A project to support UNODC as
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the permanent follow-up mechanism for the implementation of the Niamey process started in February (EU contribution EUR 1.2 million).

EU level cooperation

- Tackling the online dimension of migrant smuggling on the agenda of the EU Internet Forum Senior Officials Meeting of 12 December.
- The 14th meeting of the European Migration Network (EMN) Working Group on Information Campaigns was held on 13 November with 12 participating States. The next meeting will take place in 2025. A call for proposals with a budget of EUR 10 million for new information and awareness raising campaigns was launched on 19 November.
- The link between trafficking in human beings and migration, including migrant smuggling, was discussed on 2 December in the EU network of national coordinators for trafficking in human beings, and on 3 December in the joint meeting with the EU Civil Society Platform on human trafficking. As a majority of victims of human trafficking are migrants, the focus was the link between the two crimes, and actions needed in terms of prevention, operational law enforcement and judicial cooperation, as well protection of non-EU victims.
- The Immigration Liaison Officer (ILO) Network Steering Board meeting on 12 December discussed how to increase the impact of the ILO Network in migration management and in particular to support strategic analysis and the overall situational picture.

Engagement with partner countries on anti-smuggling

- Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnerships (ASOPs) have been concluded with Morocco, Tunisia, Western Balkan partners, and Niger (implementation currently on hold) (*see further below for details on ASOP Morocco/ASOP Tunisia and Egypt*). Implementation of the different ASOPs is ongoing with EU-funded projects, such as:
 - **EU4FAST**: the regional programme worth EUR 36 million (June 2023 – May 2027) aims to increase the capacity of Western Balkan partners to fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, with a focus on investigations, prosecutions and border management.
 - **ACTT** (Action to Combat Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Human beings in Tunisia): the anti-smuggling project in Tunisia was signed in November and will support the capacity of law enforcement and judicial authorities to investigate and prosecute organised crime groups engaging in migrant smuggling and in trafficking in human beings, as well as support to patrolling units at the border.

- Regional programme **HIMAYA** to enhance international police cooperation against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings in North Africa (EUR 5 million) implemented by Interpol since January.
- **Common Operational Partnerships (COPs):**
 - ongoing in Mauritania, The Gambia, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire. A COP has just been concluded in November with Guinea under NDICI for EUR 8 million. A top-up to COP Senegal has been validated in October as part of the Flexible Mechanism package of EUR 30 million for Senegal. A continuation of COPs will be further concluded in Mauritania and The Gambia.
 - An Individual Measure for West Africa of EUR 100 million was adopted by the College on 11 December, under which EUR 15 million will further support anti-smuggling and trafficking activities in West Africa.
 - ROCK (The Regional Operational Centre in support of the Khartoum process and the African Union Horn of Africa Initiative), supported by France and Interpol is a platform bringing together liaison officers to exchange police information on human trafficking and migrant smuggling. ROCK just launched this month in November its first operation called SAHAN coordinated with Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan leading to numerous arrests and the identification of up to 15000 victims of trafficking and smuggling.

Preventing exploitation of workers with an irregular status in Europe

- The Commission monitors the implementation of the Employers Sanctions Directive 2009/52/EC and will be reporting on its implementation [*report tentatively foreseen end of 2025*]. This report will be part of a package together with the implementation report on the Seasonal Workers Directive.
- Technical Expert Group meeting on Irregular Migration focusing on Employer Sanctions Directive 2009/52/EC on 5 December discussed financial and criminal sanctions and data collection.

NEXT STEPS:

- Second international conference on the Global Alliance to be held in 2025, ensuring continued political engagement of international partners, focused on concerted and targeted action at global level.
- Signature of the EUR 20 million anti-smuggling project with Egypt is planned in the coming weeks, with a view to reinforcing Egypt's capacities to detect and prosecute criminal networks engaged in migrant smuggling (the programme also works to support the action of Egyptian authorities to protect the victims of trafficking).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ EU financial support for new Common Operational Partnership projects with non-EU countries to counter migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings (EUR 12 million available in EU contribution through the Internal Security Fund, deadline for applications was 8 October). The evaluation is ongoing. New projects will complement the portfolio of existing ones in Türkiye, Western Balkans, Western Africa, and Pakistan. ➤ The action “Global Action against the Financial and Digital-based Dimensions of the Smuggling of Migrants” (EUR 15 million from NDICI) is under preparation. Expected adoption by the Commission in Q1/2 2025.
<p>New common approach on the return of irregular migrants</p>	<p><u>Legislative framework on returns:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The Commission will put forward in early 2025 a new common approach on returns, replacing the current Return Directive and the proposed recast Return Directive. The new common approach on returns will take into account reflections on ‘innovative solutions’ (discussed in SCIFA, Coreper and Council meetings) and include streamlined procedures, the obligation to cooperate, and mutual recognition of return decisions (indications provided for example during the EMN conference of 25-26 November). Returns were also discussed at the JHA Council on 12 December, and in the EP plenary debate of 23 October. Further consultations with Member States, the European Parliament, international organisations and NGOs are ongoing. ➤ Two ongoing studies will inform the legislative proposals, on: (i) the gaps and needs of EU law in the area of return, and (ii) a comprehensive, integrated and digitalised EU migration management system, focussing on the digitalisation of the return, readmission and reintegration processes. ➤ The challenges and good practices identified in the Schengen thematic evaluation on return published on 16 December will also inform the forthcoming legislative proposals. ➤ A Commission Staff Working Document presented on 16 December provides an overview of legislation and best practice concerning returns of individuals presenting a security risk. <p><u>NEXT STEPS:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ New legislative proposal on returns in Q1 2025. ➤ New legislative proposal on digitalisation of the return, readmission and reintegration processes will follow later in 2025.

- Analysis of possible revision of the Frontex mandate on returns as part of the overall review of the Frontex mandate.

Operational measures:

Progress on the five key actions of the Returns Roadmap presented by the Commission:

- **Action 1 Joint identification actions leading to issuing of travel documents and Action 2 Assisted voluntary return, reintegration and joint return operations with Frontex:** 7 high-level planning and coordination meetings led by Frontex on seven priority third countries by end June. For the country added by the High-Level Network for returns, discussions took place in the framework of the Country Working Group. Measures identified to increase the number of effective returns; implementation ongoing. Monitoring of results, with the first report at the High-Level Network for Returns in September. Frontex asked to consider additional measures.
- **Action 2 Assisted voluntary return, reintegration and joint return operations with Frontex:** workshop organised by Cyprus on incentives for more effective return case management on 16 April, especially to encourage voluntary returns. Best practices document being finalised.
- **Action 3 Issuing of return decisions at the same time with a negative asylum decision:** online workshops organised by The Netherlands and Norway (13 May) on the comprehensive decision (negative asylum decision plus return decision), to be followed by an online workshop on last-minute asylum claims (22 October). Peer support offered by Norway and the Netherlands to Member States.
- **Action 4 Mutual recognition of return decisions and follow-up enforcement action:** joint seminar of Schengen Information System and migration experts on the use of the SIS return alerts to expedite return processes (7 March). Questionnaire to the High-Level Returns Network on need for more awareness, training, and support in September. Pilot project on mutual recognition by the Hungarian Presidency.
- **Action 5 Prioritising returns of illegally staying third country nationals posing a security threat:** addressed by the High-Level Network for Returns; the Commission issued a Staff Working Document on the return of illegally staying third country nationals posing a security threat.

Frontex support on returns

- Frontex' capacity to support Member States has increased, and so has Member States' uptake of Frontex support. Member States are making extensive use of Frontex support, not only in terms of flights, but also through return counselling and the EU Reintegration Programme.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The implementation of the EU Reintegration Programme has continued to progress, further streamlining the reintegration support offered to returnees from the EU. <p><u>NEXT STEPS:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ By January 2025, Frontex to set up an enhanced coordination system, based on joint planning of Member States’ use of Frontex support on return, to improve financial planning and allow for better pooling of resources during all phases of return, including a more strategic use of Frontex return operations, particularly to priority third countries, in line with EU policy. It will also feed into the work on the Return Roadmap. ➤ The Commission, together with Frontex, to conduct an analysis on the opportunities to further strengthen the return component of the Standing Corps, with a view to consider expanding the return support that the Agency provides by Q2 2025. ➤ The Return Coordinator to work on developing a ‘targeted action’ manual by Q2 2025, to guide actors involved in return within Member States to be linked through an efficient workflow, building also on the results of the thematic Schengen evaluation in the area of return. ➤ Specific Action funded by AMIF amounting to EUR 25 million to support Member States under pressure to incentivise voluntary return to priority third countries, supporting the implementation of building block 5 of the Pact Common Implementation Plan, and supporting implementation of the Returns Roadmap. Following the call for expression of interest launched on 15 October, the six applications received are under evaluation. ➤ Launch of the EUR 13 million (IPA-funded) regional Western Balkans return action, for both IOM and Member States-led components targeted by 1 January 2025.
<p>Strengthening our readmission policies</p>	<p><u>Visa Code Art. 25a process</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visa measures due to insufficient cooperation on readmission were adopted on 29 April by the Council regarding Ethiopia. - Discussions are ongoing in the Council regarding the follow-up to the Commission’s fifth assessment report adopted on 23 July, as well as the Commission proposal of 23 July proposing visa measures due to insufficient cooperation on readmission regarding Somalia. - Preparatory work to launch the 6th assessment report is ongoing.

	<p><u>Readmission requirements in other instruments</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Commission proposal for the new Generalised Scheme of Preferences Regulation included lack of cooperation on readmission as one of the grounds for withdrawal but was not accepted, and the current GSP Regulation (with no readmission conditionality) has been extended to December 2027 (Regulation (EU) 2023/2663)). This period could be shortened appropriately if the agreed successor Regulation enters into force before. - Samoa Agreement includes detailed obligations on return and readmission and covering countries where there is no readmission instrument in place with the EU. - Indicators on readmission have been included in the Budget Support for Senegal and The Gambia. <p><u>NEXT STEPS:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Regular follow-up on using the Article 25a mechanism to its full potential (in IMEX, JHA Counsellors and other Council formations), as well as specific follow-up to the proposals put forward by the Commission. ➤ Dialogue on readmission embedded in other dialogues (e.g. Samoa agreement) and follow up to take place in this framework. ➤ The Article 25a mechanism on strengthening readmission cooperation will be used to support the implementation of the border procedure of the Pact. Selection criteria related to the border procedure have been added to further strengthen the attention to the third countries whose nationals might fall under the border procedure and better understand the challenges Member States face in cooperation with these third countries.
<p>Visa policy</p>	<p><u>Visa suspension mechanism</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Commission proposal to review the visa suspension mechanism set out in Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 adopted on 18 October 2023. Council General Approach endorsed on 13 March. The European Parliament still has to adopt a negotiating position. - Commission proposal to reintroduce visa requirement for Vanuatu based on the visa suspension mechanism adopted on 31 May. Mandate adopted by the Council; European Parliament plenary voted in favour in the November II session.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The seventh report under the visa suspension mechanism was adopted on 6 December. <p><u>Visa policy alignment of third countries having visa free access to the EU</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Further visa policy alignment has been included as steps in the Reform Agendas 2024-2027 of Western Balkan partners under the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. <p><u>Visa liberalisation dialogue</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visa liberalisation dialogue launched in September with Armenia. <p><u>NEXT STEPS:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop a visa liberalisation Action Plan for Armenia in Q2 2025 setting detailed conditions to be fulfilled by Armenia in view of a possible visa-free regime with the country. ➤ Continue outreach to neighbouring countries with visa-free access to the EU to further visa policy alignment. ➤ <i>n.b.:</i> Political Guidelines of the Commission for 2024-2029 include new EU Visa Policy Strategy.
<p>Legal pathways and integration</p>	<p><u>Resettlement and humanitarian admission</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Entry into force of the new Resettlement Regulation in June. During the first meeting of the High-Level Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Committee on 7 November, participants discussed how to make best use of the Regulation, including through more strategic use of resettlement and humanitarian admission. Preparations for the first Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Plan 2026-2027 are underway. <p><u>Talent Partnerships</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Tunisia: Second roundtable held on 21 June. Joint roadmap under finalisation. Identified sectors of interest: construction, agriculture, hospitality, transport. Follow-up technical meeting to be held early/first half of 2025. ➤ Morocco: Second roundtable on 21 October. Identified focus sectors: mechatronics, lorry drivers, construction, agriculture, hospitality. Follow-up technical meeting to take place in the first half of 2025, ➤ Egypt: First roundtable on 7 June 2023. Technical workshop on 4 December. Draft joint roadmap to be discussed during the workshop. Identified sectors of interest: information & communication technology (ICT), construction, tourism, agriculture, transportation and energy.

- **Pakistan:** Second roundtable in April. Joint roadmap under finalisation. Identified sectors of interest: ICT, care and long-term care.
- **Bangladesh:** Second roundtable in March. Joint roadmap under finalisation. Identified sectors of interest: transport, ICT, construction, textile/garments, ship building industry, agriculture and hospitality/tourism.
- In total, **projects worth over EUR 58.8 million** are adopted or under implementation in support of the five Talent Partnerships:
 - Projects of about EUR 18 million under AMIF through the Migration Partnership Facility (MPF) (targeting Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan).
 - Projects from NDICI worth EUR 23 million are under implementations on THAMM (Towards a Holistic Approach to Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa), which supports Talent Partnerships with Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt. An additional EUR 10 million support was adopted in November and will be contracted in 2025. Funding focuses on employability of potential migrants, support for skills and mobility schemes, capacity building, recognition of qualifications and validation of skills etc.
 - NDICI support of EUR 4.8 million has been mobilised for the Talent Partnership with Bangladesh (projects signed in July) and EUR 3 million for Pakistan (project signed in November). The initiatives will support building the skills and addressing the training needs in the sectors of common interest between the EU and both Bangladesh and Pakistan with a view to facilitating mobility to the EU.

Skills and Talent Mobility package:

EU Talent Pool

- Commission proposal tabled on 15 November 2023. Council general approach endorsed on 13 June. Awaiting European Parliament's position to start trilogues as soon as possible.

Recognition of qualifications and validation of skills of third country nationals

- Commission Recommendation adopted 15 November 2023. Webinar series completed in April-June to support implementation, in addition to regular discussions with Member States in the Group of Coordinators on recognition of professional qualifications.
- Reflection underway on next steps to harmonise rules on the recognition of qualifications and facilitate skills portability, as set out in the Political Guidelines 2024-2029.

- Support for the recognition of qualifications, skills validation, as well as skills development and training, is a focus of all current Talent Partnerships.
- Call for proposals launched in September closing 18 December under Erasmus+ programme aiming to support national recognition authorities with transparent and fair practices for the recognition of qualifications of third country nationals.

Long-term Residents Directive

- Trilogues held on 30 November 2023 and 16 January. Political agreement was not reached during the last legislative term and the negotiations are currently on hold.

Seasonal Workers Directive

- Compliance exercise ongoing - Infringements launched against all Member States bound by the Directive (except Ireland and Denmark).

Blue Card Directive

- Launch of infringements against 17 Member States for failure to notify (January 2023). As of 12 December, 8 Member States did not notify complete transposition.

Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027

- Over 60 actions by the Commission and the Member States in four key areas: labour market integration, education and training health care and housing. There is also a focus on mobilisation of funding and building partnerships, including through the European Integration Network (meeting held on 9-10 December) that gathers representatives of Member States, and via the Urban agenda (meeting on 5 December) for better involvement of local and regional authorities.
- Ongoing mid-term review, to provide an overview of the implementation status of the Plan's actions, identify remaining challenges and put forward strategic actions, notably on labour market.

NEXT STEPS:

- **Resettlement and humanitarian partnerships:** Second meeting of the High-Level Committee on Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission in Q1 2025. Commission Proposal for the Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Plan 2026-2027 to be adopted in mid-2025.
- **Talent Partnerships:** Finalise Talent Partnership joint roadmaps with partner countries in upcoming meetings/roundtables. Organisation of next roundtables and technical meetings on dedicated topics.

	<p>Launch of the activities in the framework of the Talent Partnership programmes with Bangladesh and Pakistan.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Trilogues on the recast of the Long-term Residents Directive should resume quickly. ➤ Implementation report on the Seasonal Workers Directive planned for 2025, together with the Implementation report on the Employers Sanctions Directive [<i>reports tentatively foreseen end of 2025</i>]. ➤ Analysis of the completeness of the Blue Card Directive transposition for all Member States. ➤ Sixth meeting of the Labour Migration Platform to be held in spring 2025. ➤ Integration: Mid-term review of Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion planned for Q1 2025. AMIF call in support of integration actions in 2025.
<p>Strategic relations on migration with non-EU countries, especially countries of origin and transit</p>	<p><u>MIGRATION ROUTES TOWARDS EU:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ To meet the challenges of irregular migration in an operational way, the Commission and the Member States are implementing Action Plans for the four main migratory routes: (i) Central Mediterranean, (ii) Western Mediterranean/Atlantic, (iii) Eastern Mediterranean, and (iv) Western Balkans. The Commission continues to coordinate the implementation of its 10-Point Plan for Lampedusa that was presented on 17 September 2023. ➤ These action plans outline operational measures with an emphasis on stepping up prevention of irregular migration, protection of those on the move and enhancing management of flows in cooperation with key countries of origin and transit. This is a part of the Team Europe strategy that works with partners along whole routes, in order to improve migration management and save lives. <p><u>Central Mediterranean</u></p> <p>In the first eleven months of 2024, the number of irregular border crossings (62034) along the route more than halved (-59%) compared to the same period last year (Frontex data).</p> <p><i>Regional actions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Strengthened capacities of Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia: EUR 318 million migration package was adopted in June 2023 and followed by EUR 208 million Annual Action Plan 2024 of the Multi-Country Migration Programme for the Southern Neighbourhood adopted on 18 November, with four action documents: (1) protection, 2) voluntary returns and reintegration, 3) border management and anti-smuggling, as well as 4) legal migration.

- This includes regional programmes: fighting against the smuggling of migrants and the trafficking in human beings in North Africa (EUR 18 million in Tunisia, EUR 20 million in Egypt), as well as legal migration action for North Africa (as noted above, projects worth EUR 23 million are under implementation for Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, with additional support of EUR 10 million adopted in November for regional legal migration programme THAMM to be contracted in 2025).
- **Regional Development and Protection Programme in North Africa** is under implementation (EU contribution of EUR 25 million; 2023-2024) and a next phase is planned to start early 2025 with more than EUR 37.5 million of EU contribution. Current phase of RDPP-North Africa includes the following contributions from AMIF: EUR 2 million in Tunisia, EUR 8 million in Egypt, EUR 2 million in Libya, EUR 2.7 million in Morocco and EUR 3.5 million in Mauritania.
- A new **2024 migration package** for Southern Neighbourhood worth EUR 208 million was adopted in mid-November.

The assisted voluntary returns from North African countries to the Sub-Saharan countries of origin have intensified significantly through EU-funded operations over the past four years, reaching almost 26500 in 2024 by the end of November (compared to around a total of 5000 in 2020 and 13000 in whole of 2023), with Libya and Tunisia as main improvement points (see specific figures below). Apart from facilitating returns, **the Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration Programme (MPRR)** since beginning of 2023 provided protection assistance to over 53000 migrants across North African countries. To expand its operations, additional EUR 56 million top-up, part of the 2024 migration package, will support assisted voluntary return and reintegration for vulnerable and stranded migrants in North Africa, and will be contracted by the end of 2025.

Tunisia: key steps

- Implementation continues on all pillars of the strategic and comprehensive partnership agreed in July 2023, including on migration.
- An interservice mission took place on 29-30 October to discuss the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding with the Tunisian authorities, including meetings with UN organisations.
- EUR 105 million earmarked for Tunisia in 2023 were contracted to support the country in the area of protection, assisted voluntary returns, border management and migrant smuggling. Engines and spare parts provided to the Garde Nationale Maritime are keeping at least 17 boats operational. Equipment such as cameras, generators, lifejackets, forklifts, as well as cars and scanners were delivered. An EUR 18 million anti-smuggling action titled ACTT (Action to Combat Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in

Human beings in Tunisia) contributing to the implementation of the ASOP, and an EUR 30 million contract with ICMPD for the supply of the coastal surveillance system were both signed in November. Moreover, a top-up to the Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration in North Africa (MPRR-NA) contract with IOM covering assisted voluntary returns to countries of origin was signed in December.

- As of October, 34272 irregular migrants were intercepted by Tunisian authorities at sea and in the coastal areas, down by 11% compared to the same period last year. Overall, in 2023, 43394 irregular migrants were intercepted by Tunisian authorities, up 58% compared to 2022. (Source: UNHCR)
- Between 1 January and 9 December, 18970 arrivals from Tunisia to Italy were recorded (around -80% compared to the same period last year). (UNHCR data)
- Since 2023, UNHCR Tunisia has been able to register 13679 asylum-seekers and refugees and finalise over 1000 refugee status determinations supported by the EU. Decision by Tunisia to suspend UNHCR refugee registrations is being raised with the government (visit of UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner Menikdiwela in November), in particular the need for an interim solution as the country sets up its own system.
- Acceleration of assisted voluntary returns (AVR) from Tunisia to third countries in 2024. From January to November, IOM has facilitated the voluntary return of 6600 migrants from Tunisia to their countries of origin (mainly the Gambia, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Benin) with funding from the EU and other donors. This is already doubling the total figure in 2023 (with 2558 returns).

NEXT STEPS:

- Holding of Association Council meeting and subcommittees in the first semester of 2025.
- Organisation of a technical meeting on Talent Partnership (early/first half of Q1 2025).
- On protection, key objective to continue supporting UNHCR to carry out its mandate, while supporting Tunisia in its transition towards a state-owned asylum system based on international obligations and protection safeguards, eventually with UNHCR support.

Egypt: key steps

- Implementation continues on all pillars of the Joint Declaration on the EU-Egypt Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership, signed by Presidents von der Leyen and Al-Sisi on 17 March, including EUR 200 million support for migration management. Commissioner Johansson adopted a joint press statement with Egypt in September in Cairo, underlining the shared commitment to a comprehensive

approach to migration, linking migration to development, preventing irregular migration, facilitating dignified and sustainable return, readmission and reintegration and pathways for regular migration.

- 4th Migration Dialogue and 2nd Security Dialogue held mid-July in Cairo.
- Ministry of Defence delegation visited Frontex HQ on 9-10 October to explore further avenues for cooperation.
- Continued implementation of action on Protection and Resilience of Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Migrants, including host communities (EUR 28 million).
- Under above programme, launch of the EUR 12.2 million first ever Joint UN Action in Egypt on 30 September to strengthen the protection and resilience of persons in need, especially women, youth and minors, as well as to provide livelihood support to the host communities. Another project under the same programme sees the launch of the 2nd round of the HIMS (Household International Migration Survey) in Egypt, in view to strengthen the capacity of CAPMAS (Egypt's Statistical Agency).
- Discussion will continue between Egypt and EUAA and UNHCR to formulate by-laws and ensure transition towards the adoption of the new Asylum Law.
- EUR 82 million top-up to the ongoing border management project to be finalised in the coming weeks with IOM and Civipol.
- Signature of the EUR 20 million anti-smuggling project with UNODC, in cooperation with France (Civipol) planned in the coming weeks, with a focus on reinforcing Egypt's capacities to detect and prosecute criminal networks engaged in migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, and protection of victims of trafficking.
- Three search and rescue boats delivered to the Egyptian authorities in 2024 under the ongoing Border Management Programme.
- Three workshops were held on 3-4 December in Cairo: one on programming of the EUR 200 million for migration management until 2027 under the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership; and two technical workshops on legal migration and Talent Partnership; on returns, readmission and reintegration, visa challenges and residency permits.

NEXT STEPS:

- Agreement on mutual priorities and start of implementation of the EUR 200 million in line with the programming workshop of December (for years 2024-2027).

- Signature of working arrangements negotiated with Europol and Ceuol envisaged early 2025. The Frontex Management Board agreed on prioritising the southern neighbourhood, with a focus on Egypt, for the year 2025 for the deployment of a Frontex Liaison Officer.
- Rollout of the Talent Partnership with 2nd Roundtable planned in 2025.

Libya: key steps

- Since increased engagement, including three joint Commission/EEAS technical missions and EU participation in the Trans-Mediterranean Migration Forum hosted by Libya in July, Libya has removed the cost of exit visas for voluntary humanitarian returns from the country, expanded UN agencies' access to detention centres and disembarkation points, and progressed in the operationalisation of the EU-funded Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC)..
- A joint technical Commission/EEAS mission visited Libya for the fourth time at the beginning of December (7-10 December) to deepen the technical dialogue and assess progress on the ground. Further progress was reported in the area of alternatives to detention for vulnerable categories, in particular children, further facilitation of the voluntary humanitarian returns, to make the MRCC fully operational, to strengthen the management of the eastern and southern borders, including relevant airports, regularisation of migrant workers and the protection of the population of Sudanese refugees.
- As of 16 November, disembarkations in Libya in 2024 have reached 20231 (18% increase compared to 17190 in total in 2023), while 515 deaths and 830 missing were recorded along the Central Mediterranean route in the same period (compared to 2498 dead and missing migrants in total in 2023) (IOM data).
- Between 1 January and 16 November, 37155 arrivals from Libya to Italy were recorded (around 21% less than in the same period last year) (UNHCR data).
- In 2024, as of November, 238 individuals have arrived to Malta via the Central Mediterranean route (UNHCR).
- Until end of November, 14922 voluntary humanitarian returns took place from Libya, representing 60% more than during the whole of 2023.

NEXT STEPS:

- Continuation of technical dialogue focused on the need to improve the current migratory situation in the country, especially in containing the high number of irregular departures from the Western

coast towards Italy and Malta, as well as conditions in migrant shelters, level of trainings and operating procedures for search-and-rescue operations, further work on the release of children in detention and enhancing cooperation with the UN agencies.

Countries of origin

- **Bangladesh** The 8th meeting of the Joint Working Group on return and reintegration of Bangladesh nationals took place on 4 March, followed by the 2nd Talent Partnership Roundtable and the 2nd Migration and Mobility Dialogue, which covered all aspects of migration including continued enhanced cooperation on return and reintegration, legal migration, migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings on 6 March. Ongoing inception phase of the NDICI-funded Talent Partnership umbrella project for Bangladesh (EUR 3 million), implemented by ILO (supported through an additional EUR 1.8 million under the Skills21 project; both signed in July).
- The EU-Bangladesh Joint Commission took place on 4 November and confirmed Bangladesh engagement with the EU, in all policy areas, including migration management.

NEXT STEPS:

- Commission's technical mission to Bangladesh is planned for Q1 2025, to prepare for the next iteration of meetings of Migration and Mobility Dialogue, Joint Working Group on return and reintegration, and Talent Partnership in Q2 2025.
- **Pakistan** The 2nd Migration and Mobility Dialogue took place on 25 April and covered the whole spectrum of migration-related topics, *i.a.* the implementation of the EU-Pakistan Readmission Agreement, addressing irregular migration, migrant smuggling, trafficking in human beings, and cooperation with the JHA agencies. Back-to-back with the Migration and Mobility Dialogue, the EU and Pakistan engaged in dedicated discussions on legal migration, in the framework of the second Talent Partnership roundtable (23 April) and on return and readmission, under the 15th Joint Readmission Committee (24 April).
- EU (NDICI)-funded programme (value: EUR 3 million; implementing partner: GIZ, DE) in support of Talent Partnership was signed in November.
- Additional project, on “Sustainable reintegration of returnees and improved migration management in Pakistan” (EUR 7 million) was signed in November.

- The EU-Pakistan Joint Commission took place on 21 November, and confirmed the progress made and joint commitments in the area of migration management and labour mobility.

NEXT STEPS:

- The next meeting of the Migration and Mobility Dialogue, back-to-back with the Joint Readmission Committee and the Talent Partnership Roundtable, is planned for Q2 2025.
- Deployment of the Frontex Liaison Officer as of 1 April 2025.

Western Mediterranean and Atlantic route

According to Frontex, by the end of November, the total number of arrivals in the Canary Islands was more than 41756, an increase of 19% in comparison with the same period last year, while the Western Mediterranean route recorded a 2% drop in arrivals compared to last year.

Common Operational Partnership (COP) on anti-smuggling

The COPs on anti-smuggling has been making significant progress in The Gambia, Senegal, Mauritania, and Côte d'Ivoire, with planned expansions to Guinea, Nigeria, and potentially other West African countries. A call for proposals under the Internal Security Fund (ISF) is currently underway and is expected to be evaluated by the first quarter 2025 (EU contribution EUR 12 million). NETCOP II, a network dedicated to fostering regional cooperation among COPs and joint investigation teams in Western and Central Africa, is active until May 2025, with efforts ongoing to secure funding for its continuation.

West Africa regional actions:

The EUR 201 million Individual Measure, which includes EUR 101 million allocated for the Global Gateway initiative and measures addressing the root causes of irregular migration (including collaboration with diaspora communities) was adopted by the Commission on 11 December. This measure also encompasses EUR 85 million to support the countries of origins' ownership and capacities on the reintegration process, including through the development of national referral systems for the reintegration of returnees, and EUR 15 million aimed at promoting national and regional initiatives that enhance cooperation to combat migrant smuggling and human trafficking, as well as border management. Discussions and reflections on the contracting of these measures are currently ongoing.

Morocco: key steps

- Provision of EUR 152 million of budget support (so far two tranches for a total of EUR 79.6 million paid), with positive results in border management and the fight against migrant smuggling and human trafficking, as well as integration of migrants. The third tranche of budget support worth EUR 49 million is to be assessed and completed early next year.
- Additional funding (approximately EUR 41 million) has been allocated between 2021 and 2023, supporting programmes across all areas of migration and additional funding is indicatively allocated for Morocco under the Annual Action Programme (AAP) 2024 adopted on 18 November.
- In addition, a Talent Partnership Roundtable was held on 21 October in Rabat, reinforcing cooperation on skills development and mobility and identified sectors of common interest.
- An **Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership** (ASOP) with Morocco was launched in July 2022 with Frontex and Europol enhanced cooperation ongoing and the possible launch of negotiations for working arrangements in 2024.
- Between January 2023 and November, 2194 people have been returned from Morocco to their country of origin with EU support. Additional funding supporting such efforts have been envisaged under the AAP 2024.
- Under the programme "*Soutien à la Gestion Intégrée des Frontières et de la Migration au Maroc*" managed by FIIAPP, additional vehicles and equipment - including 200 night-vision binoculars, 9 buggies, and 5 refrigerated trucks - will be delivered in the coming weeks.

NEXT STEPS:

- ASOP: Frontex-Morocco Comité Mixte meeting to decide on the 2025 road map of activities will take place early 2025. Frontex Liaison Officer (FLO) to be deployed in spring 2025. Moroccan part of the Regional Anti-Smuggling Programme will be developed in the course of 2025.

Mauritania: key steps

- Following President von der Leyen's visit to strengthen the partnership with Mauritania, marked by a Joint Press Statement in February, and followed by the launch by Commissioner Johansson of the Migration Partnership in March, implementation, including of the support package, is advancing.
- Most of the components of the EUR 210 million package will be contracted by the end of 2024, including support for migration management (notably support to forcibly displaced Malians in the East of the

country), security, humanitarian aid, entrepreneurship and opportunities for youth. EUR 60 million under the Flexible Mechanism includes a contract for EUR 20 million on support for refugees signed in July, as well as a contract for the EUR 25 million on maritime border surveillance signed on 28 August. The proposed EUR 100 million financial agreement for budget support was signed by the EU on 14 November and by Mauritania on 20 November. Commissioner Sikela will be going to Mauritania on the 18 and 19 December and will be signing the financing agreement and announcing the first disbursement.

- CIVIPOL is advancing with the implementation of the EUR 25 million maritime border surveillance action. The inception phase is set to continue until March 2025 to finalise the list of equipment to be procured. It is noted that any vessel delivery is expected to take between one year for used vessels and two years for new vessels.
- The EUR 2 million to address emergency needs post-disembarkation, along with EUR 300000 for an information campaign on Schengen visas, both funded under Migration Partnership Facility (MPF) are to be contracted in the coming weeks. On 11 September, the Commission adopted a harmonised list of supporting documents for visa applicants from Mauritania.
- Follow up on all elements of the migration partnership have been assured through technical missions and political level contacts, most recently Commissioner Johansson and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mauritania in September in the margins of UNGA.
- Cooperation with Frontex is in place: Frontex liaison Officer based in Senegal also covers Mauritania and The Gambia. Frontex opened an Africa Frontex Intelligence community (AFIC) risk analysis cell in Mauritania in September 2022.
- Negotiations on a working arrangement between Frontex and Mauritanian authorities are ongoing.

NEXT STEPS:

- Migration Dialogue with Mauritania will be scheduled in Q1 2025 and a senior officials' dialogue on migration planned for January (to be confirmed).
- The EUR 5 million project aimed at strengthening the assistance, promotion, and protection of the rights of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees is expected to be signed in January 2025. This action will be implemented by IOM in partnership with UNHCR and the Commission Nationale des Droits de l'Homme de Mauritanie (CNDH), following discussions with the authorities on establishing a more robust migration management system and ensuring access to UN agencies to closed transit centres.

- The EUR 2 million project continuing the Common Operational Partnership (COP) in Mauritania is expected to be signed in Q1 2025.

Senegal: key steps

- Following the proposal of visa measures under article 25a of the Visa Code, in view of Senegal’s insufficient cooperation on readmission, four technical dialogues on readmission have taken place with Senegal so far. The last one occurred on 19 September, back-to-back with discussions on broader aspects of cooperation on prevention of irregular migration and border management during a joint HOME/INTPA mission to Senegal. Following these discussions, the Commission mobilised EUR 30 million for support on prevention measures and border management under the Flexible Mechanism, with contracting in the coming weeks. The delivery of first vessels under the project expected to start in Q2 2026.
- **Cooperation also focuses on engagement with Frontex:** negotiations on a Working Arrangement between Frontex and the Senegalese National Police are ongoing.
- Out of EUR 30 million package, a new set of actions targeting **maritime and land border surveillance** is under preparation, including rescue at sea and protection of migrants in general (contracting expected before the end of 2024). This will be complemented by an upcoming regional action “Managing migration better in West Africa”, with EUR 100 million for up to 12 countries, including a component on reintegration and a component on anti-smuggling/anti-trafficking (adopted by the Commission on 11 December with implementation starting in 2025).
- This package will build on previous activities on **fight against migrant smuggling** and trafficking in human beings: Common Operational Partnership – Phase 2 (EUR 5.7 million) started in December 2023, as well as action supporting for deployment of a GARS-2 Unit (Groupes d’Action Rapide – Surveillance et Intervention, EUR 5.3 million) in the south-east tackling terrorist threats, organised crime and human/trafficking/migrant smuggling (both actions implemented by CIVIPOL and FIIAPP).
- It is supported by **regional cooperation to counter migrant smuggling** and trafficking in human beings in the framework of the Niamey process and action **assisting intelligence services** of Senegal, The Gambia, Mauritania and now also Mali to counter migrant smuggling (EUR 1.2 million and EUR 1.75 million respectively, both through the Internal Security Fund).
- The Commission proposal on restrictive visa measures under Article 25a is pending before the Council. Contacts have been intensified at all levels in Brussels and Dakar.

NEXT STEPS:

- Continue regular engagement at senior officials and technical level in Brussels and Dakar to foster cooperation on migratory matters, particularly on countering irregular migration, promoting legal/ labour migration pathways, and improving cooperation on returns and readmission.
- Conclusion of the negotiations on a Working Arrangement between Frontex and Senegal.

The Gambia: key steps

- There is comprehensive EU engagement with The Gambia on migration and mobility to address all aspects, including return and readmission, migrant smuggling and trafficking and legal migration including through the Team Europe Initiative on the Western Mediterranean/Atlantic route.
- Cooperation on **returns and readmission**: improvements over the last two years were acknowledged by the EU by lifting of the second layer of EU visa measures. However, since then cooperation has been considerably deteriorating again, notably on charter flights, which have been *de facto* suspended by The Gambia. A readmission dialogue is planned for January (to be confirmed).
- The fourth Joint Working Group (JWG) on readmission cooperation took place on 17 May. The Gambia received additional funding of EUR 15 million for migration management with the envelope connected to cooperation on migration.
- **Anti-smuggling**: Common Operational Partnership (COP) for The Gambia increased investigations of smuggling events to prevent departures (EUR 1.4 million under the Internal Security Fund). A no cost extension is planned.
- **Border management**: there is ongoing support to the Gambian Security Sector Reform for improved Human Security, Migration and Border management with EU contribution of EUR 6 million.
- **Migration, readmission and reintegration** supported by two indicators in a EUR 40 million Budget Support for EUR 5 million. Disbursement of the budget support will also depend on fulfilment of the readmission related indicator.

NEXT STEPS:

- Continuous engagement on readmission cooperation in view of re-establishing cooperation on charter flights.

- Next Joint Working Group on readmission cooperation planned for early 2025.
- Contracts implementing additional funding under the Flexible Mechanism are under discussion and are expected to be signed in early 2025.
- Preparations of the actions ongoing with the expected implementing partners for the continuation of the COP.

Mali: key steps

- Reflections are ongoing on the best ways to promote activities within the country that could address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement, aiming to curb smuggling of migrants. The EU maintains that any funding must be directed solely toward activities that directly benefit the population.

Eastern Mediterranean

According to Frontex, during the first eleven months of 2024, irregular border crossings to Greece and Cyprus increased by 18% to 63935 compared to the same period of 2023 with elevated migratory pressure from Türkiye. During 2024, as of 16 November, the Türkiye-Italy sea corridor saw a year-on-year decline of 51%, while based on national data arrivals in Greece by sea increased by 36% as of 30 November compared to the same period of 2023. The number of irregular arrivals in Cyprus via the Green Line (UN buffer zone) fell by 42%, while no sea arrivals from Lebanon have been recorded since mid-April.

Türkiye: key steps

- Engagement with Türkiye on all matters regarding migration in line with the April European Council Conclusions on EU-Türkiye relations. By the end of the year, a EUR 1 billion package for refugee assistance and migration management support will be in place. This package set to be adopted in the joint IPA and NDICI committees on 11 December will finance activities that include four components (EUR 421 million) focused on basic needs support, water supply and waste management, education and health care, as well as nine migration and border management projects for a total of EUR 398 million, which will also include a component to support preparations for voluntary returns of Syrians (EUR 95 million) and provide protection and refugee registration (EUR 60 million), both to be implemented by UNHCR. An additional component, implemented by the IOM, will support the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) to other countries of origin (apart from Syria).

- Accelerate the implementation of Individual Measure for ‘Support to Türkiye’s Efforts to Strengthen Border Management at the Eastern and Southeastern Border’, with a total budget of EUR 220 million, funded under IPA 2022 and 2023 through ICMPD.
- Cooperation between Turkish authorities and Frontex is progressing. Full and effective implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement and the EU-Turkey readmission agreement towards all EU Member States remains essential. Following the 2023 EU-Türkiye High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Security. Commission envisages to continue regular exchanges with relevant Turkish counterparts.
- Senior officials meeting in Ankara (3-4 December) discussed issues on migration and visas. The EU is currently analysing the potential for streamlining Schengen visa procedures for Turkish citizens. The meeting also served to raise important issues including limiting departures to Aegean islands, return and anti-smuggling. It also served to prepare the ground for a political engagement under the new Commission, with a view to strengthen cooperation within the context of the EU-Turkey Statement
- Efforts are ongoing with Turkish Airlines and the relevant authorities to relaunch joint work on tackling facilitation of irregular migration by air.

NEXT STEPS:

- Work on visa procedures to facilitate and improve current practices via regular meetings of local Schengen consulates with Turkish side.
- Planning for the next EU-Türkiye High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Security to be scheduled in 2025 in function of the progress in visa discussions, as well as overall state of EU-Türkiye relations.

Lebanon: key steps

- Following the visit of President von der Leyen and President Christodoulides to Lebanon on 2 May, the EU announced a financial support package of **EUR 1 billion for 2024-2027** to improve basic services such as education, social protection and health, for people in Lebanon, including Syrian refugees and host communities, and anti-smuggling and border management. Objectives include also support for voluntary return of Syrian refugees, where possible.
- On 1 August, the **first EUR 500 million** was adopted for 2024 and 2025 to strengthen cooperation in the area of migration, border management and security. Support to the security forces, including strengthening the Lebanese Armed Forces, has focused on funding related to border management. The

Commission is re-targeting its interventions in the health, water sector and education sectors to better address current needs.

- **EU emergency response 2024:** In view of the current deteriorating situation in the region, the Commission has allocated additional EUR 45 million to be contracted by mid-December for the increasing immediate and humanitarian needs following the escalation between Israel and Hezbollah, including EUR 25 million in humanitarian assistance adding up to EUR 92 million of humanitarian aid in 2024 plus EUR 20 million extra for emergency development support to provide cash assistance for internally displaced persons (including vulnerable Lebanese and refugees from Syria) and primary health care services targeting hard-to-reach populations. An additional FPI measure of EUR 10 million is in the contracting phase, too.
- The Commission is in close contact with Cyprus and Greece to ensure good preparedness and necessary contingency planning. Two high-level meetings took place (23 October and 18 November) to assess and further strengthen migratory preparedness in Cyprus, Greece and Bulgaria, with particular focus on support to these three Member States, including from the EU Agencies, in light of recent developments and potential increased migration flows.
- **Frontex** has a mandate to start negotiations on working arrangements with relevant authorities of Lebanon. Frontex is implementing EU4BorderSecurity project (ENI, EUR 6.5 million) currently ongoing until April 2025.
- In addition, a package worth EUR 36 million, including EUR 10 million to be implemented by UNHCR to help improve the conditions for safe, dignified, and voluntary returns of Syrian refugees, was adopted by the Commission in November.
- In 2024, the Commission budget also included over EUR 163 million in humanitarian aid to assist millions of people **inside Syria**. This includes EUR 5.5 million in humanitarian aid mobilised in October to respond to the influx of displaced people from Lebanon to Syria. The assistance included the provision of food, non-food items, health and protection services.

NEXT STEPS:

- Adaptation of the rollout of the EUR 1 billion package to adjust to the evolving security situation and address the needs arising from the hostilities in the South of Lebanon.

Western Balkans

According to Frontex, the number of detections on the Western Balkan route continued to fall significantly in the first ten months of this year and was down 79% (to 20526 irregular border crossings) compared to last year.

Regional actions: key steps

- Strengthened presence of EU agencies – Frontex (new Status Agreement signed with Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia and deployments in all countries).
- In Montenegro, a working arrangement with the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) was signed on 29 October.
- North Macedonia joined the European Migration Network as Observer (EMN) by signing an Administrative Arrangement on 28 October with DG HOME.
- EUAA: bilateral Roadmaps being renewed with Western Balkan partners; Europol: operational cooperation continuously strengthened.
- EUR 350 million of **migration governance and management** funding committed under IPA III between 2021 and the end of 2024.
- Regional and bilateral support for border management includes EUR 7 million IPA Border security programme to improve local border police agencies' border management capabilities, and EUR 19.2 million supporting effective, protection-sensitive migration management systems in the region.
- The EUR 36 million regional IPA project on **anti-smuggling** focuses on increasing border management capacities and strengthening law enforcement and judicial cooperation against criminal smuggling networks. The project includes opening in January 2025 of the first operations room in the region, in Montenegro, to establish interoperable systems and interconnected databases, and enhance exchange of information.
- Member States report very satisfactory cooperation on **readmission**. Frontex is helping strengthen implementation of readmission agreements, including third country national clauses, and implementation of bilateral readmission agreements is annually reviewed and discussed with Western Balkan partners.
- **Visa alignment:** significant steps taken since October 2022 have helped reduce irregular arrivals. However, most Western Balkan partners still have visa free regimes with third countries causing potential migratory challenges, notably with Türkiye (all of them), China, Russia, and Belarus. Concrete commitments have been secured with all Western Balkan partners to further align their visa policy as

part of their Reform Agendas under the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. Based on these commitments, Serbia has taken decisions regarding visa alignment for a further three countries, while a decision on alignment for one additional country is expected from Montenegro by the end of 2024.

- EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Forum on Justice and Home Affairs held on 28-29 October in Budva (Montenegro) took stock of progress on the implementation of the EU Action Plan.

NEXT STEPS:

- Expansion of the presence of the EU JHA Agencies in the region, in particular deployment of Frontex at the EU borders following signature of the Status Agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina tentatively expected in early 2025 and adoption of the agreement with Serbia around the same time (signed in June).
- Continue advocacy on visa alignment, including follow up on the commitments to further visa policy alignment as part of national Reform Agendas under the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.
- Increased EU support to step up returns from Western Balkan partners: as part of the 2024 migration package, a regional EUR 13 million project will cover both voluntary (to be implemented through IOM) and non-voluntary returns (to be implemented through a consortium of EU Member States), with a focus on strengthening institutional systems and capacities to lead effective and rights-based return management operations. This project is planned to be signed in early 2025.

TACKLING ROOT CAUSES

The EU and its Member States remain, collectively, the largest provider of official **development assistance** in the world. We continue our close cooperation with the UN family, in particular IOM and UNHCR.

- Global Gateway, the EU's investment strategy in support of sustainable infrastructure investments, will have mobilised up to EUR 300 billion by 2027, to boost connectivity and support the green and digital transitions. Over half of the total amount will be invested in Africa, while EUR 77 billion will be devoted to Economic and Investments Plans for the Eastern Partnership, Southern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans.
- The EU is supporting partners in preventing irregular migration through addressing its root causes – including through creating sustainable economic opportunities, vocational education and training,

particularly for young people and addressing drivers of migration including poverty, poor governance, the adverse effects of climate change and instability both in countries of origin and transit.

Examples: In *Tunisia*, an EU education programme worth EUR 65 million adopted 2022 improves the match of education and vocational training offers to the labour market needs in Tunisia and Europe. In *Egypt*, “EU Support to Youth Employability and Skills (EU4YES)” worth EUR 25 million adopted in 2023 improves technical education and training in line with identified labour market needs and the future of work, including the green and digital transitions. In *Morocco*, the EUR 46 million support programme for the Plan d'Accélération de la Transformation de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche Scientifique et l'Innovation (ESRI Pact) promotes access to quality education. In *West Africa*, the causes of irregular migration will be addressed through the new Action “Unlocking the potentials of youth in West Africa” to be adopted in the coming weeks with EUR 101,6 million for up to 12 countries to improve the inclusion of youth in resilient and climate-smart green economic transitions. In *Senegal*, Youth Budget Support Programme (EUR 70 million) including a specific migration component (addressing reintegration, readmission); agriculture projects promoting employment and support to training and vocation education to enhance skills relevant to the Youth Olympic Games to be held in Dakar in 2026. In *Afghanistan*, the action “Addressing basic needs and supporting livelihoods of the people of Afghanistan – 2024” (EUR 146 million), adopted in July, will address the basic needs and support livelihoods of Afghans, contributing to increased stability, and decreased displacement within Afghanistan and from Afghanistan.

Multilateral engagement and regional process

- The EU supports a number of regional and inter-governmental processes that help to promote the whole-of-route approach: the Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development (Rabat Process), the EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative (Khartoum Process), the Silk Route Partnership on Migration (Budapest Process), and the Prague Process (Western Balkans, Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia). Since 2018, the EU also supported the Niamey process in West and North Africa to prevent and combat migrant smuggling, as well as trafficking in human beings. DG HOME partially finances these initiatives mainly through AMIF, and ISF and BMVI through the MPF project or specific contract (e.g. Niamey process).
- 11th edition of the EU-IOM Senior Officials Meeting tentatively rescheduled for the spring 2025.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ EU participation at the Joint High-Level Meeting of the Rabat and Khartoum processes, “Empowering EU-Africa Cooperation: Innovative Pathways for Skills Mobility” on 16-17 October in Lisbon. ➤ Board meeting with the participating Member States, coordination meeting with African partners of the Team Europe Initiatives on the Atlantic/Western Mediterranean routes and on the Central Mediterranean, 18 October, Lisbon. ➤ AU-EU Continent-to-Continent Migration and Mobility Dialogue (C2CMMD)’s Senior Officials Meeting, 18 October, Lisbon. ➤ The 7th Budapest Process Ministerial Conference took place on 12 November. It adopted the Ministerial Declaration and Call for Action (2025-2030), renewing the joint commitments of the Budapest Process.
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