

EUROPEAN COUNCIL – MIGRATION STATE OF PLAY
European Commission, March 2025

Key objectives	Key actions under way and next steps
Implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum	<p><u>Steps taken since mid-December 2024, in line with the Common Implementation Plan of June 2024</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ National Implementation Plans: Most Member States communicated their National Implementation Plans to the Commission. The Commission is in close contact with those Member States that are still to transmit their Plans. ➤ Pact Coordination Platform <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the first meeting of the Platform (28 January), the Commission provided an updated state-of-play of the implementation of the Pact and information on future financial support. The Commission invited Member States to indicate further support needs. ➤ Meetings of committees, contact and expert groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR) Regulatory Committee successfully voted (13 February) on the template for national asylum and migration management strategies. • AMMR Contact Group discussed (16 December 2024) the draft national strategies template, exchanged views (14 January) on the new Commission Implementing Regulation in relation to family-related criteria and the implementation of transfers under the AMMR, and discussed (14 February) the AMMR provisions on relocation and solidarity, and was informed of the process to set up the Technical-level Solidarity forum. • Resettlement Expert Group (5 March) discussed the synergies between the Resettlement Framework Regulation and the Eurodac Regulation. • Informal expert groups under the AMMR with volunteering Member States were created to support the preparation of implementing rules to replace the existing Commission Implementing Regulation 1560/2003: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Informal Working Group on the Form and Uniform Methods for Relocation discussed (17 December 2024 and 21 January) the revised relocation form and the draft Commission Implementing Regulation. ▪ The Informal working group meetings on the lists of proofs and circumstantial evidence under the AMMR (18 December 2024 and 20 February). ▪ The Informal Working Group on Transfers established in January discussed (26 February) possible new approaches for implementation of the Dublin transfers. • Setting up of the Technical-level Solidarity Forum: the launch of the Technical-level Solidarity Forum and full operationalisation of the new solidarity mechanism through dedicated meetings of the Solidarity Platform “Pact”. • eu-LISA Eurodac Advisory Group (11 February) and various meetings of the Eurodac Project Management Forum continued the work on the technical implementation of the Eurodac system. • The Schengen Borders Code Committee (17 January) discussed guidance linked to the Screening Regulation.

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- **Implementing and Delegated Acts:** Preparation ongoing in the framework of the AMMR Regulatory Committee. Discussions in the Interoperability Committee/Expert Group (5 December 2024) led to stable versions of the Eurodac cross-systems statistics act and interoperability acts that required amendments.
 - **Guidance:** The Commission issued in December 2024 an explanatory document to support national authorities in the transposition of the Reception Conditions Directive, and in March 2025, Q&As in relation to the Directive's interpretation.
 - **European Annual Asylum and Migration Report preparation**
 - In line with the Common Implementation Plan, the Commission completed the “dry run” exercise and delivered the main lessons learnt to the Blueprint Network in preparation of the Report in view of the start of the annual migration management cycle on 1 June.
 - The Commission and Agencies are supporting Member States in filling data collection gaps.
 - Working arrangements signed with EUAA and Frontex to cooperate on situational awareness, early warning, and forecasting, to step up sharing of information linked to the implementation of the Pact.
 - **Preparedness and contingency planning:** The Sub-group on contingency planning of the Blueprint Network was reactivated in February. The European Migration Network hosted (12 March) a capacity-building workshop on scenario modelling and contingency planning. The High-level Network for Returns chaired by the EU Return Coordinator discussed (11 March) preparedness in the field of return.
 - **Information to Parliament and/or Council**
 - Pact Coordination Platform
 - The Commission presented the state of play of the implementation of the Pact in several meetings of the European Parliament Working Group on Asylum - Implementation of the Pact/Common European Asylum System.
 - SCIFA discussed (13 February) the implementation of the Pact and the concept of safe third country. The Asylum Working Party discussed (5 February) implementation and the safe third country concept.
 - The Commission provided information on the implementation of the Pact at the JHA Council meeting of 5 March.
- EU Agencies' support to Member States in the implementation of the Pact**
- **EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA):** ongoing work on a model for the border procedure and on a template for provision of information to applicants; template on contingency planning (completed), with a guidance manual and webinars; guidelines on alternatives to detention (completed); revision of reception & vulnerabilities standards and indicators (starting in February); revision of data collection indicators under the Early Warning and Preparedness System in alignment to the new obligations under the Pact (ongoing).
 - **Frontex** supports the implementation of screening and the updated return procedures, with guidelines and templates for a screening form and information leaflets, updating the operational plans and contingency plans and training material. Good practices provided on alternatives to detention, supplementing the EUAA guidance.

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Five-year European Asylum and Migration Management Strategy

- **Template for the national strategies:** Positive opinion of the AMMR Regulatory Committee on 13 February. Adoption and publication in March.

Dublin Roadmap

- 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 are the basis for the new implementing rules to be adopted in 2025.

Relocation

- Under the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism, up to 4 March, 6454 persons out of 8 289 pledges made available have been transferred (*2643 from Cyprus, 2113 from Greece, 1221 from Italy, 237 from Spain and 240 from Malta*).
- Until the solidarity mechanism under the Pact starts applying and becomes operational in mid-2026, the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism can continue channelling solidarity contributions, including if specific needs arise.

Review of the safe third country concept in the Asylum Procedure Regulation (APR)

- The Commission organised informal consultations with Member States in January-February, with written comments from 19 Member States, as well as through the Asylum Working Party and SCIFA. Consultations with the European Parliament (Working Group on Asylum – Implementation of the Pact, 18 February), and with civil society organisations (19 February). Parallel consultations with UNHCR took place to ensure alignment with international standards.

Frontloading of Pact elements

- The Commission held two informal thematic meetings as well as bilateral meetings to discuss the possibilities for Member States to accelerate the implementation of certain elements of the Pact: on efficient management of reception systems and on improving the efficiency and fairness of the Dublin system, balanced with advancing certain solidarity aspects (23 January), and on frontloading in relation to improved management of external borders and security cases in view of the Screening Regulation and on abusive or likely unfounded claims in view of the Asylum Procedure Regulation (30 January).

Funding

- EUR 3 billion will be available under AMIF and BMVI over three years (2025–2027). Following the vote in the Home Affairs Funds Committee on 10 March, the Commission will adopt implementing decisions.
- The EUR 3 billion includes around EUR 1.8 billion resulting from the MFF mid-term revision, supplemented by a EUR 1.2 billion top-up from the AMIF and BMVI, to further support Member States in implementing the Pact and, as regards AMIF, to support Member States hosting Ukrainians.
- In addition, Member States will benefit from around EUR 1.6 billion for the same period 2025-2027, from the AMIF and BMVI mid-term review of the Member States' programmes and their adaptations to support Pact implementation.

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	<p><u>NEXT STEPS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Adoption and publication of the template for the national strategies in the Official Journal in March. Based on the template, Member States will have to draft their national strategies, in line with the AMMR. ➤ Review of the safe third country concept in the APR. ➤ Adoption of the Commission Implementing Decisions and amendments of Member States' AMIF and BMVI programmes to channel the additional funding. ➤ AMIF support for hosting of Ukrainians to include exploring support to “unity hubs”. ➤ Preparation of the AMMR Implementing Acts. ➤ Preparation of the European Annual Asylum and Migration Report. ➤ Upcoming contact and expert groups and other meetings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second meeting of the High-Level Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Committee on 17 March to launch the discussion on the first-ever Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Plan for 2026-2027. • AMMR Contact Group on 18-19 March to discuss the lists of proofs and circumstantial evidence and the exchange of information before the transfer and relocation, and on Dublin transfers. On 29-30 April, it is planned to present the consolidated version of the draft implementing rules under AMMR. • EUAA Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Network - National Contact Points on 2-3 April planned to discuss operational aspects of resettlement. • On 28 April, the Solidarity Platform ‘Pact’ will discuss the state-of-play of the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism and preparation of the implementation of the solidarity mechanism under AMMR. • Reception Conditions Directive expert group meeting on 15 May. • Upcoming eu-LISA Eurodac Advisory Group on 15-16 May. • AMMR Regulatory Committee on 25 June to vote on the implementing rules under AMMR (omnibus implementing act).
<p>A deeper and wider Schengen, with stronger external borders</p>	<p><u>European digital border management</u></p> <p>Entry/Exit System (EES) start of operations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ On 4 December 2024, the Commission made a proposal to allow for a progressive start of operations of the Entry/Exit System. The JHA Council endorsed its general approach on 5 March. <p>ETIAS/Interoperability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The March JHA Council discussed the implementation of interoperability and endorsed the Interoperability Roadmap. <p>Dedicated funding for EES/ ETIAS</p>

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- All 23 Member States' programme amendments earmark additional funding to support preparations at the national level for the entry into operation and functioning of the EES and ETIAS (EUR 45.7 million) were finalised in 2024. Additional funding is made available to the three Schengen Associated Countries (EUR 6.3 million).

Digitalising border management and visa procedures

- Legislative proposals on the digitalisation of travel documents are being examined by Parliament and Council.

European Border and Coast Guard

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

- Alignment of the National Strategies with the multiannual strategic policy adopted by the Commission and the technical and operational strategy for EIBM, verified under the Schengen monitoring and evaluation mechanism, was completed in January. The final assessment, after consultation of Member States, was submitted to the Council in March.
- The Management Board of Frontex is monitoring the implementation of the technical and operational strategy for EIBM. Annual updates ensure that the requirements for national strategies and strategic plans of Frontex take into consideration legislative and policy developments, and changes in the operational environment.

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), launched on 31 July 2024 for an indicative amount of EUR 170 million, invited Member States bordering Russia and Belarus to strengthen their border surveillance capabilities. The notification letters to the five Member States (Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) and a Schengen Associated Country (Norway), informing them their applications were successful, were sent on 11 December 2024. Member States are amending their BMVI programmes to earmark the amounts. Funding for this action will be added to Norway's initial programme, once approved.

Operational support

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

Legal measures

- The Crisis and *force majeure* 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 in December 2024 a Communication contextualising the exceptional nature of the security threat currently posed at the EU's Eastern border by the political use of migration flows by Russia and Belarus, which can result in the weaponisation of illegal migration. It outlined the scope in the existing legal framework for response by Member States concerned, including temporary measures that may affect fundamental rights in certain circumstances, and if strictly needed to preserve national security and the integrity of the EU external border.

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Schengen governance

- The Commission presented the Schengen Barometer+ in the Schengen Council on 5 March.

Schengen evaluation and monitoring mechanism

- In the first half of 2025, Switzerland, Slovenia and Austria will undergo the periodic Schengen evaluation.
- The Schengen Coordinator has systematically followed up on evaluations completed last year, with visits to Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and Croatia focusing on remedial actions and structural reforms to address priority recommendations.
- In line with the 2024-2025 Schengen Cycle priorities, the Schengen Council adopted on 5 March recommendations on common areas for improvement flowing from the thematic Schengen evaluation on making returns more effective.

EU/Schengen enlargement

- The Schengen Council took the decision on 12 December 2024 to abolish all controls at the internal borders with **Bulgaria and Romania** as from 1 January. Bulgaria and Romania will undergo a full Schengen evaluation in 2025.
- The first-time Schengen evaluation of **Cyprus** is ongoing with significant progress reported in some areas. Once the outstanding issues are addressed, the Commission and Member States will carry out the necessary Schengen visits.
- **Ireland** is exempt from participating in all provisions of the Schengen architecture but was authorised by the Council to participate in certain areas (e.g. Schengen Information System), and the first-time Schengen evaluation is ongoing.

Internal Border Controls

- The revised Schengen Borders Code entered into force on 10 July 2024. It contains an updated framework for the reintroduction of internal border controls, with clearer deadlines and stricter monitoring and reporting obligations for the Member States and the Commission.
- Currently, ten Member States have internal border controls in place. 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.

Stronger coordination of search and 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 planned to take place before summer).

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	<p><u>NEXT STEPS</u></p> <p>Schengen governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ In June, the EU celebrates 40 years of Schengen. In April, the Commission will present the State of Schengen report 2025 including priorities recommended for the 2025-2026 Schengen Cycle. <p>European digital border management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Implementation of the revised interoperability roadmap. <p>European Border and Coast Guard</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Frontex and Member States must swiftly contribute human resources and technical equipment to the Standing Corps and to the technical equipment pool and 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 trafficking in human beings: Council position on the proposal endorsed by Coreper II on 19 June 2024. European Parliament position still to be adopted. The European Parliament Research Service's Substitute Impact Assessment was presented and discussed in the LIBE meeting of 17 February. ➤ 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 2024. 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: discussions resumed in the JHA Counsellors Working Party on 20 January and 21 February, with the aim of swiftly concluding negotiations on this key legal instrument for 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, in 2024 over 30 events were organised by the Commission or with the Commission's active participation. These included a thematic Conference on tackling migrant smuggling in the digital domain, 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. ➤ Cooperation in international frameworks to counter migrant smuggling, notably the G7 Anti-Smuggling Action Plan endorsed by Ministers of Interior in October 2024. The Roma-Lyon Migration Experts Sub-Group, tasked to follow-up on the Action Plan, is currently mapping the different activities of the G7 countries (next meeting April). A project to support UNODC as the permanent follow-up mechanism for the implementation of the Niamey process started in February 2024, supporting international cooperation to counter migrant smuggling, between European countries, countries from West and Central Africa and international

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organisations (EU funding EUR 1.2 million). The Niamey Declaration Focal Points meeting, at technical level, took place on 25 and 26 February in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

EU-level cooperation

- Situational awareness is supported through Migration Preparedness and Crisis Blueprint network and the ISAA.
- Following the EU Internet Forum Senior Officials Meeting of 12 December 2024, Member States agreed to expand the focus of the Forum to encompass the online dimension of migrant smuggling. A technical meeting will be organised by the Commission in 2025, aiming to bring together Member States and relevant private stakeholders.
- The European Migration Network (EMN) Working Group on Information Campaigns meeting will take place by summer 2025.
- A call for proposals with a budget of EUR 10 million for new information and awareness-raising campaigns on the risks of illegal migration was launched on 19 November 2024. The deadline for submitting applications is 1 April.
- The Immigration Liaison Officer (ILO) Network Steering Board meeting was held on 12 December 2024. The next Steering Board meeting is tentatively scheduled for June and will include a discussion on concrete Commission proposals to enhance the Network's operational impact.

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 below details on ASOP Morocco/ASOP Tunisia*). Implementation of the different ASOPs is ongoing with EU-funded projects, such as:
 - **EU4FAST**: the regional programme (EUR 36 m 2023-2027) increases the capacity of Western Balkan partners to fight against migrant smuggling, as well as 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 signed in November 2024 will support the capacity of law enforcement and judicial authorities to investigate and prosecute organised crime groups, 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 2024.
- Anti-smuggling programme in Egypt (EUR 20 million) to enhance the investigative, prosecution and protection capacities of the Egyptian Police and Administrative Control Authority (main beneficiaries) implemented by UNODC and Civipol since January.
- **Common Operational Partnerships projects (COPs)**
 - Ongoing with Mauritania, The Gambia, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire. A COP has been concluded in November 2024 with Guinea (EUR 8 million); a top-up to COP Senegal was signed in December 2024 as part of the EUR 30 million package for Senegal. A continuation of COPs will be further concluded with Mauritania and The Gambia (new phase is to be concluded by Q2 2025, upon completion of an evaluation). Counter-smuggling projects financed under the Internal Security Fund (new call for EUR 12 million). The evaluation process is in its final stage, allowing for new COP projects to start implementation in 2025, after signing the respective grant agreements.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under an Individual Measure for West Africa of EUR 100 million adopted by the College on 11 December 2024, EUR 15 million will further support anti-smuggling and anti-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. In November 2024, ROCK launched an operation called SAHAN, coordinated with Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan, leading to numerous arrests and the identification of up to 15 000 victims of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. <p><u>Preventing exploitation of workers with an irregular status in Europe</u></p> <p>➤ The Commission monitors the implementation of the Employers Sanctions Directive 2009/52/EC and will present a report on its implementation, together with the implementation report on the Seasonal Workers Directive.</p> <p><u>NEXT STEPS</u></p> <p>➤ Second international conference on the Global Alliance to be organised in Q4 2025, ensuring continued political engagement of international partners, focused on concerted and targeted action at global level.</p> <p>➤ 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, evaluation of submitted applications is ongoing. The new projects will complement the portfolio of existing ones in Türkiye, Western Balkans, Western Africa and Pakistan.</p> <p>➤ 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 signature of the contract in June, which could make its launch possible at the second international conference on the Global Alliance.</p> <p>➤ Under the adopted Individual Measure for West Africa, contracts (total EU contribution of EUR 15 million) on counter-smuggling and anti-trafficking with selected implementing partners will be signed in 2025.</p> <p>➤ Additional NDICI funding (EUR 5 million) for a third phase of ROCK to be adopted by the Commission in 2025.</p> <p>➤ The Expert Group on Irregular Migration next meeting focusing on Employers Sanctions Directive 2009/52/EC planned for April. Social partners (business, union representatives) will be consulted on the Directive’s implementation.</p>
<p>New common approach on the return of irregular migrants</p>	<p><u>Legislative framework on returns</u></p> <p>➤ On 11 March, the Commission put forward a proposal for a new Regulation establishing a common approach on returns, replacing the current Return Directive and the Commission’s 2018 proposal for a Directive on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country national, which is withdrawn. The new proposal is based on broad consultations with Member States, European Parliament, international organisations, civil society and NGOs.</p>

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	<p>➤ The challenges and good practices identified in the Schengen thematic evaluation on return and the Commission SWD on the returns of illegally staying third-country nationals posing a security threat, both presented on 16 December 2024, have also informed the proposal.</p> <p><u>NEXT STEPS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Examination by Parliament and Council of the negotiation of the proposal for a new common approach on returns. ➤ New legislative proposal on digitalisation of return case management by the end of the year. ➤ Preparation of a revision of the Frontex mandate on returns as part of the overall review of the Frontex mandate in 2026.
	<p><u>Operational measures</u></p> <p>Progress on the five key actions of the Return Roadmap presented by the Commission</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Action 1 Joint identification actions leading to issuing of travel documents and Action 2 Assisted voluntary return, reintegration and joint return operations with Frontex: Targeted actions and better planning and coordination led to more visible joint efforts. ➤ Action 2 Assisted voluntary return, reintegration and joint return operations with Frontex: Brochure on incentives for effective returns, in particular promoting voluntary returns, has been finalised and shared at the EMN Presidency Conference (Budapest, November 2024). Preliminary discussions in the High-level network on voluntary returns to politically sensitive third countries. ➤ Action 3 Issuing of return decisions at the same time with a negative asylum decision: Workshops supported by Norway and the Netherlands on the comprehensive decision and on last-minute asylum applications. Peer support offered by Norway and the Netherlands to Member States. ➤ Action 4 Mutual recognition of return decisions and follow-up enforcement action: Pilot project on mutual recognition launched by the former Hungarian Presidency and presented at the EMN Presidency Conference on Returns (Budapest, November 2024). ➤ Action 5 Prioritising returns of illegally staying third-country nationals posing a security threat: the Commission issued a Staff Working Document in December 2024 on the return of illegally staying third-country nationals posing a security threat. ➤ Commission support: AMIF Specific Action of EUR 25 million to support six Member States under pressure to incentivise voluntary returns to priority third countries is supporting the implementation of building block 5 of the Common Implementation Plan for the Pact and of the Return Roadmap. <p>Frontex support on returns</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 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. More than half of the return counselling sessions provided in 2024 have been followed by an application for an assisted voluntary return. The number of returnees supported grew from 39 226 in 2023 to 56 263 in 2024. By the end of 2024, the number of third-country nationals returned only on scheduled flights surpassed the total number of those returned in 2023.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The implementation of the EU Reintegration Programme (EURP) has continued to progress, further streamlining the reintegration support offered to returnees from the EU. In 2024 over 12 000 people were supported through the EURP (5 500 in 2023). ➤ Frontex has set up a comprehensive system for strategic financial planning based on Member States' expected needs and EU priorities. The assigned budget for 2025 was considered adequate; this will be reviewed before the summer. <p><u>NEXT STEPS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The Commission, with Frontex, to conduct an analysis on the opportunities to further strengthen the return component of the Standing Corps, with a view to expanding the return support that the Agency provides, by Q4 2025. ➤ The Return Coordinator to work on an update of the Return roadmap, which will include new targeted return actions. These will focus on: active promotion and facilitation of the full use of the SIS return alerts; developing a manual by Q2/Q3 2025 to guide actors involved in return border procedure within Member States to be linked through an efficient workflow; raising awareness of the need for preparedness on returns, building on the results of the thematic Schengen evaluation in the area of return; active participation in the Task Force on data on returns between Eurostat, Frontex and interested Member States to ensure the increased quality of return data; working on promoting forced return monitoring. ➤ Launch of the EUR 13 million (IPA-funded) regional Western Balkans return action, for both IOM and Member States-led components, targeted by the end of March.
Strengthening our readmission policies	<p><u>Visa Code Art. 25a process</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Discussions are ongoing in the Council regarding the follow up to the Commission's fifth assessment report adopted on 23 July 2024, as well as the Commission proposal of 23 July 2024 proposing visa measures due to insufficient cooperation on readmission regarding Somalia. ➤ Preparatory work for the 6th assessment report is ongoing. Member States have submitted their qualitative feedback. <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. As Parliament and Council could not reach agreement in time, 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.

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	<p><u>NEXT STEPS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Regular follow-up on using the Article 25a of the Visa Code mechanism to its full potential (in IMEX, JHA Counsellors and other Council formations), and specific follow-up to the Commission's proposals for visa measures. ➤ If there is no targeted dialogue on readmission, readmission is discussed in broader dialogues (e.g. Samoa agreement). ➤ The Article 25a mechanism on strengthening readmission cooperation will be used to support the implementation of the border procedure under 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 the cooperation with these third countries. ➤ The adoption of the 6th Article 25a assessment report is expected for Q2/Q3 2025.
<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 2024. The European Parliament still has to adopt a negotiating position. <p><u>Visa facilitation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ In response to democratic backsliding in Georgia, the Council adopted on 27 January a Decision to partially suspend the visa facilitation agreement with the country. On 18 February, the Commission adopted guidance requesting Member States to reimpose visa requirements on Georgian diplomats and officials. ➤ On 7 February, the Commission proposed negotiating directives for a visa facilitation agreement and a readmission agreement with Kazakhstan. <p><u>Visa liberalisation dialogue</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Visa liberalisation dialogue launched in September 2024 with Armenia. A Senior Officials Meeting was held in Yerevan on 11 December 2024 as part of the dialogue, followed by an expert mission mid-February and a second expert meeting in March. <p><u>NEXT STEPS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A visa liberalisation Action Plan for Armenia will be developed in Q2/Q3 2025, setting detailed conditions to be fulfilled by Armenia in view of a possible visa-free regime with the country. ➤ Proposal for a new EU Visa Policy Strategy in Q4 2025 looking at how to best leverage the EU's visa policy in a strategic manner.

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<p>Legal pathways and integration</p>	<p><u>Resettlement and humanitarian admission</u></p> <p>➤ In line with the new Resettlement Framework Regulation, preparations for the first Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Plan 2026-2027 are underway.</p> <p><u>Union of Skills</u></p> <p>➤ On 5 March, the Commission adopted a Communication on a Union of Skills, which includes a strand of action on attracting and retaining talent from third countries by working towards a ‘Europe talent magnet framework’, as a complement to measures to activate and upskill the domestic workforce, including the following actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting up a pilot for a multiple-purpose legal gateway office in third countries to facilitate talent mobility; • Adopting and launching the EU Talent Pool and scaling up EU Talent Partnerships; • Presenting a Visa Strategy with measures to support the timely granting of long-stay visas and residence permits to students, researchers and trained workers from third countries; • Reviewing the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion; • Supporting validation of skills and qualifications gained outside the EU, notably through exploring whether to propose common rules to facilitate the recognition and validation of qualifications and skills of third country nationals as part of a Skills Portability Initiative. <p><u>Talent Partnerships</u></p> <p>➤ The Commission discussed (12 February) with Member States priorities to strengthen the implementation of Talent Partnerships, as well as potential multiple-purpose legal gateway offices. Reflections are ongoing on the next steps.</p> <p>➤ Implementation of the following Talent Partnerships continues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tunisia: Joint roadmap under finalisation. Identified sectors of interest: construction, agriculture, hospitality and transport. Follow-up thematic workshop on transports and logistics will be held in April, to discuss concrete measures to boost mobility, as well as a series of webinars on the hospitality and tourism sector in April and May. Third roundtable expected in June. • Morocco: Identified priority sectors: mechatronics, lorry drivers, construction, agriculture, hospitality. Follow-up technical meetings on the lorry drivers sector took place in January and February, resulting in the identification of the main obstacles to the mobility of heavy lorry drivers and possible paths to overcome them. • Egypt: Draft Joint Action Plan under finalisation. Technical workshop in December 2024 re-started exchanges with the Egyptian authorities and allowed discussion on the draft Joint Action Plan under finalisation. Identified sectors of interest: information & communication technology (ICT), construction, tourism, agriculture, transportation and energy. The Egyptian component of the THAMM Plus programme was launched on 10 February. Next roundtable tentatively planned in the first half of 2025. • Pakistan: Joint roadmap under finalisation. Identified sectors of interest: ICT, care and long-term care. An EUR 3 million worth programme co-financed by EU was signed in November 2024 to support the EU-Pakistan Talent Partnership. The objective of this support is to develop the institutional framework and capacities at all levels and bring relevant stakeholders
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	<p>together to enhance regular labour mobility between Pakistan and interested EU Member States. Third roundtable tentatively planned for June 2025.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bangladesh: Second roundtable in March 2024. Joint roadmap under finalisation. Sectors of interest: transport, ICT, construction, textile/garments, ship building industry, agriculture and hospitality/tourism. EUR 4.8 million projects in support of the Talent Partnership were signed and launched in July 2024. Third roundtable tentatively planned to take place in the first half of 2025. <p>➤ In total, EU-funded projects (over EUR 58.8 million) are adopted or under implementation in support of the five Talent Partnerships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Projects of about EUR 18 million under AMIF through the Migration Partnership Facility (MPF) (targeting Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan). Total mobilities currently planned: around 1320¹. • Projects from NDICI worth EUR 23 million are under implementation to support Talent Partnerships with Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt. An additional EUR 10 million support will be contracted in 2025, focused on employability of potential migrants, support for skills and mobility schemes, capacity building, recognition of qualifications and validation of skills etc. Total mobilities planned: around 3 000 through the regional programme THAMM+. • NDICI support of EUR 4.8 million has been mobilised for the Talent Partnership with Bangladesh (projects signed in July 2024) and EUR 3 million for Pakistan (project signed in November 2024). The initiatives will support building 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. Work under both projects started respectively in December 2024 and February. <p><u>Long-term Residents Directive</u></p> <p>➤ Political agreement was not reached during the previous legislative term. The negotiations remain on hold.</p> <p><u>Seasonal Workers Directive</u></p> <p>➤ Compliance exercise ongoing. Infringements launched against all Member States bound by the Directive (except Ireland and Denmark).</p> <p><u>Blue Card Directive</u></p> <p>➤ Launch of infringements against 17 Member States for failure to notify (January 2023). As of 17 February, 7 Member States did not notify complete transposition.</p> <p><u>Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027</u></p> <p>➤ Over 60 actions by the Commission and the Member States in four key areas: labour market integration, education and training, healthcare and housing.</p> <p>➤ 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 participation.</p>
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¹ This number refers to the cumulative total number of mobilities planned or ongoing for the current MPF projects targeting Talent Partnership priorities countries. The list of MPF projects and respective mobility targets is available here: [MPF Projects - Migration Partnership Facility https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects](https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects).

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	<p>➤ Labour Migration Platform: its sixth meeting (12 March) focused on employers and private sector engagement in legal pathways and labour market integration policies.</p> <p><u>NEXT STEPS</u></p> <p>➤ Resettlement and humanitarian admission: Commission Proposal for the Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Plan 2026-2027 to be adopted by Q4 2025. High-Level Committee on Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission on 17 March.</p> <p>➤ Union of Skills: Trilogues on the EU Talent Pool to be launched as soon as the European Parliament has a negotiating position.</p> <p>➤ Talent Partnerships: Finalise Talent Partnership joint roadmaps and action plans with partner countries in upcoming meetings/roundtables. Organisation of next roundtables and technical meetings on dedicated topics.</p> <p>➤ Trilogues on the recast of the Long-term Residents Directive should resume quickly.</p> <p>➤ Implementation report on the Seasonal Workers Directive planned for Q1 2026, together with the implementation report on the Employers Sanctions Directive.</p> <p>➤ Analysis of the completeness of the Blue Card Directive transposition for all Member States.</p> <p>➤ Integration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mid-term review of Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion planned for Q2 2025. • AMIF call in support of integration actions to be published in the first half of 2025 and cover access to health, support measures for women integration, digital skills, pathways for education and support measures for children.
<p>Strategic relations on migration with non-EU countries, especially countries of origin and transit</p>	<p><u>MIGRATION ROUTES TOWARDS EU</u></p> <p>To meet the challenges of illegal migration in an operational way, the Commission and Member States as Team Europe 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.</p> <p><u>Central Mediterranean</u></p> <p>In 2024, irregular border crossings (IBCs) along the Central Mediterranean route (around 66 800) dropped by 59% compared to 2023, reflecting lower departures mainly from Tunisia, but also from Libya. However, in the first two months of the year, the numbers increased by 48% to almost 6 900 in year-on-year arrivals, with arrivals mainly from Libya (<i>Frontex</i>). In 2024, 1 692 missing migrants were recorded along the Central Mediterranean route (compared to 2526 missing migrants in 2023) (<i>IOM data</i>).</p> <p><u>Regional actions</u></p> <p>➤ Strengthened capacities of Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia: EUR 325 million migration package (June 2023) and EUR 208 million Annual Action Plan 2024 of the Multi-Country Migration Programme for the Southern Neighbourhood (November 2024), covering 1) protection, 2) voluntary returns and reintegration, 3) border management and anti-smuggling, 4) legal migration.</p>

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- **Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP/Home Affairs Funds) in North Africa:** Phase 6 under implementation (EU funding EUR 25 million for 2023-2025), Phase 7 started in March (EUR 37.5 million) of EU contribution.
- **Assisted voluntary returns (AVR)**
 - AVR from North Africa and Sahel to countries of origin have further intensified, more than doubling in North Africa from 2023 to 2024 (over 28 600 in 2024) and increasing by 35% in the Sahel (over 17 650 in 2024).
 - Apart from facilitating returns, the Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration Programme in North Africa (funded by the NDICI) has provided protection assistance to over 25 500 migrants since early 2023 across North Africa. An additional EUR 50 million top-up will be contracted in the first half of 2025.
 - The programme has also provided individual reintegration assistance in Sub-Saharan Africa to over 61 000 returning migrants September 2022-December 2024, with about half returning from North Africa and the other half returning from the Sahel. An additional top-up of EUR 70 million is expected to be contracted in the coming weeks, and another top-up of EUR 90 million may follow to cover needs in 2025.

Tunisia: key steps

- Implementation continues on all pillars of the strategic and comprehensive partnership agreed in July 2023, including on migration. Latest contacts were a February visit of the Director-General of the Commission's newly established DG MENA, also starting preliminary consultations on the new Pact for the Mediterranean.
- 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. An EUR 18 million anti-smuggling action supporting the Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership, and an EUR 30 million contract to supply the coastal surveillance system were both signed in November 2024.
- In 2024, 37 613 irregular migrants were intercepted by Tunisian authorities at sea and in the coastal areas, down by 13% compared to 2023. In 2024, 19 388 arrivals from Tunisia to Italy were recorded (around -80% compared to 2023) (*ISAA*).
- The decision by Tunisia to suspend UNHCR refugee registrations since June 2024 is being raised with the government, in particular the need for an interim solution, pending development of a Tunisian system. Despite suspension of new registrations, the cooperation with UNHCR on protection of registered asylum seekers and refugees continues.
- In 2024, IOM has facilitated the voluntary return of 6 879 migrants from Tunisia to their countries of origin (mainly The Gambia, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Ivory Coast) with funding from the EU and other donors. This is more than double the total figure in 2023 (with 2 558 returns). A top-up to the IOM contract was signed in December 2024.
- Positive developments related to legal migration/Talent Partnership, with good cooperation with Tunisian authorities (*see legal migration section above*).

NEXT STEPS

- Subcommittees in the first two semesters of 2025 (8 April Human Rights and Democracy and 13 May for the Subcommittee on Migration, Employment and Social Affairs), in view of a possible Association Council meeting in 2025.
- Organisation of a technical meeting on Talent Partnership (first half of 2025) and a Roundtable in June.

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- On protection, the key objective is to continue supporting partners (UNHCR and civil society organisation) to provide assistance to the mixed migrant population within their mandate, while supporting Tunisia in its transition towards a state-owned asylum system based on international obligations and protection safeguards, possibly 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 2024, including under the migration and mobility pillar (EUR 200 foreseen until 2027 for its operationalisation). This builds on the Migration Dialogue of July 2024, the visit of Commissioner Johansson in September 2024, and the visit of the EU Special Representative for Human Rights in November 2024, as well as an Egyptian visit to Frontex in October 2024.
- Most recent contacts: visit of Commissioner Šuica on 2 March and of Director-General of DG MENA on 2-5 March.
- Continued implementation of the programme on Protection and Resilience of Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Migrants, including host communities (EUR 28 million), as well as the ongoing protection programme (EUR 12.2 million) and the first ever Joint UN Action in Egypt launched in September 2024 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. Other projects seek to strengthen the capacity of Egypt's Statistical Agency, and to work with the EUAA to support the Egyptian asylum system.
- Discussions will continue between Egypt and EUAA and UNHCR to ensure a smooth transition from the current UNHCR-led registration system to one owned and autonomously administered by Egypt.
- EUR 110 million project on border management, implemented by IOM and Civipol, is under way (EUR 82 million top-up signed in December 2024); a EUR 20 million anti-smuggling project with UNODC, in cooperation with Civipol, will soon start implementation. Three search and rescue boats were delivered to the Egyptian authorities in 2024 under the ongoing Border Management Programme.
- On-going follow-up at technical level to the three workshops that were held in December 2024 in Cairo (programming for migration management until 2027; legal migration and Talent Partnership, as well as returns, readmission and reintegration, visa challenges and residency permits).
- Talent Partnership (*see legal migration section above*).

NEXT STEPS

- Agreement on mutual priorities and start of the implementation of the EUR 200 million in line with the programming workshop of December 2024 (for years 2024-2027). Operational conclusions following the programming workshop to be finalised in the coming weeks.
- Signature of working arrangements negotiated with Europol and Cepol envisaged in the first half of 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.

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Libya: key steps

- Since the EU's increased engagement with Libya on migration since early 2024, including three joint Commission-EEAS technical missions to Libya (February, June and December 2024), two Libyan return missions to Brussels (May 2024 and February) and EU high-level participation in the Trans-Mediterranean Migration Forum hosted by Libya (July 2024), Libya has delivered on the number of commitments, including lifting the cost of exit visas for voluntary humanitarian returns, which has contributed to a 73% increase of voluntary humanitarian returns, as well as expanded cooperation with UN agencies and access to detention centres and disembarkation points, improved protection of Sudanese refugees, developed alternatives to detention and progression towards the full operationalisation of the EU-funded Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC). The EU also launched discussions with technical authorities in Benghazi and organised a first joint discussion with representatives from both Tripoli and Benghazi to identify unified actions.
- The most recent exchanges opened new cooperation avenues on anti-smuggling, including cooperation with the countries of origin (Bangladesh and Pakistan), supporting the implementation of a project on anti-smuggling with IOM in the Benghazi airport. Further actions are being developed in border management and control of departures from both Western and Eastern Libya, as well as in the South, search and rescue, and protection, and migration governance, including the situation of irregular migrants and Sudanese refugees.
- In 2024, disembarkations in Libya reached 21 762 (a 26.6% increase compared to 2023). 674 deaths and 1 015 missing were recorded along the Central Mediterranean Route in the same period, including 183 deaths at sea and 324 missing in Libyan territorial waters. In 2024, 42 643 arrivals from Libya to Italy were recorded (a 18% decrease year on year). In 2024, 3 550 individuals arrived to Greece from Libya and 96 to Malta.
- In 2024, there were 16 207 departures from Libya with voluntary humanitarian returns, representing an 73% increase compared to 2023, most of it EU-funded (94%).

NEXT STEPS

- Continuation of the 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, addressing the emergency situation of Sudanese refugees in Libya and labour migration paths.

Countries of origin

Bangladesh: The 2nd Migration and Mobility Dialogue (5 March) covered all aspects of cooperation on migration including migrant smuggling, return and reintegration, and legal migration. It took place back-to-back with the 8th meeting of the Joint Working Group on the implementation of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the Identification and Return of Persons without an Authorisation to Stay, and the 2nd Talent Partnership Roundtable.

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- Next Migration and Mobility Dialogue, together with the Joint Working Group and the Talent Partnership Roundtable meetings, to take place in Q2 2025 (pending feedback from Bangladesh).

Pakistan: The 2nd Migration and Mobility Dialogue (April 2024) covered the whole spectrum of migration-related topics, including dedicated discussions on legal migration. A new reintegration project (EUR 7 million) was signed in November 2024. Progress was confirmed in the EU-Pakistan Joint Commission on 21 November 2024.

- 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 June 2025.
- Deployment of the Frontex Liaison Officer and European Migration Liaison Officer as of May.

Western Mediterranean and Atlantic route

In 2024 the number of arrivals in the Canary Islands reached 46 877, an increase of 18% in comparison with the same period in 2023, while the Western Mediterranean route recorded a small 1% increase in arrivals compared to 2023, with 17 026 arrivals. In January and February, the Atlantic route accounted for nearly a third of all irregular crossings in the month. Despite a 40% decline compared to the same period in 2024, the Atlantic route remains the most active.

Common Operational Partnerships (COP) on anti-smuggling

- Action on anti-smuggling have been making significant progress in The Gambia, Senegal, Mauritania, and Côte d'Ivoire. A new COP with Nigeria is financed by Home Affairs Funds (EUR 1.6 million). Expansions or renewals are starting or are planned with Guinea (contract signed in November 2024), The Gambia (contracts to be signed in 2025), Senegal (top-up signed in December 2024). The COP project with Côte d'Ivoire has started under the Internal Security Fund (ISF) on 1 February 2023 (EU contribution of EUR 1.5 million).
- NETCOP II, a network dedicated to fostering regional cooperation among COPs and joint investigation teams in Western and Central Africa, is active (EUR 1.9 million) until May; funding for a new phase is planned.

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 illegal migration (including collaboration with the diaspora), and EUR 100 million for up to 12 countries for reintegration and counter-smuggling/anti-trafficking (“Managing migration better in West Africa”) (Individual Measure), was adopted in December 2024.
- Regional cooperation to counter migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings in the framework of the Niamey process (EUR 1.2 million), and action assisting intelligence services of Senegal, The Gambia, Mauritania and now also Mali to counter migrant smuggling (EUR 1.75 million (MISPEAC-MPF)), both implemented through ISF.

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Morocco: key steps

- 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 is in the process of being assessed for prompt disbursement.
- Additional funding (approximately EUR 41 million) was allocated to Morocco to 2023, supporting programmes across all areas of migration, as well as new funding under the Annual Action Programme (AAP) 2024.
- An Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership with Morocco was launched in July 2022, with Frontex and Europol enhanced cooperation ongoing. Negotiations for a working arrangement with Frontex launched in 2025.

NEXT STEPS

- ASOP: Frontex-Morocco *Comité Mixte* meeting to decide on the 2025 roadmap of activities will take place in the first semester 2025. Frontex Liaison Officer to be deployed in spring 2025.
- Next phase of Budget Support (EUR 150 million) is under negotiation with Morocco.
- Moroccan part of the Regional Anti-Smuggling Programme will be developed in the course of 2025.

Mauritania: key steps

- President von der Leyen's visit to Mauritania and the Joint Press Statement in February 2024 led to the launch of the Migration Partnership in March 2024.
- The first formal migration dialogue under the Migration Partnership took place on 21 January. Both parties expressed satisfaction with the state of play of the implementation and the need to deepen this further.
- Most of the components of the EUR 210 million package were contracted by the end of 2024, including support for migration management (notably support to forcibly displaced Malians), security, humanitarian aid, entrepreneurship and opportunities for youth. Commissioner Škela visited Mauritania in December 2024. One third of the variable tranches of the budget support programme is linked to migration (for a total of EUR 24.4 million). The inception phase of the March EUR 25 million maritime border surveillance action, to finalise the list of equipment to be procured, will be concluded in the coming weeks. The EUR 2 million to address emergency needs post-disembarkation, along with EUR 300 000 for an information campaign on Schengen visas, both funded under the MPF, are to be contracted in the coming weeks.
- Cooperation with Frontex: 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 progressing.

NEXT STEPS

- The remaining the EUR 5 million (out of EUR 210 million package) funding to strengthen the assistance, promotion, and protection of the rights of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees should be contracted in Q2 2025 through one contract to be signed by IOM in partnership with UNHCR and the *Commission Nationale des Droits de l'Homme de Mauritanie* (CNDH),

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and another one with IFRC/Red Crescent, following discussions on a more robust migration management system and ensuring access of UN agencies to closed transit centres.

- The EUR 2 million project continuing the COP in Mauritania is expected to be signed in Q2 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. The Commission's proposal under Article 25a of the Visa Code is pending before the Council. The intensive engagement continues at all levels in Brussels and Dakar.
- The Commission mobilised EUR 30 million for support on prevention measures and border management under the Flexible Mechanism. EUR 29 million were contracted in December 2024 as a top up to the existing COP action. The delivery of the first vessels under the project expected to start in Q2 2026.
- Cooperation also focuses on engagement with Frontex. The negotiations on a Working Arrangement between Frontex and the Senegalese National Police are ongoing. Frontex technical meetings in Dakar in February.
- Border management programmes build on the existing COP and an action supporting deployment of a GARS-2 Unit (*Groupes d'Action Rapide – Surveillance et Intervention*, EUR 5.3 million).

NEXT STEPS

- Regular engagement to focus on countering illegal migration, returns and readmission, and promoting legal/ labour migration pathways. The next technical dialogue on readmission is tentatively envisaged for Q2 2025.
- Conclusion of the negotiations on a Working Arrangement between Frontex and the Senegalese Authorities.
- Signature of the pending action (EUR 1 million) on document fraud planned for Q2 2025.

The Gambia: key steps

- The comprehensive EU engagement with The Gambia on migration and mobility addresses key aspects, including return, readmission and reintegration, migrant smuggling and human trafficking, through the Team Europe Initiative on the Western Mediterranean/Atlantic route.
- Improvements over the last two years on returns, readmission and reintegration were acknowledged by the EU by the lifting of the second layer of EU visa measures. However, since then, there has been a deterioration in cooperation, with charter flights *de facto* suspended by The Gambia. The fifth Joint Working Group on the implementation of the EU-The Gambia readmission arrangement in January looked at a possible resumption of charter flights operations in April.
- The Gambia received additional funding of EUR 15 million for migration management (NDICI), with a focus on vulnerable migrants, reintegration, youth employability, and migrant smuggling. A COP for The Gambia increased investigations of smuggling events to prevent departures (EUR 1.4 million under ISF) was extended to June. There is ongoing support to the Gambian Security Sector Reform for improved human security, migration and border management (EUR 6 million).

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- Targets on migration, readmission and reintegration have been included in a EUR 40 million budget support (migration-related indicators would allow the disbursement of support for EUR 5 million).

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 Q4 2025.
- Contracts implementing additional funding under the Flexible Mechanism are under discussion and are expected to be signed in Q2 2025. Work to allow the continuation of the COP.
- Conclusion of a working arrangement between Frontex and The Gambia's relevant authorities.

Mali: key steps

- Reflections are ongoing on the best ways to promote activities within the country that could address the root causes of illegal 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

In 2024, irregular border crossings along the Eastern Mediterranean route to Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria increased by 15% to 70 219 compared to 2023, however the first two months of 2025 saw a 35% drop in year-on-year arrivals. The top nationalities registered in recent months have been Afghanistan, Egypt and Pakistan (*Frontex*).

Türkiye: key steps

- The November 2023 Joint Communication to the European Council on EU-Türkiye relations outlines specific recommendations to re-energise the relationship, in a phased, proportionate and reversible manner and based on the established conditionalities. This document constitutes a roadmap for the next steps, subject to the endorsement of Coreper, *as per* the mandate of the April 2024 European Council.
- Engagement with Türkiye on all matters regarding migration follows the European Council Conclusions. In December, a EUR 1 billion package for refugee assistance and migration management support was adopted, with contracting taking place during 2025. This will finance activities that include basic protection needs (EUR 421 million), as well as migration and border management projects (EUR 398 million). This includes a component to help prepare 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 IOM, will support Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) to other countries of origin (apart from Syria).
- The programme 'Support to Türkiye's Efforts to Strengthen Border Management at the Eastern and Southeastern Border' (EUR 220 million) is being taken forward.

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- Cooperation between Turkish authorities and Frontex is progressing aiming for full and effective implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement and the EU-Turkey readmission agreement towards all EU Member States. Works follows up on the 2023 EU-Türkiye High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Security.
- A Senior Officials Meeting in Ankara (3-4 December 2024) discussed migration and visas. The EU is working on streamlining Schengen visa procedures for Turkish citizens. The meeting also covered limiting departures to Aegean islands, cooperation on return and anti-smuggling.
- In February, meetings with Turkish authorities and Turkish air carriers tackled facilitation of illegal migration by air and improving the flow of information (on airports, airlines, best practices on forged documents).

NEXT STEPS

- Ongoing work on visa procedures to facilitate and improve current practices, including via regular meetings of local Schengen consulates with the Turkish side.
- Planning for the next EU-Türkiye High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Security to be scheduled in 2025, taking into account the overall state of EU-Türkiye relations and holding of other dialogues.

Lebanon: key steps

- Recent political developments in Lebanon (election of President, formation of government receiving broad parliamentary support) allow for the relaunching of the EU-Lebanon partnership on hold since 2021, with the intention of holding an EU-Lebanon Association Council in 2025. This sets the path for a number of thematic dialogues to be held, including the areas of justice, security and migration.
- In August 2024, EUR 500 million was adopted for 2024 and 2025, to provide essential assistance to Lebanon's governance reform, economic stability and access to basic services for vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugees. The package also includes EUR 70 million for the Lebanese Armed Forces and internal security forces to support Lebanon in border management, fight against organised crime and migrant smuggling.
- In view of the current situation in the region, the Commission allocated additional EUR 45 million 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. EUR 20 million NDICI funding was contracted by December 2024 to provide cash assistance for internally displaced persons, including vulnerable Lebanese and refugees from Syria, and primary healthcare services targeting hard-to-reach populations.
- Frontex has a mandate to negotiate a working arrangement with the relevant authorities of Lebanon and stands ready to engage as soon as Lebanon confirms its interest and a point of contact. Frontex is implementing the regional EU4BorderSecurity project (EUR 6.5 million), ongoing until April.
- The Commission is in close contact with Cyprus and Greece to ensure good preparedness and necessary contingency planning in case of increase of irregular arrivals. The Commission closely monitors the dynamic situation in border areas, working in coordination with the EU Agencies present on the ground. Regular and *ad hoc* meetings are held as needed to promptly identify and address any emerging issues.

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NEXT STEPS

- Contracting in Q1 2025 of the Integrated Border Management programme (EUR 7 million), to align border management in Lebanon with EU and international standards, including a human rights-based approach.
- Continuous monitoring of developments in Lebanon and wider region to address potential emerging needs.
- Relaunching of EU-Lebanon partnership, including technical dialogues.

Western Balkans

Detections on the Western Balkan route fell significantly in 2024 by 78% (to 21 637 irregular border crossings) compared to 2023. In January-February this year, a further 40% decrease year-on-year was registered (*Frontex*).

Regional actions: key steps

- Strengthened presence of EU Agencies:
 - Frontex: Status Agreements in force with Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, and deployments in all countries. Status Agreement negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina finalised; signature is pending.
 - EUAA: bilateral Roadmaps being renewed with Western Balkan partners.
 - Europol: operational cooperation continuously strengthened.
 - Montenegro signed a working arrangement with the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) in October 2024.
 - North Macedonia joined the European Migration Network as Observer (EMN) in October 2024.
- 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 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. A EUR 36 million regional project on anti-smuggling focuses on increasing border management capacities and strengthening law enforcement and judicial cooperation against criminal smuggling networks, including a new operations room in Montenegro.
- Under Home Affairs Funds, there are two projects dealing with migrant smuggling and borders (EUR 3.6 million).
- Member States report positive cooperation on readmission. Frontex is helping strengthen implementation of readmission agreements, and the implementation of bilateral readmission agreements is discussed with 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), 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 took decisions on visa alignment in December 2024 (Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Mongolia). However, Montenegro in fact added to its visa-free

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lists and is expected to take corrective measures. Albania is due to align further with at least two countries in 2025, according to its commitment under the Reform Agenda.

NEXT STEPS

- Expansion of the JHA Agencies' presence in the region. Frontex deployments following signature of the Status Agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Additional deployments with entry into force of the agreement with Serbia in April (signed in June 2024).
- Continued 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 the Western Balkan partners: as part of the 2024 migration package, a regional EUR 13 million project covers both voluntary (IOM) and non-voluntary returns, with a focus on strengthening institutional systems and capacities to lead effective and rights-based return management operations. The IOM component (EUR 8 million) was signed in December 2024.