

Brussels, 17 March 2025

Dear colleagues,

Over a week ago we discussed the unprecedented set of challenges that Europe is facing. Together we agreed that we need to act with strength and determination to preserve our security, our democracies and our values.

At the same time, we must show our citizens that the EU continues to deliver on what we have promised. When it comes to migration, putting in place the new legislative framework we agreed, and keeping up the pace of operational work, is the best way to show that our focus remains as strong as ever, and that an EU approach remains indispensable to fair, effective and well-managed migration and asylum policies.

*The **implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum** is the first of our key priorities for the year to come. We are on track to reach our goal of full readiness by June 2026. We need to keep up the pace to build the robust migration management system we have agreed. The focus should be on ensuring the **necessary preparedness** – including in terms of personnel and infrastructure – which is essential to build the mutual trust required for the new balanced approach to work. Most Member States have communicated their **National Implementation Plans** to the Commission. We are in close touch with the remaining Member States, and I urge all Member States to complete this process as soon as possible. In addition, the national contingency plans on reception and the national migration and asylum strategies will be key building blocks for our common approach.*

*The Commission and EU Agencies continue to **actively accompany Member States'** preparations for entry into application of the Pact. While all elements of our reformed system are important, I would draw attention to a few areas that require particular attention in the coming months, namely the screening phase, the border procedures, the implementation of Eurodac and Dublin procedures, as well as reception conditions. Work is ongoing on guidance to help implement these key elements, including the provision of information, contingency planning, alternatives to detention, reception and vulnerability standards. Member States can exchange on their national implementation efforts and indicate further support needs in the Pact Coordination Platform chaired by the Commission. During this time, the Commission will continue to keep the European Parliament, and the Council fully informed of progress.*

Member States' work will also benefit from **EU funding**. An additional EUR 3 billion, including funding agreed in the MFF mid-term revision and from the Thematic Facilities of the asylum and borders funds, will support implementation of the Pact over the 2025-2027 period, as well as help Member States hosting beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine. A further EUR 1.6 billion stemming from the mid-term review of the Member States' programmes will address current needs and supplement funding for the Pact. These resources will seek to maximise flexibility, and minimise the administrative and procedural burden, to allow them to come quickly on stream. After agreement by Member States on 10 March, the Commission will adopt the necessary implementing decisions. The new allocations will then need to be reflected in Member States amended programmes.

The Commission presented concrete ideas to **accelerate the implementation** of certain aspects of the Pact and is supporting those Member States that are keen to frontload work. Discussions are ongoing with Member States on a more efficient management of reception, on improving the efficiency and fairness of the Dublin system and on setting up the border procedure, balanced with advancing solidarity aspects. The Commission is also working on proposals to accelerate targeted aspects of the Pact, including as regards the designation of safe countries of origin with exceptions, which, if applied as soon as possible, will enhance the efficiency of our asylum system.

An **effective and common European system for returns** is essential for the EU's migration policy to work. With the proposal we presented on 11 March for a regulation on a common system for return, we are providing for a robust and modern framework to address an evident weakness in our overall migration management. The current Return Directive was adopted in 2008: it is no longer fit for purpose with the challenges that Member States face today. There are many elements in the agreed legislation that will help streamline practices but as recognised by the October European Council, we need determined action and a new legal framework on returns.

The Commission's proposal was developed through intensive consultations with Member States. By strengthening the European dimension of managing returns, it will create a seamless link between the different stages of the migration process. It will allow a more efficient return process with clear, simplified and common rules in the interests of all. The proposal seeks to incentivise cooperation and introduce consequences for non-cooperation by those with no right to stay, including measures to deter unauthorised onward movements. The use of forced return will be strengthened and applied, for instance, where conditions for voluntary return are not respected or in cases presenting security risks. The proposal also includes dedicated measures to cover people posing a security risk, with stricter rules on detention and entry bans.

The new return proposal aims to close loopholes in the return process, so that a return decision issued by one Member State cannot be simply circumvented by moving to another Member State, with dedicated tools such as a European Return Order to operationalise this step and advancing towards an effective recognition and enforcement of each other's return decisions. We are also opening the possibility for Member States to establish 'return hubs'

in third countries. This has been an important part of our discussion on innovative solutions to vigorously counter illegal migration, acting in cooperation with partner countries and ensuring the fundamental rights of the individuals concerned are guaranteed in line with international law.

*To complete the new **common approach on returns**, the Commission is also preparing a proposal on the digitalisation of return case management for the end of the year. The new approach will also feed into the forthcoming review of Frontex, where it is important to ensure that return operations can be organised by Frontex directly with third countries, while also enhancing the Agencies' role in prevention of illegal migration.*

*A key element in the Pact that allows us to streamline asylum procedures is the use of **safe countries concepts**. The Commission is currently preparing an **EU list of safe countries of origin**. For this purpose, we are drawing on an analysis from the EU Agency for Asylum and other available sources of information to assess a first selection of countries chosen on objective criteria, such as low asylum recognition rates. Our intention is to present a proposal for a first EU list of safe countries of origin in the coming weeks. Once adopted by the European Parliament and the Council, this list will be dynamic and can be further expanded or reviewed over time.*

*In addition, the Commission is finalising its consultations with Member States, the European Parliament, civil society and UNHCR in view of reviewing the **safe third country** concept as foreseen by the Asylum Procedure Regulation. There is a shared understanding among Member States that some of the conditions and procedural steps need to be alleviated. We are currently examining the best way to do this, while ensuring that every person continues to have an individual assessment and that the overall functioning of the system among Member States is safeguarded. In preparation of this work on safe countries, cooperation with our partner countries is essential: joint outreach, through Member States' diplomatic channels and EU delegations, is necessary to bring clarity and to dissipate any misconceptions.*

*Our efforts to develop and nourish **comprehensive and strategic partnerships** with key countries of origin and transit have continued in recent months. These partnerships allow us to build confidence and trust around shared interests, and they are an important part of our migration policy, having resulted in a significant decrease in illegal border crossings into the EU. Partners have welcomed the creation of the Mediterranean portfolio by the Commission and the holistic approach being taken by the EU as a signal of strong engagement with the region on various areas of cooperation ranging from energy, security to economic development and migration.*

*While we have started consultations on a new Pact for the Mediterranean, January saw the launch of a major new Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership with **Jordan**. Jordan remains a key partner for Europe in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, serving as a pillar of regional stability. This partnership would tackle shared challenges and opportunities, with migration being one of five key areas of cooperation.*

*We have been stepping up our partnership activities with **Lebanon** since the announcement of the EUR 1 billion package for 2024-2027 in May last year, with support for much-needed reforms, the security sector and border management, economic activity, and measures for the most vulnerable in Lebanon.*

*Our engagement with **Türkiye** continues in order to actively implement the April 2024 European Council Conclusions. During my meeting with President Erdoğan in December, I underlined Türkiye's key role in efforts to stabilise the region. Türkiye's huge efforts in hosting Syrian refugees are now also supported by an additional EUR 1 billion for 2024, going to refugee assistance, including voluntary return to Syria and other countries of origin, as well as migration and border management. In line with the European Council Conclusions, we are preparing the EU-Türkiye High-Level Dialogue on Economy planned to take place in April to discuss deepening economic cooperation and the EU-Türkiye High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Security, to strengthen our cooperation.*

*The EU's close engagement with these regional actors is key to help **Syria's peaceful and inclusive transition** and to shape the region's future. The fall of the Assad regime not only impacts the situation in Syria, but also affects that of its neighbours and most importantly provides new hopes for Syrian refugees all over the world. As of 6 March, UNHCR estimates that over 300 000 Syrians have returned to Syria via neighbouring countries since early December 2024, and that almost 890 000 internally displaced persons have returned to their home region since November 2024. The EU continues to work closely with UNHCR to ensure that returns are voluntary, safe and dignified, and with other UN partners to help create the conditions inside Syria for people to return.*

The recent violence that we witnessed underscores how fragile the situation remains. Nevertheless, as stressed by the December European Council, the fall of the Assad regime provides a historic opportunity to reunite and rebuild Syria. A Syria able to offer more stability to Syrians and to the region would be in the interests of all. That requires a peaceful, inclusive, Syria-led and Syrian-owned political transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people without fear of retaliation. The Council decision in February to suspend a number of restrictive measures was an important, yet reversible, first step, as well as the indefinite extension of the humanitarian exemption.

This backs up our gradual efforts to strengthen our presence on the ground, as well as our socioeconomic support and, possibly, reconstruction projects as conditions are met. Adding to the humanitarian aid to those inside Syria of EUR 163 million in 2024, the EU will provide humanitarian support to Syrians, both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, for an amount of EUR 270 million for 2025. The focus of the 9th EU Brussels Conference on Syria on 17 March is to mobilise the international community to address the immediate needs of the Syrian people, in the country and in the region, and supporting an inclusive transition.

*While the situation in the Middle East has been a focus in recent months, we have not eased on our commitment to work with partner countries along all migratory routes. Frontex data showed a **significant 38% drop in illegal border crossings into the EU** in 2024, with just*

over 239 000 detections recorded, reaching the lowest level since 2021, when migration was still affected by the pandemic. The decrease in the total figure for the EU was mainly driven by a 59% fall in arrivals via the Central Mediterranean route and a 78% reduction in detections across the Western Balkans. At the same time, there was an increase of 18% in arrivals via the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands, and detections of illegal border crossings rose by 14% on the Eastern Mediterranean route also due to new corridors from eastern Libya to Crete. As for this year, by the end of February, the number of illegal border crossings into the EU had reached around 25,000, a 25% decrease compared to the same period last year.

The **Western Balkans** saw the biggest drop in the number of illegal border crossings in 2024 (-78%): this points to the impact of united Team Europe advocacy on alignment of visa policy, the accelerated pace of accession negotiations with implementation of the Growth Plan, the increased delivery of operational assistance and equipment to the region, and the effective involvement of Frontex in the region, putting the countries in a better position to manage migration flows.

The significant drop of illegal border crossings in the **Central Mediterranean route** can be largely attributed to intensified migration management and anti-smuggling operations carried out by the Libyan and Tunisian authorities. Cooperation under the Memorandum of Understanding with **Tunisia** contributed to an 80% drop in irregular departures from the Tunisian coast. Work in areas such as assisted voluntary returns from Tunisia to third countries saw a major increase in 2024, with EU funding helping IOM to facilitate the voluntary return and reintegration of almost 5 000 migrants. This year we jointly decided to also establish a regular form of inter-agency cooperation with the Tunisian authorities to help support migration management.

Technical contact with **Libya** launched last year has continued, looking at cooperation on anti-smuggling, border management and control of departures from both Western and Eastern Libya. Protection of a growing number of Sudanese refugees in Libya is also a key theme, with assisted voluntary returns from Libya almost doubling in 2024, to over 16,000. Building on the work we have done with Tunisia and Libya, it is in our mutual interest to further intensify our support to partners in North Africa as regards voluntary return to countries of origin.

Building on three technical workshops that took place in Cairo in early December, the EU and **Egypt** are working on mutual priorities for the EUR 200 million foreseen under the migration and mobility pillar of the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership. The implementation of the Partnership continues across all its pillars. In December, the Commission also adopted a decision to disburse EUR 1 billion in loans to Egypt under the ongoing Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) and discussions are ongoing between the co-legislators to agree on EUR 4 billion of MFA.

With **Senegal**, the EUR 30 million package to support prevention measures and border management has been now contracted, targeting maritime and land border surveillance, including rescue at sea and protection. The first formal migration dialogue under the

Migration Partnership with **Mauritania** took place in January, with a focus on curbing illegal migration and managing Malian refugee inflows in Mauritania. The EUR 210 million package is well under way, focused on migration management, security, humanitarian aid, entrepreneurship and opportunities for youth. We continue to pursue cooperation and negotiations on a working arrangement between Frontex and both the Senegalese and the Mauritanian authorities, boosted by the recent visits of Frontex to both countries. Close cooperation on migration with **Morocco** continues building on the EUR 152 million budget support programme, with the third tranche worth EUR 49 million now being assessed.

One of the consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has been the need to respond to an escalation of hybrid attacks on the EU and its Member States. Attempts to weaken citizens' trust in institutions and governments includes steps by Russia and Belarus to **weaponise illegal migration**. This is a persistent threat, with effects on the security of the Member States directly impacted and of the Union as a whole. The Commission has been supporting Member States in various ways, including funding and helping to clarify the legal framework applicable in such situations. Given the geopolitical developments, the situation of Member States at the external borders with Russia and Belarus needs close and continued vigilance.

With the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, over 4.5 million Ukrainians have found safety, shelter and opportunities across EU Member States. Member States and their citizens have made a powerful proof of solidarity towards **Ukraine**, and indeed towards other Member States. Last year, we extended the temporary protection framework to March 2026. This extension gives predictability and legal certainty – both for Ukrainians and for Member States. We will now need to consider together, and with Ukraine, possible options and steps for the future. We will work with Ukrainian and Member States' authorities to help set up unity hubs in coordination with UNHCR and IOM to support Ukrainians in their choices. In addition, the Commission will continue to support, coordinate and foster joint reflection on the way forward: we are looking at different options including whether or not to extend temporary protection depending on developments, the transition to national statuses for work, study or family reasons and support to those going back home to Ukraine. We need a common European solution that can offer predictability, stability, and a more balanced impact on Member States' systems.

Finally, the recent Commission **Communication on a Union of Skills**, which aims to provide more and better skills to increase the EU's competitiveness, addresses the need to attract and retain talent from third countries, as a complement to measures to activate and upskill the domestic workforce. This will incorporate the future EU Talent Pool and continued work on Talent Partnerships, as well as additional measures to attract global talent for digitalisation and innovation. The potential of multi-purpose legal gateway offices to complement this work is being explored, and discussions with Member States on piloting the concept are underway. Active involvement of Member States in these initiatives is key to their success. The Union of Skills also prioritises action to make it easier for people to use skills or qualifications gained in another Member State or outside the EU, and the

Commission will look at whether this could also support improved recognition of the qualifications of third country nationals.

Our joint efforts are paying off. You will see from the annex to this letter that we have made major strides in taking forward the implementation of our legal framework and in consolidating our operational work strands.

This year we are celebrating 40 years of the Schengen area, a much-cherished achievement that has brought decades of freedom and growth to Europeans. Now is the right time to continue our work to ensure a fully functioning area without borders. Working together is the best way to bring results.

Looking forward to our discussions this week.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'U. von der Leyen', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ursula von der Leyen

