



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Ursula von der Leyen
The President

Brussels, 13 December 2023
Ares (2023)

Dear colleagues,

Our work on migration is guided by a shared understanding that migration is a European challenge that requires European solutions. Migration constantly confronts us with a wide variety of challenges, from the sea borders in the Mediterranean – be it to the East, South or West – to the Western Balkans and the land borders of Lithuania, Latvia, Poland with Belarus, all the way to the northernmost border of Finland with Russia. Throughout this year we have shown that concrete action can bring change on the ground.

However, we continue to see, time and time again, that the need to work together concerns all Member States. Most recently, Finland has been impacted by illegal border crossings orchestrated by Russia. We are witnessing a new order of hybrid attack after Finland joined NATO, that requires a clear and determined response. Finland has acted decisively. As I have reassured Prime Minister Orpo, Finland can rely on the EU's support. Frontex has already expanded its Joint Operation: 50 European border guards, along with border surveillance equipment and patrol vessels, are now deployed at our EU external border in Finland. Against the backdrop of hybrid attack of Russia, we will strengthen that support even further to bolster Finland's border security, reinforcing its border control capabilities, equipment, infrastructure and means of surveillance – including through the EU budget. We will need to complement this by identifying and addressing transit hubs and countries of origin to support to raise awareness and help to prevent a further deterioration of the situation and to ensure returns can be carried out smoothly.

Since January, we have been steadfast in our determination, taking forward work based on two tracks: legislative and operational. I have taken the opportunity to set out the operational steps under way before every European Council. In my last letter of October, I explained that all the activities we set as priority actions at the start of the year were now either ongoing or completed. Nevertheless, we have had to deepen our work still further, setting up new workstreams and finding new responses to evolving needs.

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This work has come against the backdrop of our common resolve to put in place a sustainable and comprehensive migration and asylum system. The Pact on Migration and Asylum will provide the essential keystone to allow us to move forward together and build a migration management system that is effective and fair. Now is the moment to show that resolve in earnest. Agreement on the key planks of the Pact by the end of this year will allow essential proposals to be in law before the European Parliament elections. I am grateful to all the Presidencies and the European Parliament that have steered these important negotiations, and to all those who are still searching for effective solutions. It is this work that will allow us to show our understanding for the different pressures faced by each Member State and our determination to ensure the respect for the rights of every individual.

Working together with unity of purpose is indispensable. That means being attuned to changing circumstances and new needs faced in different Member States. This year has seen targeted action in many areas of our Union: in the Central Mediterranean, on the Greek Islands, in Cyprus, on the Canary Islands and in the Western Balkans. In annex to this letter, you will find an update on the implementation of the dedicated Action Plans. We have also seen important initiatives driven by Member States, such as the operational arrangement between Italy and Albania. This serves as an example of out-of-the-box thinking, based on fair sharing of responsibilities with third countries in line with obligations under EU and international law. Moreover, we should work together to maintain the momentum created by the International Conference on Development and Migration in July and take this work forward through the Rome Process, exploring different forms of cooperation with partners countries based on mutual interest.

In fact, addressing migration with partners worldwide is most effective when our relationships are at their most comprehensive. A balanced approach leads to sustained cooperation: a touchstone of the Global Gateway. When we work with our partners on addressing global poverty, including economic development in countries of origin and transit, on making real strides on climate change, on boosting peace and security – in making progress on these key goals of our age, we also make progress on tackling the root causes that lie behind migration. We can best discuss cooperation on migration when this is embedded in a broad, multifaceted, mutually beneficial dialogue of equals.

We must continue to devote our energy and attention to finding new ways to make our collective action count. I would like to highlight four areas of current attention where our work has been able to make a real difference and where we need to continue focusing our efforts, namely strengthening external borders, combatting migrant smuggling, stepping up returns, and building comprehensive partnerships.

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*First, in our operational work we have continued prioritising the **strengthening of the EU's external borders**, reinforcing the presence of agencies at strategic points, taking into account the differences between land and sea borders and ensuring greater resources. Of the EUR 600 million I mentioned in my March letter, EUR 473 million have now been allocated to enhance electronic surveillance equipment at the land border in Member State, to purchase equipment to be put at the disposal of Frontex, to reinforce border control capabilities and for actions to support the establishment of IT systems. Similar investments are needed for border surveillance equipment for sea borders as pre-frontier aerial surveillance is crucial to prevent irregular arrivals and loss of life at sea. The pilot projects have proven to be effective and are now being extended with both Bulgaria and Romania with continued engagement of the authorities, the Commission and EU agencies and the on all aspects of migration management. The Commission is ready to continue ensuring stable financing for these important initiatives, and operational support by the EU Agencies, in particular, Frontex at the external border between Bulgaria and Türkiye, can be reinforced.*

*Second, we have focused global attention on **combatting migrant smuggling**. This criminal trade, often intertwined with other criminal activities, exploits human suffering, and presents a critical security threat. We should decide who comes to the European Union and under what circumstances, not smugglers.*

Nearly 60 countries took part in the international conference hosted by the Commission on 28 November to form a Global Alliance to counter migrant smuggling. Working with partner countries, international organisations, and online platforms, as well as in tune with Member States and EU agencies, this can give the fight against migrant smuggling a major boost. The Call to Action sets out how the Alliance – which remains open to others to join – will move forward, with three main work strands, namely, preventing people falling prey to the smugglers through strengthened border management, information campaigns and a new focus on digital smuggling; responding firmly to smuggling with coordinated law enforcement work, ensuring that we seize the criminals' profits, and shut down their supply chains; addressing the root causes of irregular migration and finally providing more legal alternatives to disincentivise irregular departures. The Conference on mutual partnerships to be organised next year by Denmark will be an opportunity to take stock of the progress made.

This global commitment has been backed up by a range of proposals to serve these three workstrands. We have proposed an upgrade of EU legislation to prevent and respond to migrant smuggling, defining the crime of migrant smuggling, and toughening the penalties. We have proposed improved cooperation between Member States and EU agencies, with a single European Centre against Migrant Smuggling in Europol to coordinate activities and share information. I encourage the co-legislators to take forward the work on these important legislative initiatives swiftly, allowing us to have a legal framework fit for purpose. We will strengthen our response with operational task forces, including with partner countries, deploying Europol to reinforce Member States' capacity on the ground. A number of Europol Operational Taskforces have been established and deployed with several Member States and partner countries, along key migration routes. Work is ongoing to boost the use of Operational Task Forces in

particular along the Central Mediterranean route, where the close cooperation between Italy and partner countries, such as Tunisia, will play a key role.

Third, part of our work on response to smuggling, and to irregular arrival of migrants overall, must be more **effective return**. As part of a functioning asylum and migration system, those who have no right to come to Europe must know they will not be allowed to stay. However, the number of return decisions that are effectively implemented remains too low across the EU. As announced in my October letter, the Return Coordinator is working closely with the Member States in the High-Level Network for Returns on a roadmap to target efforts for improved results. The first meetings with the Network have shown a real determination to see how better cooperation can make a difference.

The **roadmap** is now in place, and it is a living document. It will give us the right frame for taking this work forward. It sets out targeted joint identification actions supported by Frontex in relation to seven priority destinations (Iraq, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Tunisia, Nigeria, Senegal and The Gambia); joint return operations with Frontex for voluntary returns to these seven countries; helping to ensure that return decisions at the same time as negative asylum decisions; strengthening mutual recognition of return decisions; and prioritising return of those who may pose a security threat – with Frontex providing priority access to charter flights to such cases. Member States will focus on one or more of these activities and I am encouraged that the first responses show that we have found an effective way to bring real operational solutions to a long-standing problem.

A **fourth** key area is to take forward the work of building **comprehensive partnerships**. We hope to soon reach an agreement with Egypt on a way forward for a strategic and comprehensive approach, based on common interests, of which migration is one. Work on the implementation of the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding continues. We have seen a stabilisation in irregular departures from Tunisia (Sfax), following migration management action by the Tunisian authorities, a trend which we hope can be consolidated.

This is an area where constant work is needed. We have delivered critical equipment to partners in North Africa to intensify anti-smuggling, border management and search and rescue operations, while also stepping up returns directly from third countries to the countries of origin. EU Agencies have continued expanding their footprint in North Africa, building up relationships in Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco. Negotiations on the working arrangements between Frontex and the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya are on-going, and in January 2023 border management programmes were initiated to strengthen the training academy for border management with capacity building, trainings, revision of standard operating procedures and training curricula. After the peak of irregular arrivals in Lampedusa, Vice-President Schinas' followed up with visits to Mauritania, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia and Guinea, as well as discussions on how visa policy can help discourage irregular movements. Relevant EU Delegations across the world have been mobilised to step up their dialogue and cooperation on migration with partner countries.

*The delivery on the **Western Balkans** Action Plan has been effective, thanks to enhanced and sustained engagement at technical and political level with Western Balkan partners and with Member States. In fact, between January and November 2023 there was a 27% decrease in arrivals compared to 2022. Significant efforts have been made by Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania to reinstate visa regimes towards third country nationals who had been moving irregularly to the EU in 2022. As regards anti-smuggling, the implementation of the Regional Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership (ASOP) launched in November 2022 is underway with the support of a regional project for EUR 36 million. Furthermore, cooperation with Frontex is excellent and today we count almost 500 European border guards in the Western Balkans region.*

*A second High Level Dialogue on migration and security with **Türkiye** took place on 23 November. This falls squarely into the overall approach on Türkiye set out by the Commission in its report in the run-up to the European Council. We need to strengthen cooperation with Türkiye, for the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement and in day-to-day cooperation. Here there has been encouraging progress on the ground in recent weeks. A broader approach to work together to prevent irregular departures and combat migrant smuggling networks can go hand in hand with exploring possibilities to facilitate to the processing of visa applications, in particular for categories of Turkish citizens who want to travel to the EU for business or study. At the same time, Türkiye is expected to further harmonise its visa policy with that of the EU, and in particular to align its visa requirements with EU legislation and to fully phase-out the issuing of visas at borders and electronic visas.*

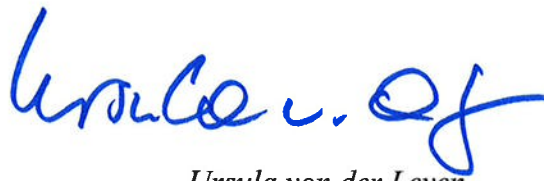
Throughout the year, we have continued to multiply and deepen our migration partnerships, with intensive contacts with Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, Iraq, and the Gambia, among others, achieving in each case a better understanding of the EU's priorities notably on readmission, but also of each partner's own interests in working with the EU.

As part of our comprehensive partnerships, a key workstream is to develop legal alternatives in a Team Europe approach under the banner of Talent Partnerships. In my last letter I underlined that greater support to third countries for example through the Talent Partnerships should come alongside stronger cooperation on returns and readmission. Commissioner Johansson hosted a High-level meeting on 1 December, inviting Member States to discuss the strategic use of Talent Partnerships. The meeting showed the growing consensus that well managed legal migration including through Talent Partnerships can help reduce irregular flows and strengthen partner countries' commitment to cooperate on return and readmission, while contributing to meeting labour market needs in the EU. I very much welcome that more Member States agreed to join these efforts. By increasing our collective weight, we can work on legal migration opportunities alongside cooperation on readmission, demonstrating that partnerships can bring real mutual benefits.

The mid-term review of EU funds offers the opportunity to match our ambition both on the external and the internal dimensions of migration but: adequate funding resources are essential for the protection of the external border, the implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum and to cement the comprehensive partnerships we seek with migration partners.

This letter and its annex illustrate that, in the few weeks since the last European Council, we have been able to take key workstreams forward. To continue on this path we need determination, willingness to work together, and the tools and resources required to ensure that our efforts match the scale of the challenge. Meeting these goals will be a powerful demonstration to our citizens that we are effectively addressing this key test for us all. It is only through solidarity and unity that we can achieve this.

Yours sincerely,



Ursula von der Leyen

EUCO - December 2023 – Follow -up to the October EUCO Letter

EUCO Letter October 2023	Ongoing / Underway	Next Steps and Timeline
PREVENTION		
<p>Strengthening external borders and prevention of irregular Migration</p>	<p>Step-up tailor-made approach for strategic and mutually beneficial partnerships with key partners:</p> <p>Implementation of MoU with Tunisia In line with the conclusions of the June European Council, the MoU was signed on 16 July. It focuses on macro-economic stability, economy and trade, green energy, people-to-people contacts, and migration and mobility. The MoU is under implementation.</p> <p>Pillar 5 of the MoU on migration and mobility foresees joint work towards preventing loss of life at sea, including fighting smuggling and human trafficking, strengthening border management and preventing irregular departures; improving protection of migrants; fostering legal pathways, including facilitating legal mobility between Tunisia and EU MS; enhancing cooperation to support returns of irregular migrants from Tunisia to countries of origin and returns and readmission from the EU; and to harness the benefits of migration and promote sustainable development in Tunisia.</p> <p>The Commission is working with the Tunisian authorities to swiftly implement the MoU in line with established rules and procedures. The EU is working on an MoU implementation matrix with Tunisia covering all five pillars which includes a monitoring table containing a series of short- and medium-term measures along 8 axes to jointly address the challenges of migration.</p> <p>The Commission has delivered the operational assistance package on migration worth EUR 67 million announced on 22 September. This assistance includes the signature of two border management contracts for EUR 35 million and prioritises cooperation to crack down on the smuggling networks, intensifies EU assistance for capacity building of the Tunisian law enforcement authorities, increases protection for migrants and refugees in Tunisia, and support for voluntary return and reintegration of migrants to their countries of origin. Equipment is being delivered progressively by the end of the year to increase search and rescue capabilities and anti-smuggling operations. As of 24 November, the Tunisian Coast Guard had executed 3 022 operations, resulting in 73 185 interceptions (compared to 31 859 interceptions recorded in 2022). A technical mission took place on 27 and 28 November.</p>	<p>Tunisia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Technical level meetings to continue in December/January on the migration strand of the MoU, on anti-smuggling and border management programmes with TN authorities.</i> ➤ <i>At the technical mission to Tunis on 27 and 28 November focusing on border management, the European Commission agreed with the Tunisian Coast Guard to prioritise delivery of the following equipment:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Seven 11m boats under ongoing contracts.</i> ○ <i>Seven 17m patrol vessels refurbished under ongoing contracts.</i> ○ <i>Three 27m Search and Rescue vessels under 2023 funding.</i> ○ <i>Provision of a radar system to cover the whole Tunisian Coast under 2023 funding.</i> ○ <i>Build an electronic maintenance centre for the fleet under 2023 funding.</i> ○ <i>A further two Search and Rescue boats of 27m have been agreed for the Navy plus IT and communication supply to refurbish the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC).</i> ➤ <i>Next steps are the approval of the technical specifications and launch of the procurement procedures by the implementing partners.</i> ➤ <i>The signature of additional contracts with implementing partners on legal migration (3 contracts, including estimated allocation Tunisia of EUR 7.5 million) and socio-economic integration programmes (contract of EUR</i>

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	<p>Cooperation with Egypt</p> <p>Enhanced work on migration to focus on: dismantling criminal networks engaged in smuggling and trafficking in human beings, including through improved controls at borders (with a focus on Egypt's land border with Libya); supporting protection of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees, including access to basic services and needs; fostering cooperation on legal pathways, including upskilling and reskilling of the Egyptian labour force and facilitating legal mobility between Egypt and EU Member States; enhancing cooperation on returns of irregular migrants from Egypt to countries of origin, and readmission and reintegration from the EU; and harnessing the benefits of migration and promote sustainable development in Egypt. A roundtable on the Talent Partnership was successfully conducted on 7 June in Cairo.</p> <p>Additional funding for Egypt of EUR 115 million under the 2023 North Africa migration programme to support border management, strengthen anti-smuggling and anti-trafficking operations, to step-up assisted voluntary return and reintegration, and protection in support of Sudanese refugees, complementing a package for protection already adopted in 2022.</p> <p>Implementation underway of the Egypt Protection Actions for a total of EUR 28 million. EUR 20 million is being provided to support reception of refugees from Sudan (NDICI, ECHO, FPI).</p> <p>Support continues for assisted voluntary returns and reintegration from Egypt to countries of origin through a contract signed in September 2023 (EUR 21 million of which EUR 8 million for Egypt).</p> <p><u>Foster cooperation on migration management with Mauritania and Senegal</u></p> <p>Mauritania</p> <p>Mauritania has expressed the wish to establish a Mauritania-EU Framework of cooperation on migration, encompassing all migration areas. EU has proposed to launch a regular dialogue on migration.</p> <p><i>EU and Mauritania discussed format and contents of possible framework/dialogue on migration at the first SOM meeting on 11 December in Brussels.</i></p>	<p><i>4 million signed, another of EUR 6 million to be signed) will be finalised before the end of the year; one additional anti-smuggling contract of indicatively EUR 18 million and border management contract of indicatively EUR 30 million early next year.</i></p> <p>Egypt</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Adoption of a joint EU-Egypt statement on a strategic and comprehensive partnership in January 2024 to be followed by regular in-depth discussions in to agree on framework and concrete deliverables by spring 2024.</i> ➤ <i>4th migration dialogue and 2nd SOM on Security and Law Enforcement in 2024 date tbc (to include Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership, the list of equipment requested by MOI; the anti-smuggling NDICI-funded action and involvement of CEPOL, Europol and Frontex).</i> ➤ <i>Deliver equipment and capacity building activities to Egyptian Mol via training potentially targeting, inter alia, the detection of forged ID, passports and forged Libyan work permits (especially at the Egypt-Libya border against irregular migration).</i> ➤ <i>An EU Migration Liaison Officer (EMLO) will be deployed to the EU Delegation in Cairo as of 1 February 2024.</i> ➤ <i>Contracts on legal migration and protection expected to be signed by end of 2023. (In total 4 contracts on legal migration for the region of a total of EUR 18 million of which around EUR 5 million will benefit Egypt).</i>

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	<p>Senegal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Budget Support programme (EUR 70 million) supports inter alia adoption of Senegal's National Migration Strategy and related Action Plan, and actions to prevent irregular migration, reception and orientation of migrants, and expected adoption of an action plan on readmission. • In the framework of the Technical Dialogue on Cooperation on Returns and Readmissions between the EU and the Government, two high-level meetings have been held so far in Dakar on 6 December 2022 and 3 May 2023. A consular workshop, took place on 6 July in Brussels between the Senegalese authorities, Commission, Frontex, UN Agencies and EU MS. Following the workshop, operational recommendations have been developed and are under review by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Senegal. 	<p>Senegal: Decision before end 2023 on disbursement of variable tranches under Senegal's Budget Support.</p>
	<p><u>Reinforce border management and search and rescue</u></p> <p>Tunisia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As part of the MoU implementation, the Commission has already delivered substantial equipment to the Garde Nationale Maritime under ongoing projects (engines and spare parts for refitting of search and rescue vessels, 2 heartbeat detector scanners, life vests, cameras, fuel and 9 vehicles). • Tunisia familiarisation visit to Frontex took place on 13-14 September. A cooperation proposal has been sent by Frontex to Tunisia. <p>Egypt</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total of EUR 110 million have been allocated to border management in 2022 and 2023, to enhance capacity of Egyptian Coast Guard and Border Guards to perform border surveillance and search and rescue operations, covering both Egypt's land (western border with Libya) and sea borders (Mediterranean coast and SAR zone). • Call for tender for Search and Rescue boats was completed in June for accelerated delivery of 3 boats. The first boat will be manufactured in December for swift delivery after testing by the Egyptian authorities (under Phase I of the border management project adopted in 2022). 	<p>Tunisia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ In 2023, the Commission is working to contract projects by year end for EUR 35 million and early Q1 2024 for around EUR 30 million to provide Tunisian authorities with Search and Rescue vessels and equipment. ➤ Frontex will follow up the Tunisian visit with an offer of initiatives of mutual interest by the end of 2023. <p>Egypt</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ EUR 5 million top-up of border management project to be contracted in December 2023 with remaining EUR 82 million to be contracted within Q1 2024. ➤ Frontex to explore Egyptian interest for a Working Arrangement, following Egypt's familiarisation visit to Frontex headquarters on 2-4 October 2023. Frontex and the Egyptian authorities are in contact and working on making concrete proposals in December 2023.

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	<p>Libya</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Five Search and Rescue vessels have been handed over to the Libyan Coast Guard (one on 6 February, two on 22 June and two on in the first half of August) in the framework of the 'Support to Integrated Border and Migration Management in Libya' (SIBMMIL) programme. Two additional programmes of border management for an additional EUR 10 million were initiated in January 2023. The first one (EUR 5 million) is supporting the strengthening of the training academy for border management with capacity building, trainings, revision of standard operating procedures and training curricula. The other one (EUR 5 million) aims at reinforcing the Libyan Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre. <p>Mauritania</p> <p>Two actions supporting border management in Mauritania have been adopted,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Strengthening land and sea border management" (EUR 6.4 million) adopted in October 2023. Control of territory, stability of border areas and migration management in Mauritania (EUR 10.5 EUR) adopted in 2022. <i>EU-Mauritania Senior Officials Dialogue on Migration took place on 11 December 2023 in Brussels.</i> 	<p>Libya</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Follow up on the principals meeting of the trilateral EU-AU-UN Task Force on the Situation of Migrants and Refugees in Libya and encourage the AU to carry out its coordinating role. The Task Force can be an important tool to give more weight to advocacy through joint outreach to the Libyan authorities to prevent abuses of migrants and perilous journeys to Europe.</i> <p>Mauritania</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Preparation of the financing agreement with Mauritania for the implementation of the border management project. The decision on the action was adopted in October 2023.</i>
	<p>Türkiye</p> <p>High Level Dialogue on Migration and Security, 23 November 2023: Key outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> TR recalled its willingness to further strengthen all aspects of migration management, asked for EU support to (a) develop a system of mobile units to prevent irregular migration; and (b) construct permanent housing in Northern Syria. TR will look further into modus operandi of smugglers. Commission underlined the need for TR to ensure full implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement (continue prevention efforts on all routes towards the EU and resume returns from the Greek islands). Called for the organisation of a EU-TR Joint Readmission Committee. On Schengen visas, readiness to discuss with Member States facilitation for certain categories of travellers. 	<p>Türkiye</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>SOM meeting to be organised in early 2024, to be followed by a High-Level dialogue meeting on migration and security in Ankara.</i>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On security, discussions focused on counterterrorism, financing of terrorism, foreign terrorist fighters, fight against organised crime and drug trafficking. <p><u>Frontex Status Agreements under implementation:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> North Macedonia: Signed on 24 October 2022 and entered into force on 1 April 2023. Joint Operation North Macedonia Land 2023 launched on 19 April 2023. Montenegro: Signed on 16 May 2023 with provisional entry into force on 1 July 2023. European Parliament consented to conclusion on 22 November. Albania: Signed on 15 September 2023. The joint operations (JOs) currently underway in Albania are on the basis of the 'old' Status Agreement, as the new one has yet to enter into force. Status Agreement with Moldova: Signed on 17 March 2022 and entered into force on 1 November 2022. Joint Operation in Moldova 2022 was launched on March 19, two days after the EU-Moldova Status Agreement entered provisionally into force. <p><u>Frontex Status Agreements to conclude:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serbia: latest round of negotiations took place on 7 November. Agreement was reached on all but one provision. (Implementation under existing agreement continues until new one concluded). BiH: Negotiations not started; awaiting confirmation of the negotiating team by BiH's Council of Ministers pending. <p><i>Frontex deployments in the Western Balkans region, we are at currently 488. Deployment figures per partner are 162 to Albania, 12 Kosovo, 30 to Montenegro, 131 to North Macedonia, 153 to Serbia.</i></p>	<p>➤ <i>The conclusion of negotiations with Serbia is expected for Q1 2024.</i></p> <p>➤ <i>BiH has not appointed the negotiating team; negotiations have yet to commence.</i></p>

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RESPONSE		
<p><i>Strengthen joint work on responding to irregular movements by fighting the smuggling and increasing returns.</i></p>	<p><u>Anti-Smuggling</u></p> <p>The international conference on a Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling, on 28 November 2023 called upon governments to work on three strands:</p> <p>Strengthening efforts on prevention by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaffirming commitment to the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime. • Developing and reinforcing national legal frameworks and capacities to counter migrant smuggling. • Enhancing border management actions. • Developing information campaigns on the risks of irregular migration and migrant smuggling, as well as the availability of legal migration opportunities. • Dedicating adequate resources to prevent and fight migrant smuggling. <p>Enhancing response by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the collection and sharing of situational awareness data. • Promoting joint law enforcement investigations and cooperation between judicial authorities. • Cooperating on financial investigations, asset confiscation and recovery. • Limiting the supply of, seizing, and destroying smuggling-relevant equipment. • Ensuring the protection of migrants' rights. <p>Addressing alternatives to irregular migration by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting legal pathways as alternatives to irregular migration. • Addressing the root causes of irregular migration. • Working on the effective return and reintegration of smuggled migrants. <p>Two legislative proposals were adopted on 29 November 2023 to strengthen the EU's legal framework.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulation to strengthen prevention, detection and investigation and reinforce 	<p><u>Anti-Smuggling</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>The first thematic Expert Group meeting on digital smuggling will take place in early 2024. The Expert Group will engage with online service providers and private companies with a view to developing public-private partnerships. Further thematic meetings will be organised on priority topics falling under the main strands.</i> ➤ <i>Regular stocktaking at political level will include a Migration Conference on mutual partnerships in Copenhagen in spring 2024.</i> ➤ <i>Start interinstitutional negotiations – Q4 2023 - Q1 2024.</i>

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	<p>Europol.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directive setting definitions of offences and minimum penalties. <p><u>Anti-Smuggling Operation Partnerships (ASOPs)</u></p> <p>Niger</p> <p>On hold since the coup d'état.</p> <p>Morocco</p> <p>ASOP launched in July 2022. Several strands of cooperation are progressing, such as the possibility of deploying a liaison magistrate to Morocco to facilitate judicial cooperation on countering migrant smuggling.</p> <p>Tunisia</p> <p>Launch of the ASOP in April 2023. Several strands of cooperation are progressing, in particular, negotiations on a working arrangement with Europol, cooperation with CEPOL building on the working arrangement in place since 2022 and within the framework of Euromed Police (implemented by CEPOL with Europol). Two info campaigns launched in May and June 2023. Deployment of a European Migration Liaison Officer (EMLO) who functions as the EU's ASOP focal point in September 2023.</p> <p>Western Balkans</p> <p>ASOP launched in November 2022. Anti-Smuggling regional programme in the Western Balkans, signed in June 2023; EUR 36 million programme with Member States consortium on increasing capacity to fight migrant smuggling and human trafficking with a focus on investigations and prosecutions.</p>	<p>Morocco</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ During the Comité Mixte (11 December) a working group was set up that will start preparations for a working arrangement in Q1 2024. Negotiations with Europol should start in 2024. <p>Tunisia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A new EU funded programme to enhance operational cooperation with Tunisia on fighting smuggling and trafficking, with support of Member States, will be signed before the end of 2023 and launched in the Q1 2024. ➤ Contract on "Support to Cross-Border Cooperation and Integrated Border Management in North Africa" (including finalizing and equipping a Command-and-control centre in Tunisia) to be signed still in 2023. ➤ Cooperation underway in view of opening negotiations for an international agreement on cooperation with Eurojust. In November 2023, a draft agreement was shared with Tunisia. Date of first negotiation round to be confirmed. <p>Western Balkans: EU Member States and Western Balkans will hold a joint conference in Rome on 12 December for the signature of the MoU establishing a rapid response mechanism within EMPACT Task Force Western Balkans.</p>

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	<p><u>Anti-Smuggling/border management regional programme for North Africa</u></p> <p><u>Tunisia</u> window to be contracted before end of year and <u>Egypt</u> window under discussion.</p> <p><i>Other actions that will contribute to the fight against migrant smuggling and/or the trafficking in human beings have been recently adopted and will soon start to be implemented:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under Internal Security Fund-Police (ISF-P) on countering migrant smuggling three projects (total value EUR 4.8 million) have been funded covering Mauritania, Senegal, and The Gambia. For Mauritania, The Gambia and Senegal a project (total value of EUR 1.75 million) has recently been approved to enhance intelligence sharing in the area of counter-smuggling. • For Senegal, the Common Operational Partnership project should be continued. In The Gambia a Common Operational Partnership project implemented by Spain in partnership with Germany is considered as a case of best practice. Common Operational Partnership in Cote d'Ivoire and Mauritania. • The project for selected Silk Route countries (PROTECT) EUR 9 million with a EUR 4 million component to be implemented by UNODC, aims at increasing the effectiveness of responses to human trafficking and smuggling. • The project on Trafficking in Human Beings and Smuggling of Migrants in South Asia (EUR 9 million) focuses on people in and departing from Bangladesh, India, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka. • Project "Better Migration Management" (BAMM) – Phase III (EUR 40 million) supports fight against migrant smuggling and human trafficking in East Africa and the Horn of Africa. • Project on Migration Governance in Nigeria (EUR 28.4 million) has a component on smuggling and trafficking to be implemented by UNODC of EUR 8million. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Egypt-component of the regional 2023 anti-smuggling programme under discussion, for finalisation during the first half of 2024. ➤ The Gambia: discussions are ongoing to address a second phase of the Common Operational Partnership.
	<p><u>Returns Roadmap</u></p> <p>The Commission has proposed a Roadmap with 5 Key actions. Discussions took place at the High-Level Network for Returns on 23 November and the Frontex High-Level Round Table on Returns on 28 November. The Return Coordinator finalised the Roadmap and discussed with the network on 6-7 December.</p> <p>Actions proposed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint identification actions leading to issuing of travel documents: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Joint meeting between return/migration and SIS experts to ensure the full use of the opportunities created by the new return alert for enforcement of returns to priority third countries in Q4 2023.</i> ➤ <i>Workshop on the joint negative asylum decision together with return decision to be held Q1 2024.</i> ➤ <i>Workshop on incentives to voluntary returns organised by Cyprus in Q1 2024.</i>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assisted voluntary return, reintegration and Joint return operations with Frontex. • Issuing of return decisions at the same time with a negative asylum decision. • Mutual recognition of return decisions and follow-up enforcement action. • Prioritising returns of irregularly staying third country nationals posing a security threat. <p>Up to 26 November 2023, Frontex had supported Member States in returning a total number of 35 036 third country nationals out of which 18 657 were assisted voluntary returns, 3 369 third country nationals were returned with Frontex assistance, including one Frontex led return operation to Nigeria with 51 returnees from two Member States.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>First meeting of Frontex High-Level Round Table dedicated to the operational planning priority third countries (January / February 2024).</i> ➤ <i>Finalisation of a security checklist to prioritise the return of irregularly staying third-country nationals posing a security threat (Q1 2024).</i> ➤ <i>The monitoring of these actions will be included in the progress report delivered by the EU Return Coordinator to the High-Level Network for Returns.</i>
	<p><u>Readmission</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readmission Agreements (RA): 18 Readmission agreements with Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cape Verde, Georgia, Hong Kong, Macao, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Pakistan, Russia, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Ukraine. And 6 legally non-binding readmission arrangements with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire. Negotiating mandates exist to negotiate with Nigeria, Tunisia, Morocco, China, Algeria and Jordan. Negotiations with Nigeria are progressing; they are on hold with Tunisia, Morocco, and China. There is no willingness to engage by Algeria and Jordan. • Article 25a of the Visa Code: The fifth report on Readmission cooperation is under preparation. Maintaining unaltered the quantitative and qualitative selection criteria, 34 third countries will be included in the upcoming assessment. • Engagement with countries in context of Article 25a continues. Senior officials level meetings have taken place with Senegal (5 December) and Bangladesh (1 December). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Conclude negotiations on Readmission Agreement with Nigeria: 13 rounds of negotiation have taken place.</i> ➤ <i>Joint Working Groups planned with The Gambia (13 December), Guinea (12 December) and Ethiopia (in January, tbc).</i>
	<p><u>Visa Policy Alignment</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steps to align visa policies in Western Balkan partners with those of the EU have contributed to reducing irregular border crossings on the Western Balkans route in 2023 (26% decrease compared to 2022 as of mid-November). Further alignment is needed notably by Western Balkan partners (Russian and Chinese citizens remain visa-free in some Western Balkan partners; Turkish nationals remain visa-free in all Western Balkans partners). Dialogue for further visa policy alignment with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania continues. In November Serbia adopted a visa harmonisation plan, which however falls short of meeting EU's expectations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Continue outreach to the Western Balkan partners to request further visa policy alignment.</i>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On 18 October, the Commission adopted a proposal to review the visa suspension mechanism, adding the lack of visa policy alignment as a possible ground to suspend visa-free regimes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Co-legislators working on defining their mandates; aim for start of negotiations under the current mandate.</i>
	<p><u>Implementation of 10-point Lampedusa plan</u></p> <p>The Commission coordinated the implementation of the 10 Point Action Plan for Lampedusa along with Frontex, EUAA and Europol by further stepping up operational and financial support to Italy, addressing the Italian needs as provided by IT (meeting with agencies and IT on 27 October 2023) and is monitoring the implementation of the 10 Point Action Plan, including at political level.</p> <p>Frontex and the EUAA are already providing additional human and material resources to Italy to enhance identification and registration processes and border surveillance. This includes additional personnel, including cultural mediators, return and reintegration counsellors, as well as maritime and terrestrial assets.</p> <p>In the context of three calls for specific actions for Member States under migratory pressure under the AMIF and BMVI, Italy received EUR 15 M for unaccompanied minors and around EUR 14 M for two projects on the reception at the external border.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Frontex has proposed to double the number of flight hours of its aircraft that monitor the Central Mediterranean route and offered additional satellite images of the main departure areas of migrants from Tunisia.</i>

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OUTREACH AND BROADER COOPERATION		
<p><i>Use collective leverage better, as part of broader understanding with partner countries</i></p>	<p><u>Outreach</u></p> <p>Continuous and regular contacts on cooperation on migration management notably with Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea, the Gambia and Ivory Coast .</p> <p><u>Talent Partnerships</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutually beneficial Talent Partnerships launched with Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Pakistan and Bangladesh to address EU labour shortages as part of broader migration partnerships. Programmes and roadmaps for their implementation under preparation. • In the context of the Conference on legal migration organised by the Spanish Presidency on 16/17 November, representatives from all Talent Partnership countries were present and expressed strong commitment to this initiative. • High-Level VTC Meeting on Talent Partnerships on 1 December 2023, was chaired by Commission Johansson. It explored how to significantly step-up Talent Partnerships in a strategic manner, building on the positive dynamics they create to better use our collective leverage vis-à-vis third countries on overall migration management, in particular strengthening cooperation on return and readmission. Three more Member States announced they were joining Talent Partnerships, bring the total to 9 and others expressed increased interest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Following VP Schinas mission to countries identified under the Lampedusa Action Plan (Guinea, Ivory Coast, Senegal, then expanded to Mauritania and The Gambia) follow-up actions to be determined to address the priority needs and cooperation areas identified (Q1 2024).</i> ➤ <i>Joint outreach by Commission and Member States in a Team Europe spirit to be further explored (e.g. further joint mission by VP Schinas and ES Minister of Interior Grande-Marlaska to Mauritania).</i> ➤ <i>Talent Partnership projects with Pakistan and Bangladesh have been adopted in November 2023. The contracting of actions will take place in the course of 2024.</i> ➤ <i>For North African partners (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt), contracts under the new phase of THAMM to support Talent Partnerships are being finalized (EUR 18 million) to be contracted by the end of the year.</i> ➤ <i>Member States are submitting proposals under the Migration Partnership Facility (MPF) for supporting mobility projects under the Talent Partnerships. New mobility schemes have been approved or are under evaluation for Tunisia and France, for Morocco, Spain and Sweden, for Egypt and Italy and for Pakistan, Italy and Finland. These mobility schemes will contribute to a range of actions financed and coordinated under the Talent Partnerships.</i>

ACTION PLANS		
WESTERN BALKANS ACTION PLAN DECEMBER 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The total amount of migration-related support for the region (so far) under the Instrument for pre-accession (IPA III) is EUR 231.9 million, to cater for border management, reception capacity, fight against migrant smuggling, and capacity building in all areas of migration management. • Border management: new Frontex Status Agreements signed with North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania, close to signature with Serbia, not started with Bosnia and Herzegovina. • Asylum and reception: the EU Asylum Agency supports all Western Balkan partners with joint Roadmaps. • Return and readmission: the capacities of Western Balkan partners are being stepped up with the help of Frontex, building on extensive work already done under IPA funded projects. Frontex is providing assistance to strengthen the return system and to work with countries of origin. • Anti-smuggling: A Regional Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership (ASOP) launched in November 2022. A technical meeting in March 2023 with EU Member States' immigration Liaison Officers to further implement this Partnership. Next to the ongoing projects in the region under ASOP, a new IPA measure (EUR 36 million) was signed on 1 June 2023 to further implement the Partnership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Follow-up missions at senior management level will be held in the region in 2024, jointly with EU Agencies and EU Member States.</i> ➤ <i>Operationalisation of the ASOP with the Western Balkans region.</i> ➤ <i>Visa alignment: Further visa policy alignment is needed from Serbia, Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Continue close monitoring of flows especially of the nationalities which are not allowed into Schengen Area without visa.</i>
CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN ACTION PLAN DECEMBER 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaunch of the Search and Rescue Contact Group; three meetings held in 2023, (in January, June and October) to enhance cooperation and information exchange on SAR. • Revision of the Relocation Workflow and implementation of the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism: over 3 500 asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection have been relocated from the 5 Mediterranean Member States of first entry (CY, EL, IT, MT and ES). • Despite the challenging socio-political situation in Niger, exacerbated by post-coup sanctions, Emergency Transit Mechanism (ETM) activities continued albeit at reduced capacity. The government agreed to authorise UNHCR resettlement flights to Western countries and 32 departures for resettlement to third countries have taken place. Operational and security constraints make it currently difficult for some Member States to proceed with the resettlement procedures from the ETM Niger. IOM Niger obtained the first authorizations to organize the voluntary return of 940 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Continued political engagement with key countries of origin and transit, notably Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.</i> ➤ <i>EU Agencies expanding their footprint in North Africa. Negotiations on the working arrangements between Frontex and EUBAM Libya are on-going.</i> ➤ <i>Operationalisation of the Team Europe Initiative (TEI) for the Central Mediterranean.</i>

	migrants from Mali, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Nigeria, Senegal, Chad and Gambia between 1 October and 31 October 2023.	
ATLANTIC AND WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN ACTION PLAN APRIL 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Countering migrant smuggling: three projects have been funded covering Mauritania, Senegal, and The Gambia. For Mauritania, under HOME funding. In The Gambia and Senegal, a project has recently been approved to enhance intelligence sharing in the area of counter-smuggling. Common Operational Partnership projects are ongoing in Côte d'Ivoire and Mauritania, For Senegal and Guinea, discussions are ongoing to continue the COPs. • Border management: a new project on management of land and sea borders in Mauritania was adopted in 2023. Frontex is pursuing the discussions with Senegal and Mauritania on the working arrangement. • Readmission: Commission continues engagement to foster readmission cooperation with Senegal, Egypt Gambia, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire. With Nigeria, engagement continues on the finalisation of the draft EU-Nigeria readmission agreement. Return and reintegration from transit countries to countries of origin, the Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration (MPRR) for Sub-Saharan Africa of EUR 180 million was signed in July 2023 and should support returns until 2025. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Operationalisation of the ASOP with Morocco</i> ➤ <i>Operationalisation of the Team Europe Initiative (TEI) for the Atlantic and Western Mediterranean</i>
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN ACTION PLAN OCTOBER 2023	<p>Preventing irregular departures, combatting migrant smuggling, and trafficking in human beings as well as providing legal migration pathways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive engagement with countries of origin and transit in Asia and Africa: the roll out of an EU-funded Common Operational Partnership project (EASTEAMS) between Pakistan and Member States continues (kick-off meeting in Athens on 26 September 2023). • Cooperation with Türkiye to counter migrant smuggling continues; support the launch of a new Common Operational Partnership project (SCOPE II). The grant agreement of SCOPE II (EUR 5 million from ISF) has been signed. Kick-off meeting with DE, HU and AT and Turkish authorities on 5-7 December 2023 in Vienna. • Targeted information and awareness raising campaigns on the risks of irregular migration to the EU, an EMN Info Working Group workshop with a geographical focus on the Eastern Mediterranean Route took place on 7 December 2023. <p>Border management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission continues to provide support to strengthen integrated border management in Lebanon and Jordan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Technical discussions ongoing with GR on reinstating the temporary scheme of short-stay tourist visits from certain areas in Türkiye to Greece.</i> ➤ <i>The Commission, EEAS and EUDEL soon to conclude negotiations with Pakistan on a Frontex Liaison Officer being posted in Islamabad.</i> ➤ <i>The Contract Border Surveillance Capacity at Türkiye's Eastern border with Iran will be signed by the end of 2023.</i>