



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 23 September 2024
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LIMITE

**SCH-EVAL 119
SCHENGEN 42
COMIX 383
JAI 1349
FRONT 259
MIGR 349
ASIM 76
ENFOPOL 376
IXIM 207
VISA 140**

NOTE

From: Services of the Commission
To: Delegations
Subject: Overall state of the Schengen area – Schengen Barometer +

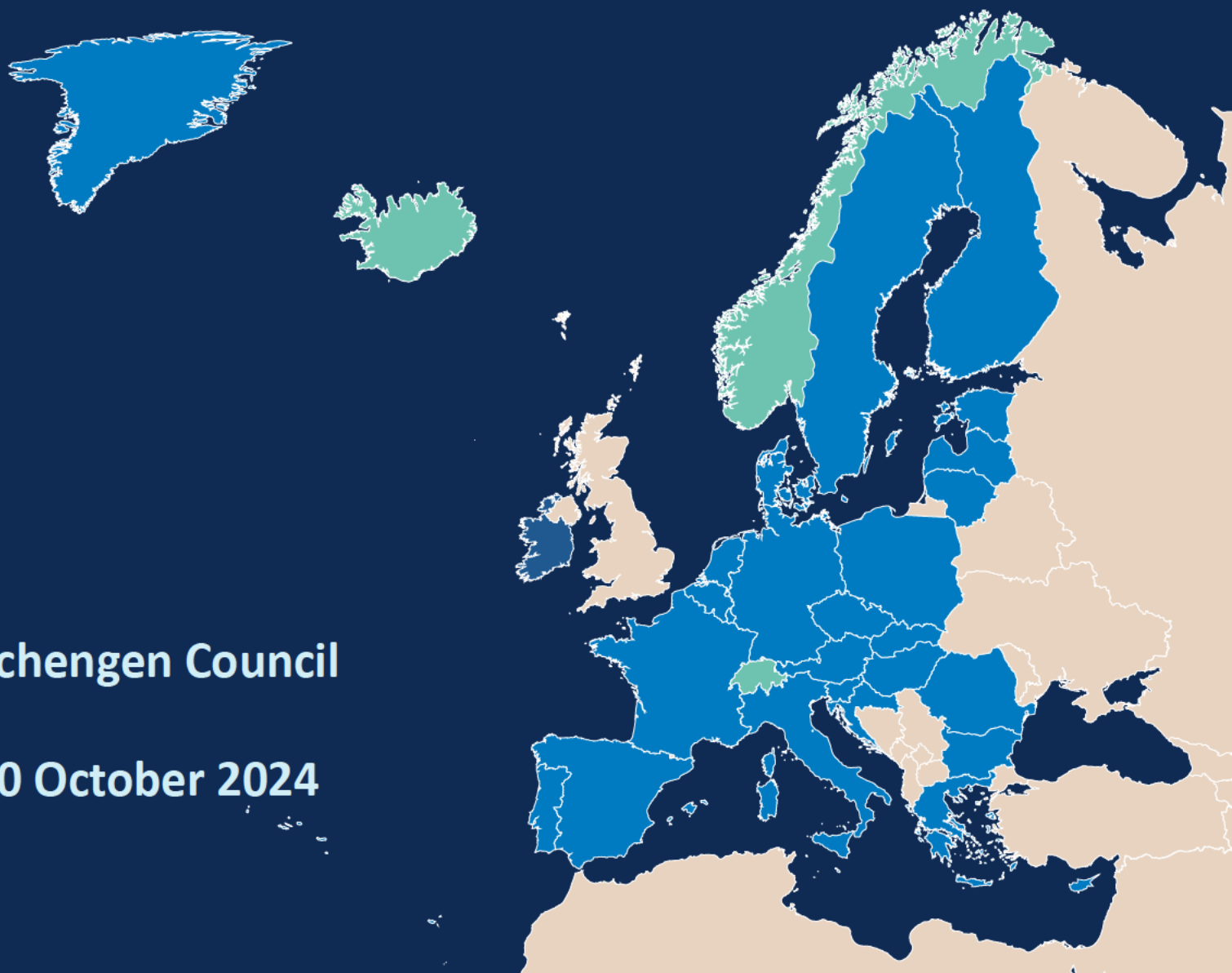
Delegations will find in the Annex the Schengen Barometer +, as provided by the services of the Commission, with a view to the meeting of the Working Party for Schengen Matters on 23 September 2024 and the meeting of the Schengen Council on 10 October 2024.

ANNEX



8th edition

SCHENGEN BAROMETER+



Schengen Council

10 October 2024

SCHENGEN BAROMETER+

The Schengen Barometer+ is a key tool of the Schengen cycle, steering political coordination of Schengen matters and enhancing facts-based policy making. It provides a comprehensive situational picture of the drivers having an impact on the stability of the Schengen area by presenting an overview of the recent developments and emerging threats for the Schengen area, using the most up-to-date data¹. As such, the Schengen Barometer+ allows to identify vulnerabilities, risks, and operational gaps requiring a timely and coordinated EU response. The identified focus areas allow the Schengen Council to enhance policy coordination and endorse actions in the form of operational cooperation.

The 8th Schengen Barometer+ in short

- **Schengen** is one of the **EU's main achievements**, as acknowledged by 72% of Europeans and 81% of EU companies. According to the 2024 Eurobarometer survey on Schengen, a large majority of Europeans and businesses agree that Schengen is good for business in EU countries and that it has more advantages for their country. The survey shows an important increase in citizens' awareness of the Schengen area compared to the last Eurobarometer survey in 2018.
- Over a third of the EU citizens (35%) say that their **experience with border checks** when leaving or entering the Schengen area **was smooth and efficient**. The entry into operation of the **Entry/Exit System** scheduled for 10 November 2024 ushers in a new era for external border security and a significant further step towards the completion of the most advanced border management system in the world.
- Around two thirds of Europeans (64%) believe that **security measures at the external borders are effective**. One year before its 40th anniversary, Schengen cannot, however, be taken for granted. The volatile and dangerous geopolitical situation continues to give rise to security risks and migratory pressure.
- More than 60% of Europeans support **more coordination in Schengen governance**. Since 2022, the regular meetings of the Schengen Council and the reinforced tools of the Schengen cycle have paved the way to increased common ownership, to a higher-level implementation of the Schengen rules and to boost mutual trust. The work to enhance the preparedness and resilience of the Schengen area to effectively manage common challenges is however not yet completed.
- Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine has had widespread implications, including major security risks for the Union and its citizens. Russia and Belarus in particular are pursuing actions to destabilise the EU and its Member States. Both countries have actively spread disinformation and propaganda aimed at polarising European societies, instrumentalised migration flows or carried out sabotage and espionage activities against EU Member States. Under these circumstances, the highest possible level of scrutiny and vigilance with regard to the entry and stay of Russian and Belarusian nationals into the Schengen area is required, as recommended by the Commission in September 2022 in its guidelines on visa and external border control².

¹ Data from Frontex, EUAA, Europol, Eurojust and eu-LISA is provisional and may differ from validated data published by Eurostat or national authorities. The figures in this document only give an estimation of the current situation in as near to real time as possible. Data from Europol and Eurojust are only a partial picture since they can only reply on the cases referred to them.

² C(2022) 7111 final of 30.9.2022

1. THE SCHENGEN NEIGHBOURHOOD

Key messages

- Schengen visa applications continue following an upward trend in 2024, nearing pre-pandemic figures with 8.3 million applications in January-August 2024. However, the number of decisions (issuances or refusals) taken on visa applications decreased significantly this year, with 16% of applications lodged this year not decided on yet.
- While Russians remained among the top 5 for Schengen visa applications in January-August 2024, the number of visa applications lodged by and visas issued to Russians did not follow the general upward trend over the last years, with Schengen visas issued to Russians representing 27% of total visas issued in 2019 but only 5% in January-August 2024. However, the visa refusal rate diverges strongly between Member States, ranging from 1% to 65% in January-August 2024.
- Among companies that have engaged in business activities with stakeholders located in third countries that had to travel to the Schengen area, 50% consider the Schengen visa application procedure a time-consuming but necessary step, while 26% consider it a major obstacle for business. Only 23% of companies consider the visa application process smooth and without difficulties. Recent Schengen evaluations found that the long-standing issue of delays in granting appointments to submit visa applications continues to the procedure persist. [2024 Eurobarometer 549; Schengen evaluations]
- Significant **reinforcement of cross-border cooperation** between Member States across the Western Balkan route with major results in combatting irregular border crossings and drug trafficking.
- The EU's global network of Liaison Officers including the deployment of Frontex staff abroad is solidifying, notably for immigration and European integrated border management. As referenced in the 2024 State of Schengen report, liaison officers deployed in third countries contribute to the intelligence picture of the Schengen area. Hence, the effective use of the intelligence available necessitates closer cooperation between LOs under the umbrella of EU delegations. This will close intelligence gaps and pool operational awareness.
- While irregular migration into the EU has decreased in 2024 compared to 2023 (see below), the situation in several third countries is highly unstable and has already led to extensive internal displacement and regional migration.

Outlook

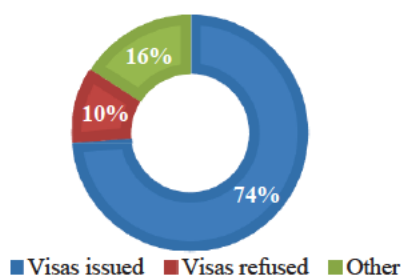
- It is expected that Schengen visa applications from major third countries, such as China and to a lesser extent India, will continue to rise. The lack of timely appointments to submit visa applications will remain a subject to strong criticism requiring reinforcing efforts at all levels to improve the situation ahead of the summer season of 2025.
- There is a risk for further instability in Europe's direct proximity. The Middle East crisis following the Hamas attacks in October 2023, enduring push factors in key host countries in the neighbouring

south-east region, as well as the dire situation in several Sahel countries, among other developments, could lead to increased departures towards the EU. In light of increasing regional tensions, the threat of terrorists blending in migratory flows is considerable. However, as a result of agreements signed with several major transit countries in North Africa, migratory pressure could be contained, and security risks mitigated.

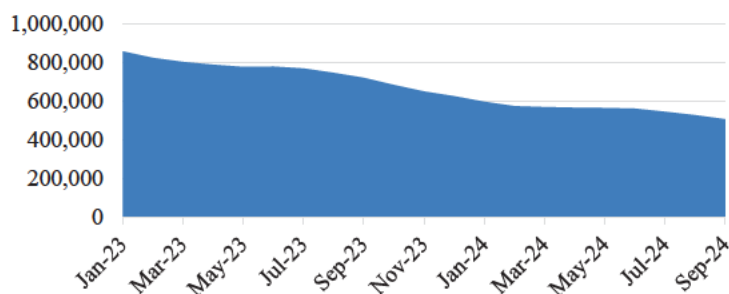
- Instrumentalised migration by state actors that are hostile to the European Union and its Member States will likely continue, if not intensify, in the coming year. New Russian-orchestrated hybrid threats could be expected.

1.1. Travelling to and residing in the Schengen area

8.3 MILLION SCHENGEN VISA APPLICATIONS IN JAN-AUG 2024



VALID SCHENGEN VISAS AFFIXED TO RUSSIAN TRAVEL DOCUMENTS ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE MONTH



- In 2024 until August, over 8.3 million Schengen visa applications were lodged and 6.1 million Schengen visas were issued, continuing the post-pandemic upward trend and nearing 2019 figures. The Member States receiving the most visa applications remained France, Spain, Germany and Italy. The top nationalities applying for Schengen visas also remained stable, with most applications submitted by Chinese, Indian, Turkish, Moroccan and Russian nationals. This year a high number of visa applications did not receive a decision (16%), while there was no such discrepancy in 2023 (0%). [eu-LISA]
- While Russians remained the fifth nationality of Schengen visa applications in January-August 2024, the number of visa applications lodged by and visas issued to Russians did not follow the general upward trend over the last years: Schengen visas issued to Russians represented 27% of total visas issued in 2019 but only 5% in January-August 2024. The number of valid Schengen visas affixed to Russian travel documents has been steadily declining. However, the visa refusal rate is largely divergent between Member States, ranging from 1% to 65% in January-August 2024. [eu-LISA]

Schengen visa issuance evaluated

In April 2023, the Commission services prepared a non-paper on the outcome of the 2022 Schengen evaluations in the field of the common visa policy³, detailing multiple difficulties in visa operations.

³ Council Doc. 8504/1/23.

Since then, 12 Member States have been evaluated in 19 locations regarding visa processing. The evaluations confirmed that decision-making in consulates and centralised offices is solid, but efficiency and resource use need improvement. Staffing levels were adequate in most cases, except for Portugal and Spain. Recently evaluated Member States have improved in providing accurate public information on their Ministry websites, though external service providers' sites still lack precision. While cooperation with these providers has improved, monitoring of visa centres and compliance with data protection requires further enhancement.

The main challenge identified remains the lengthy process of obtaining a Schengen visa, largely due to **non-compliance with the two-week appointment deadline of the Visa Code**. This issue has escalated to a political level in some third countries. Despite efforts to combat intermediary malpractices, progress has been slow. To address this, the Commission proposed a pilot project for a **common waiting list** per location, though no Member State has yet taken the lead. In addition, as of June 2024, the **visa fee has increased**, the revenue of which should feed increased resources for visa processing.

While most Member States have already demonstrated their commitment to resolving these issues, some are behind in implementation⁴.

- The **passenger flow** in the Schengen area is only partially reported to Frontex, making a complete comparison of the data virtually impossible. Considering the 20 Member States and Schengen Associated Countries that have delivered data, the passenger flow has in general stayed stable in January-July 2024 compared to the same period last year⁵. 13 countries reported higher passenger flows. [Frontex]
- Over **3,7 million first residence permits** were issued in 2023, continuing an upward trend⁶. Most residence permits were issued by Poland, followed by Germany and Spain. 110 000 residence permits were issued to Russians, primarily by Germany, Spain and Cyprus. [Eurostat]
- As of March 2024, 11,7 million **third-country nationals** were **employed** in the EU⁷. [Eurostat]

1.2. EU measures and developments in third countries, including outlook

- As of September 2024, **Frontex** deployed 448 staff in the Western Balkan partners, 12 in Georgia and 81 in Moldova (*see map in 2.1*).
- Second-generation **Status Agreements** under the current EBCG Regulation are in force with Albania, Moldova, Montenegro, and North Macedonia while ratifications are ongoing for the EU-Serbia agreement. Negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina were launched in May 2024.
- **Frontex Working Arrangements** concluded with 19 EU/Schengen candidates and partners⁸.

⁴ This includes notably Spain and Germany.

⁵ The slight fall on the reported total entry and exit is partially attributable to the Schengen accession of BG and RO, as the other Member States would report fewer cases from their flight connections with these two Member State. The effect of this amounted to over 7 million cases, so for almost the entire drop.

⁶ Data from Eurostat as of 20 September 2024.

⁷ Data from Eurostat as of 20 September 2024.

Immigration Liaison Officers (ILOs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managed by Member States • Network of almost 500 ILOs deployed in more than 100 third countries.
European Migration Liaison Officers (EMLOs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managed by the Commission • 12 deployments while 5 positions are currently unfilled. • Since the March Barometer, deployments were launched in Georgia (regional mandate Eastern Partnership), Egypt and Nigeria while the positions in Morocco and Niger became vacant.
Frontex Liaison Officers (FLOs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managed by Frontex • 5 deployments in third countries with regional mandates covering 16 countries (besides 10 deployments in Member States/Schengen Associated Countries). Possible review of FLOs clusters. • Since the March Barometer, the position in Niger was discontinued due to the security situation in the country, while deployments to Pakistan and Morocco are expected.
European Return Liaison Officers (EURLOs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managed by Frontex • 9 deployments with regional mandates covering 14 countries. • Since the March Barometer, a new deployment was launched for Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, while the positions in Bangladesh, Ghana and Iraq remain open.
'Security' Liaison Officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No EU-level overview • Council Conclusions of 18 June 2024 call to strengthen judicial cooperation with third countries in the fight against organised crime.

⁸ Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus (*cooperation on hold*), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Cape Verde, North Macedonia, Georgia, Kosovo*, Moldova, Montenegro, Nigeria, the Russian Federation (*cooperation on hold*), Serbia, Türkiye, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States. Discussions are currently ongoing between Frontex and a number of other third countries on new or updated working arrangements.

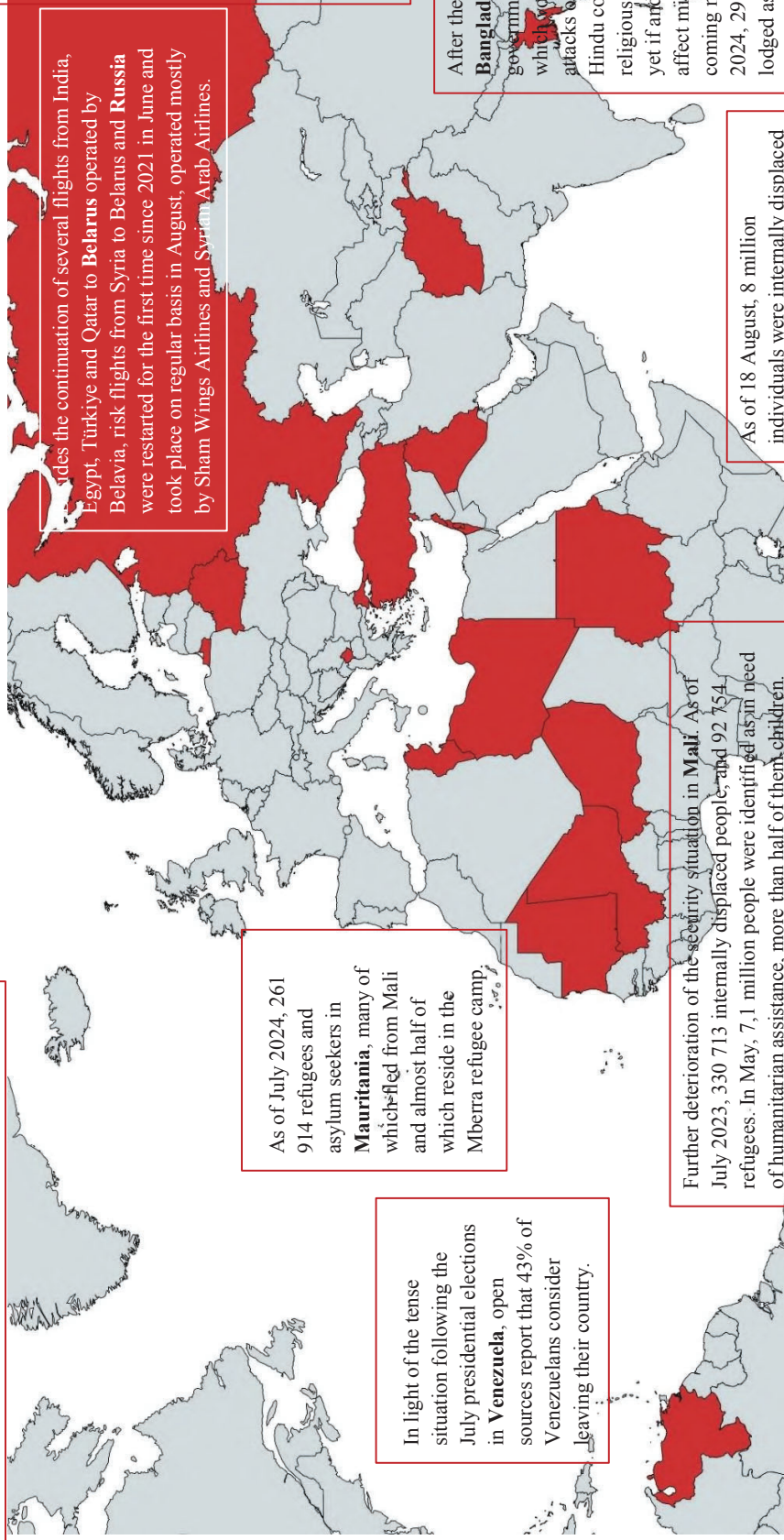
Kosovo* gained visa-free access to the EU in January 2024. This led to a rise in Kosovans entering the EU+, with 770 asylum applications in May—the highest since November 2016. The average recognition rate remained low at just 5%.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

On 15 August, **Türkiye** and **Iraq** have signed an agreement granting visa-free travel to Türkiye for Iraqi youths and people aged over 50, which will enter into force on 1 September, possibly leading to increased arrivals especially to Greece.

Israel-Gaza: Imminent famine with 1.1 million people facing catastrophic food insecurity. As of August 2024 there were 1.9 million IDPs which lack adequate shelter and the essentials for survival. Around 110 000 Palestinians have exited Gaza through Egypt since the conflict began according to the Palestinian Border Authorities.

Afghanistan: Despite the Taliban's stringent border controls, Afghan migrants often undertake long journeys through transit countries such as Iran and Türkiye. Therefore, the primary drivers of Afghan migration to the EU is closely linked to the situation in transit countries. Afghans continue to be returned from neighbouring and transit countries, with almost 712 200 individuals returned from Pakistan since September 2023.



As of July 2024, 261 914 refugees and asylum seekers in **Mauritania**, many of which fled from Mali and almost half of which reside in the Mberra refugee camp.

In light of the tense situation following the July presidential elections in **Venezuela**, open sources report that 43% of Venezuelans consider leaving their country.

Further deterioration of the security situation in **Mali**. As of July 2023, 330 713 internally displaced people, and 92 754 refugees. In May, 7.1 million people were identified as in need of humanitarian assistance, more than half of them children.

More transit since the repeal of the anti-smuggling law in **Niger**. As of July 2024, Niger is hosting around 414 000 refugees and asylum seekers of 364 506 refugees. The main nationalities of the migrants identified are Nigerians (57%), Malians (30%) and Burkinabes (9%). In addition, there are over 507 438 internally displaced persons (IDPs), of whom many have been displaced following the recent floods that have affected the country.

The **Tunisian** authorities took over the management of asylum cases from UNHCR in June 2024. In the framework of the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding, the authorities continued operations against irregular migration. As of July 2024, 18 323 refugees and asylum seekers were registered in Tunisia.

As of May 2024, around 725 000 migrants in **Libya**, a record number. Main nationalities: Nigerians (25%), Egyptians (22%) and Sudanese (20%).

rides the continuation of several flights from India, Egypt, Türkiye and Qatar to **Belarus** operated by Belavia, risk flights from Syria to Belarus and **Russia** were restarted for the first time since 2021 in June and took place on a regular basis in August, operated mostly by Sham Wings Airlines and Syrian Arab Airlines.

As of 18 August, 8 million individuals were internally displaced in **Sudan** since the outbreak of the conflict in mid-April 2023, which brings the total to almost 11 million IDPs in the country. As of 14 August, 2.3 million individuals crossed borders from Sudan into neighbouring countries, 62% of whom are Sudanese.

After the political unrest in **Bangladesh**, an interim government was established which vowed to act against the attacks occurring against the Hindu community and other religious minorities. It is not clear yet if and how the situation will affect migratory flows in the coming months. As of 3 Sept 2024, 29 000 Bangladeshis lodged asylum applications in the EU, an increase by 10% compared to the same period last year. The main reporting countries were Italy (78%), France (14%) and Greece (2.7%). Around 1 million Rohingya refugees are currently residing in Bangladesh, thousands having fled in summer.

2. SCHENGEN EXTERNAL BORDERS AND IRREGULAR MIGRATORY IMPACT

Key messages

- The entry into operation of the Entry/Exit System ushers in a new era for external border security and a significant further step towards the completion of the most advanced border management system in the world.
- Issues in staffing and training for border control continue to put at risk adequate border management. In light of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, the availability of trained and qualified staff for registration, screening, and debriefing activities is of key importance.
- Member States have stepped up checks of the Schengen Information System at the external borders: whereas in 2022 18% of passengers were not checked, in 2023 this was reduced to 9% of passengers not checked. However, only 50% of checks of the Visa Information System are carried out on the basis of fingerprints, constituting an unnecessary and avoidable security risk.
- Steady and significant decrease by 36% of irregular border crossings in January-July 2024 compared to the same period in 2023. Sharp drops on the Central Mediterranean and Western Balkan route. Irregular arrivals on the Eastern Mediterranean, Atlantic and Eastern Land Borders routes saw strong increases. On the EU-Ukrainian border, irregular border crossings have significantly increased in the first half of 2024, compared with the same period of 2023 (from 2 000 to 5 875), relating almost exclusively to Ukrainian men.
- Comparing the first seven months of 2024 with the same period last year, the number of secondary movements and asylum applications stabilised at a high level, though some shifts in regional migratory routes are noted.
- Increase in effective returns of third-country nationals in the first half of 2024 (+13% compared to the first half of 2023), notwithstanding the lower number of return decisions. Frontex support in returns continues to grow, now covering almost 45% of all effective returns.

Outlook

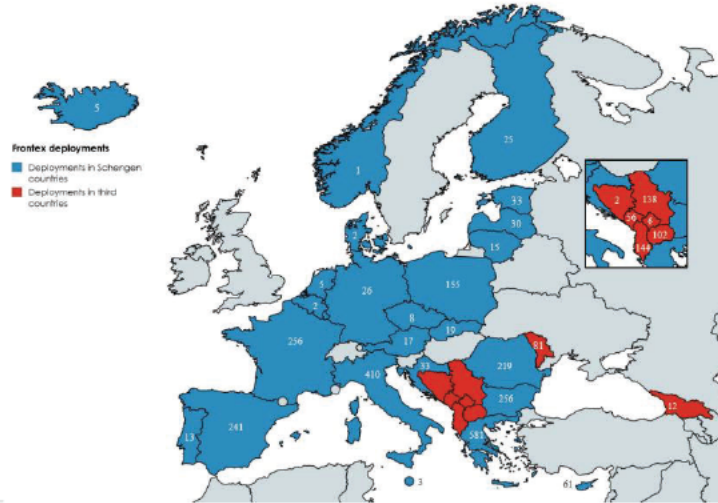
- With asylum applications typically higher in the latter half of the year, the EUAA estimates that for a second year in a row, EU+ countries could receive over a million applications by the end of 2024.
- Proxy indicators suggest that secondary movements are likely to continue on the same stable trend for the remainder of the year.
- While a high number of migrants is ready to depart to Italy from Tunisia and Libya, the number of irregular border crossings is expected to remain at a stable lower level than 2023 in light of the measures taken by the authorities. Low arrivals to Cyprus are also expected to remain unless the conflict in the Middle East further escalates.
- Irregular arrivals on the Atlantic route will remain high but the increase is expected to slow down by the end of 2024, in part due to coordinated regional measures. The lower arrivals from Morocco to the Canary Islands and the Spain mainland, due to effective bilateral cooperation, will be offset against the higher arrivals from Algeria.
- The near completion of the border fence in the Evros region and the Turkish patrols are likely to contribute to a shift in migratory pressure, underlining the need for a European integrated border management approach in the region.

- Among the Eastern Mediterranean sub-routes, the Aegean Sea corridors are expected to remain under the most pressure amid enduring uncertainties and enhanced police operations in Türkiye.
- The appeal of the Channel route will continue given the high success rates of crossings (over 45%).

2.1 Protection of the EU external borders

Joint measures and EU support

- As of 1 September 2024, Frontex deployed 2 957 staff in the Schengen Area (+557 compared to the last Barometer), including 448 in the Western Balkan partners, 12 in Georgia and 81 in Moldova, in joint operations, return-related activities and situational awareness / Frontex aerial surveillance.
- As compared to the last Barometer, Frontex deployed significantly more staff in France (+224), related to the Olympic Games and as recommended in the framework of the Schengen evaluation of Spain (+74). Following Bulgaria and Romania's new role as Schengen Members, the total number of Frontex Standing Corps deployment has considerably risen to 256⁹ and 219, respectively. [Frontex]
- Results of the deployment of Standing Corps officers in operational border management activities (January - 1 September 2024):
 - 6 556 migrants rescued in SAR cases with Frontex co-financed assets involvement;
 - 1 049 detections of falsified documents;
 - 360 detections of persons hidden in transportation means;
 - 156 apprehensions of suspected facilitators of migrant smuggling or trafficking in human beings.
- Efforts to build up the Standing Corps to 10 000 by 2027 are progressing, with improved recruitment effectiveness, but challenges remain for both Frontex and Member States in meeting staffing targets.
- In May 2024, the EUROSUR impact level at the Sava border section between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina was changed from low to medium following an overall increasing trend due to the surge in migration along the Eastern Mediterranean route and the disruption of migration and smuggling on the Serbia-Hungary corridor, leading to a shift of the route.



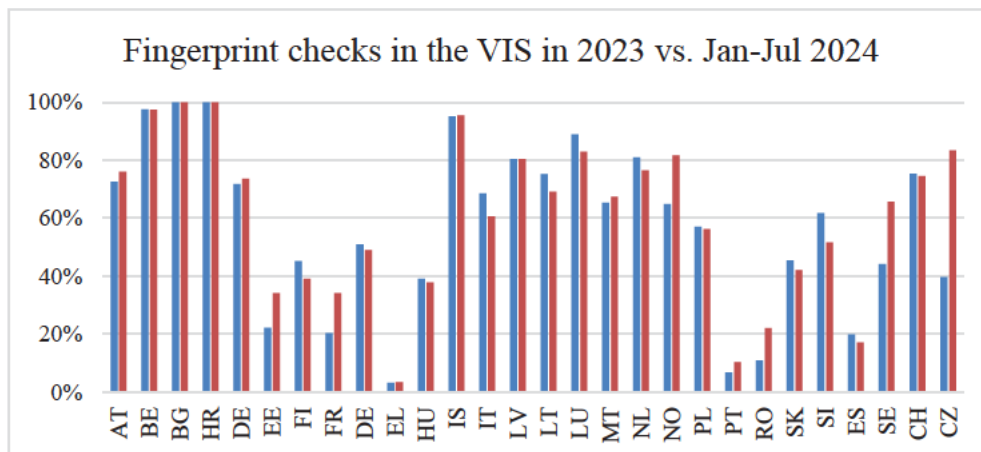
Border control quality

- By July 2024, only 55% of the Schengen visas issued by all Member States in November 2023-January 2024 were checked in the Visa Information System at the external borders. While a percentage of third-country nationals may have refrained from traveling after obtaining a visa or may have travelled after the commencement of the validity of the visa, the 45% gap indicates that too often, there is no check of the Visa Information System at the external borders. For five Member States, less than 50% of

⁹ Out of which 196 were deployed at the Bulgarian-Turkish border and 54 at the Bulgarian-Serbian border

the visas they issued were checked at the external borders (their borders or the borders of other Member States)¹⁰. 12 Schengen States met the threshold of 80% checked visas¹¹. [eu-LISA]

- In January-July 2024, out of those border checks carried out in the VIS at the external borders, half (49.55%) were conducted using fingerprints, at a stable rate compared to 2023¹². 8 Member States met the 80% threshold¹³. [eu-LISA]



Positive evolutions:
CZ, SE, NO, FR, EE, RO.

Negative evolution:
SI.

Low checks: EL, PT, EE, FR, HU, FI, SK and DE.

High checks: HR, BE, BG, IS, LV, LU, NO and CZ.

- The Commission launched a call for expression of interest under the **Border Management and Visa Policy Instrument (BMVI)** for the countries that share borders with Russia and Belarus, to strengthen their border surveillance capabilities considering the new security landscape, including hybrid threats and shortcomings identified in the management of their external borders. [HOME]
- Following the entry into operation of the **Entry/Exit-System (EES)** scheduled for November 2024, the **European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS)** is scheduled to launch in the spring of 2025. [HOME]

Management of the Schengen external borders evaluated

¹⁰ It concerns France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain. Of all visas checked in the Visa Information System on average for all Schengen states 71% were checked in the VIS at the borders of the Member State which was indicated as ‘Member State of first entry’, while 29% were checked in the VIS at the borders of another Member State. This large share of visas checked by another Member State could probably largely be ascribed to a wrong indication of the Member State of first entry by the applicant in the visa application, possibly confusing it with the main destination in case the point of arrival is elsewhere.

¹¹ It concerns AT, DK, EE, HU, IS, LV, LI, NO, PL, SK, SE and CZ. Since the last Barometer, Norway met the target while Croatia, Finland and Lithuania fell just below. The threshold is set at 80% in the assumption that not all third-country nationals who receive a Schengen visa end up travelling.

¹² The figures provided in the previous Schengen Barometer+, indicating a 39% fingerprint check rate for 2023, are not comparable given that eu-LISA has since refined its calculation method for this indicator. Using the new calculation method, the overall fingerprint check rate for 2023 was 47.53%.

¹³ The threshold is set at 80% since not all third-country nationals crossing the external borders are legally subject to a biometric check. This includes notably children under 12 years.

The Frontex Vulnerability Assessment found that the **number of passengers that were not checked in the Schengen Information System at the external borders nearly halved in 2023** compared to 2022, from 18% (100 million) to 9% (57 million) not checked, despite the increased passenger flow. This positive development can be attributed to the accession of Croatia to the Schengen area and the implementation of recommendations by some key Member States. There are, however, still significant gaps at some of the main EU airports, due to staff deficits and issues in IT infrastructure. The deployment of e-gates allowed over 100 million passengers to cross external borders in a faster and more secure way.

The rise of **migrant instrumentalisation and hybrid threats** has led to a **major increase in surveillance infrastructure and equipment at the Eastern land borders** and led some Member States to adopt legislation and practice to manage the increased migratory pressure. However, the overall number of effectively deployed staff for border checks and surveillance at those border sections is still below the level of 2019. Recent Schengen evaluations found that these developments had a negative impact on border control, especially the referral mechanism, the individual assessment and the respect for the principle of *non-refoulement*. [Frontex Vulnerability Assessment, Schengen evaluations]

The adequate performance of border checks is closely linked to the **availability of structured staff training**. Shortages were identified in this regard in the recent evaluations of Portugal, Estonia, Denmark and France. Other deficiencies leading to lengthy and incomplete border checks were the limited use of the available tools to detect document fraud, for Italy, Switzerland and Poland, and the use of outdated equipment for first-line checks, as was the case in Hungary [Schengen evaluations].

Based on Member States reporting for the Vulnerability Assessment (BA 2024), in 2023 there were approximately 34 000 border guards *effectively* deployed for border checks and approximately 53 000 for border surveillance¹⁴. Schengen evaluations reveal that staffing shortages frequently go up to 10% at the national level. However, at the local or regional levels, the vacancy rates can go up to 40% for different specific profiles, with a clear impact on border management. In Lithuania, Sweden and Latvia, the lack of a comprehensive staff recruitment strategy was identified as an important deficiency, eventually putting at risk the capacity to

¹⁴ While the planned level of border staffing is typically higher than effective deployments, Member States reporting on the effective deployment varies significantly between assessment cycles.

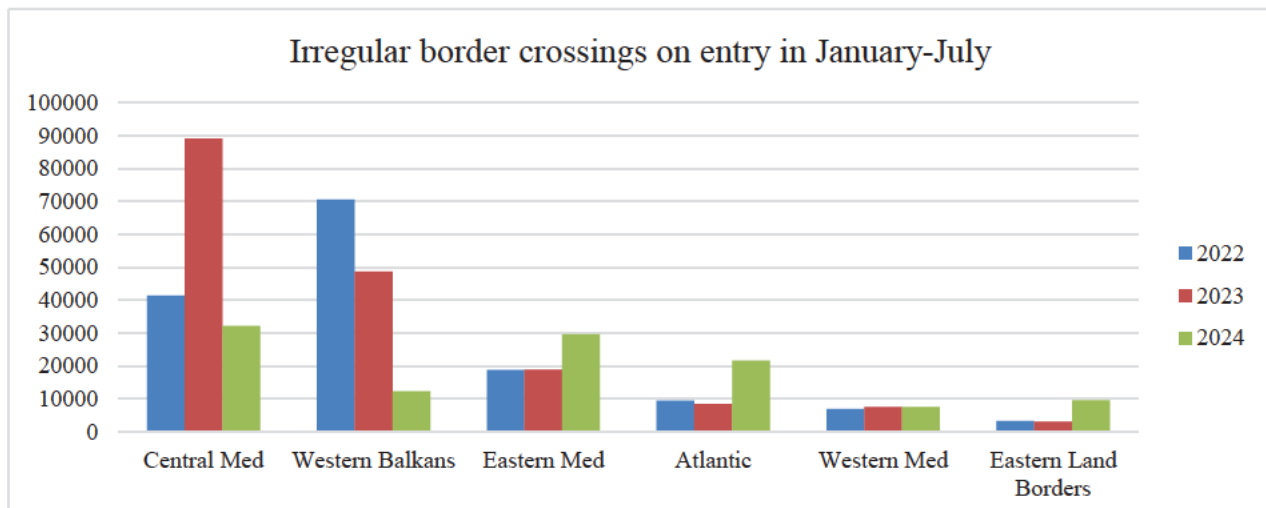
perform comprehensive border checks and surveillance adequately.

The lack of staffing may also have an impact on the **capacities for registration, screening and debriefing**, as exemplified in the discrepancy between reported irregular border crossings and Eurodac registrations. This will become especially relevant in the implementation of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum. [Frontex Vulnerability Assessment]

To **address recruitment challenges**, some Member States deploy administrative personnel, also from other authorities, or the armed forces, for border control purposes. While these are adequate crisis responses, long-term reliance on these is not sustainable. Other short-term strategies observed are temporary regional or local reinforcements in specific areas faced with increased pressure and recourse to the Frontex Standing Corps. However, five Member States still reported legal impediments in the deployment of the Standing Corps, five years after the revised EBCG Regulation became applicable. [Frontex Vulnerability Assessment, Schengen evaluations]

2.2 Irregular migration

Overall a significant decrease by 36% of total number of irregular border crossings in January-July 2024 compared to the same period last year, noting however large variations across routes:



- **Central Mediterranean route:** significant decrease of irregular arrivals in January-July 2024 compared to the same period in 2023 (-64%), largely linked to the disruption of the smuggling business based on the use of large fishing vessels in east Libya, the decreasing number of irregular border-crossings of sub-Saharan migrants on board makeshift metal boats from Tunisia and the preventive measures by the authorities, in light of agreements signed by the EU and Member States with Tunisia and Libya to curb irregular migratory flows. [Frontex]
- Strong decrease of irregular border crossings on the **Western Balkans** route compared to January-July 2023 (-75%), continuing the declining trend since 2022. Some of the pressure from the Serbian

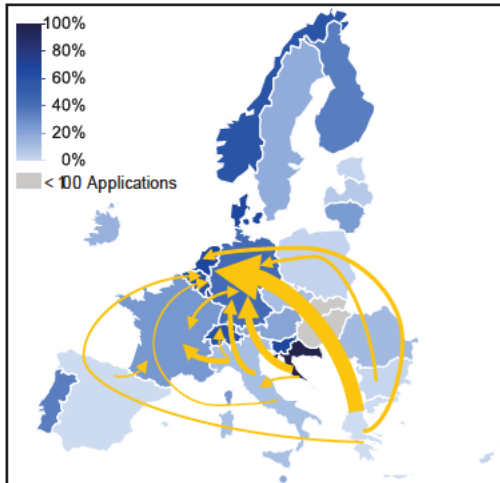
borders shifted to Croatia's borders with the Western Balkan region (+17% in the first seven months of the year, especially higher detections at the Croatia - Bosnia and Herzegovina section). Considerable decreases were reported for nationalities that had their visa-free status rescinded in one or several countries of the region, especially Cubans (-99%), and Tunisians (-57%). Irregular border crossings by Turks remained the most numerous in this category of visa-free misuse. [Frontex]

- **Eastern Mediterranean routes:** increase of irregular arrivals in the first seven months of 2024 (+67% compared to the same period in 2023). Behind these figures is a 153% increase of sea arrivals to Greece in the first seven months (by and large in the Eastern Aegean) and a 22% decline in arrivals to Cyprus, which came to a halt in April 2024 following the Cypriot suspension of the asylum procedure, the voluntary returns of Syrian migrants and maritime patrolling. [Frontex]
- **Atlantic route:** in January-July 2024, irregular arrivals increased by 153% compared to the same period in 2023, though the increase slowed down since March. Malians are the main nationality of arrival. Departures from Morocco decreased by 27% in the first seven months due to interventions by the authorities, but smuggling networks demonstrate a high adaptability in finding alternative routes, as demonstrated in the high arrivals from Mauritania (62% of total in the first seven months of the year). Regional measures are required to stem flows. [Frontex, ISAA]
- Irregular crossings on the **Western Mediterranean route** are stable from 2023 (-1%). Reduced sea crossings from Morocco, as a result of enhanced preventive measures by the authorities, were set off against increased crossings from Algeria. [Frontex]
- **Eastern Land Borders:** strong increase of 195% of irregular border crossings in January-July 2024 compared to the same period of 2023, including a strong increase from Belarus (+162%, to 1 581 crossings). While 99% of crossings were recorded by Poland, new strengthened border surveillance measures implemented since June redirected flows to Latvia. 2024 brought a notable change in nationalities with Somalis, Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Yemenis reaching the top five next to Syrians, compared to Iraqi and Afghans flows via Belarus observed in 2023. Organised movements of migrants from high migratory risk countries via Russia are well-planned as their returns from the EU will be extremely hard or impossible to enforce. Moscow remains the main transit hub. [Frontex]
- **Exits towards the UK:** Between January and August 2024, there have been roughly 41 100 IBCs detections on exit (including attempts and crossings), a 13% increase compared to the same period in 2023. In August 2024, nearly 7 900 migrants were detected, the highest recorded in the Channel since October 2023. The high success rate of sea crossings (over 45 %), coupled with the limited number of returns of those who have managed to reach the UK, makes the Channel Route a viable option. Since the British government cancelled the Rwandan asylum plan, there has been a sharp increase in attempts to cross the Channel. Since British Election Day (July 4) more than 14,000 migrants have attempted to cross the Channel. [Frontex]

2.3 Impact of irregular migration in secondary movements between Member States

- Proxy indicators suggest that in the first seven months of 2024, secondary movements remained stable at a high level compared to a year earlier. The level was notably higher than during the first seven months of 2022 and 2021 yet well below the peak recorded in the autumn last year. [EUAA]
- Considering the cases of **illegal stay on the move** reported to Frontex in January-July 2024, a shift of regional migratory routes can be noted on the Western Balkan route, with increased entries through Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia and a sharp decrease at the Serbian-Hungarian border due to i.e. intensified Serbian law enforcement measures. An increase of cases is reported by France, mostly from Italy and Spain, while the latter corridor is not reflected as such in Eurodac hits. [Frontex]

- Top flows of secondary movements in July 2024:
 - **Greece to Germany:** used most frequently by Syrians, followed by Afghans and Turks.
 - **Croatia to Germany:** mostly used by Turks, Syrians and, albeit at a lower level, Russians.
 - **Italy and Bulgaria to Germany:** mostly Syrians.
 - **Greece to Belgium and the Netherlands:** mostly Syrians and, to Belgium, Palestinians.
 - **Italy to France:** mostly nationals of African countries. [EUAA]



Share of applications lodged after secondary movements and top flows based on Dublin decisions and Eurodac hits (averaged), January-July 2024 [EUAA EPS, DG HOME / eu-LISA]

Dublin transfers

Some 10,500 Dublin transfers were implemented in the first seven months of 2024, with a slight decreasing trend evident between March and June, yet more than during the first seven months of 2023. So far in 2024, the ratio of implemented transfers to accepted requests stood at 19%, up from 12% in 2023, but still below the

implementation rates of 2019 (30%), 2020 (24%) and 2021 (21%)¹⁵. [EUAA]

2.4 Asylum¹⁶

- Around 599 000 asylum applications have been lodged in the EU+ in the first seven months of 2024, stable compared to the same period in 2023 (-1%), but below the peaks of autumn 2023 where more than 100 000 applications were recorded per month. Almost all asylum applicants (91%) were first-time applicants, as was the case in 2023. [EUAA; eu-LISA]
- In the first seven months of 2024, the top countries of origin across the EU were: **Syria (14%), Afghanistan (9%), Venezuela (7%), Türkiye (5%) and Colombia (5%)**. This is the same top five as during the same period of 2023 but with relatively fewer applications by Afghans, Turks and Colombians. **Germany, Spain, Italy, France, and Greece** jointly received over three-quarters of all applications lodged in the EU+ (similar to a year earlier). In July top receiving country per capita was Greece which received some 610 applications per 1 million inhabitants, at a much higher level than Germany, Italy, France and Spain (less than 250 applications per 1 million population). [EUAA]
- During the first seven months of 2024, 44% of all decisions issued in the EU+ granted refugee status or subsidiary protection. This was notably higher than the yearly recognition rates recorded since 2016 but nearly aligned with that of 2023 (42%). Among citizenships receiving at least 1,000 decisions, Palestinians (92%), Syrians (92%), Yemenis (82%), Burkinabes (82%), Eritreans (81%), Belarusians (80%) and Ukrainians (78%) continued to have the highest recognition rates. [EUAA]
- Decisions issued at first instance in the first seven months of 2024: around 458 000. At the end of July 2024, nearly 950 000 cases were awaiting a first instance decision in the EU+,¹⁷ up by over a third from a year earlier and a record level since the refugee crisis in 2016. [EUAA]

¹⁵ Dublin data were missing for Czechia since March 2023, for Greece since May 2023 and for Croatia for March 2024 as well as partially missing for Belgium for July 2024.

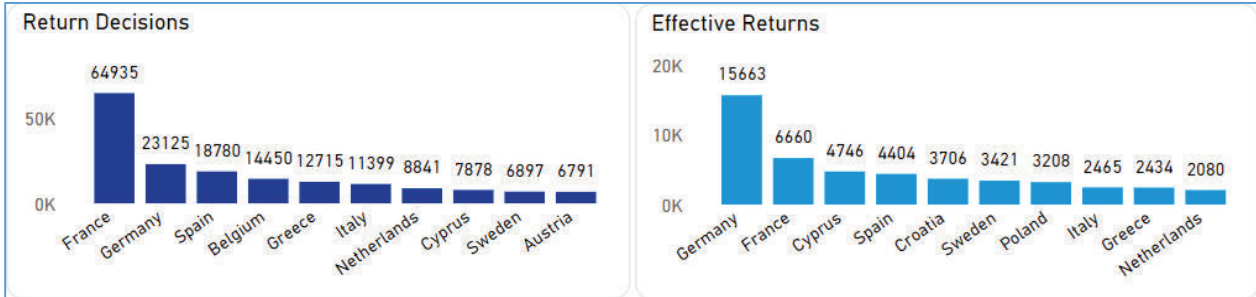
¹⁶ Monthly data for asylum applications is missing from Czechia and Malta for July 2024.

¹⁷ Data for July were missing for Czechia and Malta, therefore June data were used for these countries.

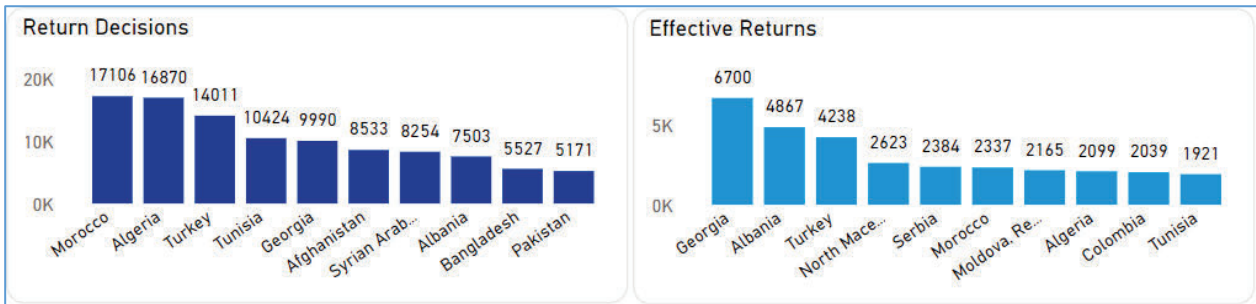
- As of 13 August 2024, there were 4,4 million active **registrations for temporary protection** in the Schengen area, on a stable rising trend. [Eurostat, Blueprint]

2.5 Return of third-country nationals with no right to stay

Return decisions and effective returns ¹⁸



Return decisions and effective returns for top 10 Member States in January-June 2024



Return decisions and effective returns for top 10 third countries in January-June 2024

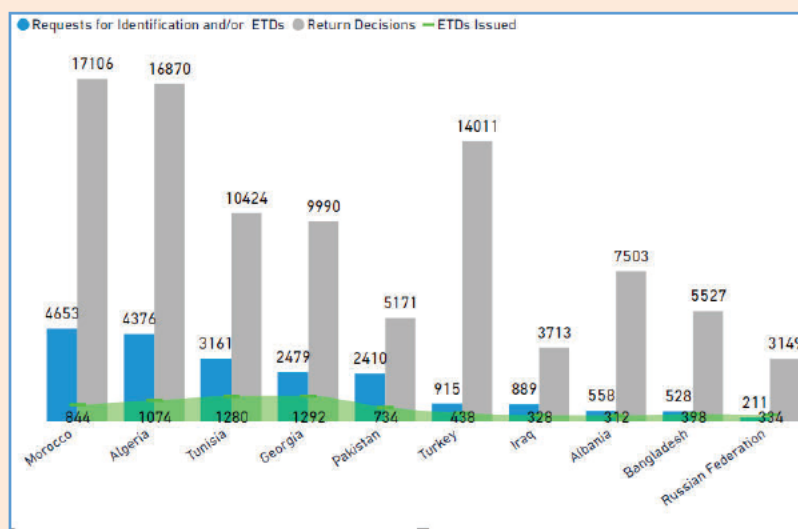
¹⁸ As outlined in the March Barometer, it is not advisable to directly compare return decisions to effective returns in the same period by calculating a return rate, given several shortages in this methodology, notably that not all people issued a return decision can be effectively returned, the number of return decisions does not fully correspond to people issued a return decision, and the delays in effective returns which makes the reference periods not entirely comparable, among other issues.

Return Decisions	Implemented Returns
<p>Approximately 208 000 return decisions issued in the first half of 2024¹⁹ (-9%).</p> <p>Of the ten Member States issuing most return decisions, notable decreases observed for Austria and the Netherlands while Sweden noted a significant increase (in line with an increase in asylum applications).</p> <p>Return decisions issued to nationals of Türkiye (+47%) and Syria (+27%) significantly increased, while less return decisions were issued to nationals of Morocco (-24%). [Frontex]</p>	<p>Effective returns increased by 13% in January-June 2024 compared to the first half of 2023, with almost 59 000 effective returns. 18 Member States saw an increase in effective returns.</p> <p>Significantly more nationals of Türkiye (+78%), North Macedonia (+32%) and Moldova (+15%) were returned, while less nationals of India (-49%) were returned.</p> <p>As compared to return decisions issued, Georgians were the most returned nationality (61%). [Frontex]</p>

¹⁹ Data as of 2/8/2024. Data is missing from Portugal and Denmark (entire period), Norway (May 2024) and Poland (June 2024).

Readmission cooperation

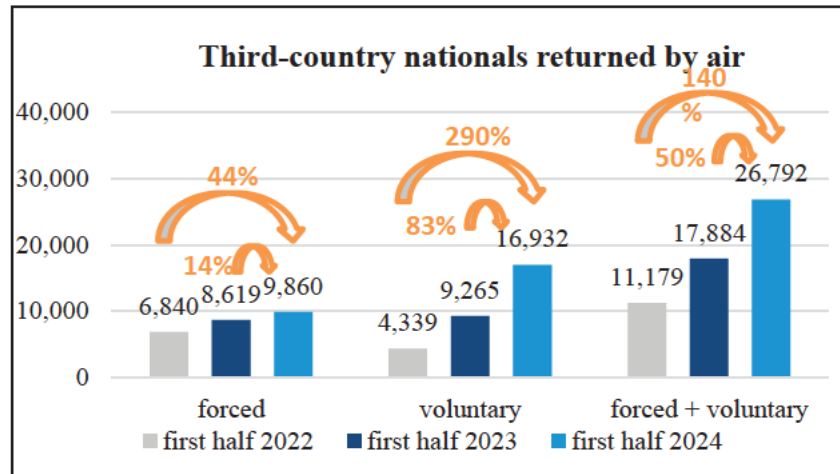
In January-June 2024, most requests for identification and/or the issuance of emergency travel documents in the framework of readmission cooperation were sent to Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Georgia and Pakistan. The overall ratio between the requests for identification and the issuance of travel documents is about one third (1:3). [Frontex]



Requests and issued emergency travel documents for top 10 third country nationals in January-June 2024

The Article 25a Visa Code mechanism continues to deliver results, triggering favourable dynamics in the cooperation with the third countries.

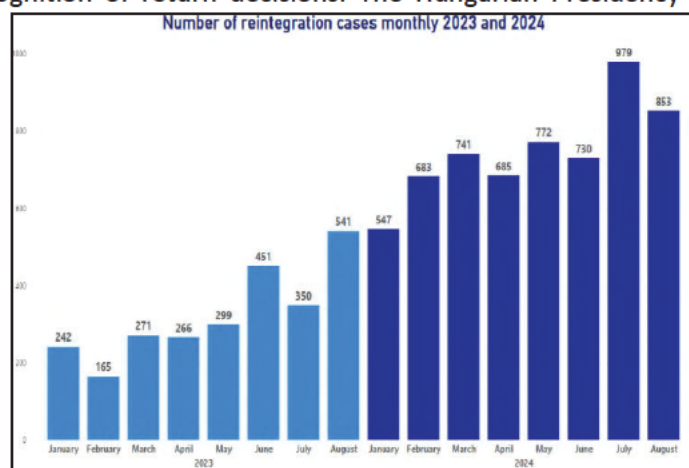
Frontex support



- Frontex supported the return of almost 27 000 third-country nationals in the first half of 2024, a record number representing almost 45% of total returns from the EU. For Nigeria (86%), Bangladesh (80%), Tunisia (68%), Pakistan (68%), and Iraq (65%), the priority third countries under the Return Roadmap, Frontex support was even higher. 63% of returns supported by Frontex were voluntary returns.
- Most returns came from **Germany, Cyprus, France, Austria, and Belgium** (Austria and Belgium replace Sweden and Italy in the top 5). The top third countries were **Georgia, Türkiye, Albania, North Macedonia and Tunisia**.
- 73 **Return Specialists** (+24 compared to the same period in 2023) supported 13 Member States with return and reintegration counselling, return operations assistance, return IT systems and third country cooperation. In addition, 79 **Frontex Return Escorts and Support Officers** (+4) provided ground support, assistance during transit and escorting tasks to over 10 000 third-country nationals.

Operational and policy response

- Following the February 2023 European Council conclusions and the **Commission Recommendation on mutual recognition**²⁰, Member States including Latvia, Spain, Czechia, Hungary, and Estonia have continued to advance on the mutual recognition of return decisions. The Hungarian Presidency is launching a pilot project on mutual recognition with a view to further encourage and support the use of mutual recognition.
- The implementation of the **EU Reintegration Programme (EURP)** is continuously growing, with national authorities allocating an increasing percentage of their caseload to the EURP. All Member States²¹ are now trained and actively using the Reintegration



²⁰ Commission Recommendation of 16.3.2023 on mutual recognition of return decisions and expediting returns when implementing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council, C(2023) 1763 final

²¹ Including the Schengen Associated Countries Norway, Switzerland and Iceland.

Assistance Tool (RIAT). Between January-August 2024, 26 Member States submitted almost 6 000 cases to 35 countries of origin (mainly Türkiye, Iraq, The Gambia, Georgia and Nigeria), noting a significant increase compared to the same period in 2023 (2 585). With this, we are steadily progressing towards the streamlining of reintegration support of returnees from the EU.

- The implementation of the 2023 **Return Roadmap** is continuing with the exchange of national best practices and the preparation of the guideline by the Commission on the return of third-country nationals posing a security threat. In addition, key takeaways of the CY-led workshop on incentives for effective returns are being transformed into a website by the Commission to be launched after the HLN meeting in late September. NL and NO will join forces again and share their knowledge and expertise on the topic of “last-minute asylum applications” in mid-October, which is a very important element for the Pact implementation.

The Schengen Information System and return

- As of 31 July 2024, there were over 470 000 return alerts in the Schengen Information System²². In July, around 60 000 alerts were **deleted or converted** into a refusal of entry, giving a rough indication of effective returns, including voluntary departures²³. Around 80 000 return alerts were marked as **suspended**. As of August 2024, over **8 000 return alerts** in the SIS had a **security marking**, meaning that the third-country national(s) is (are) considered a threat to national security [eu-LISA]
- Since the entry into operation of the updated Schengen Information System in March 2023 until June 2024, there were around 19 000 hits on SIS return alerts on exit at the external borders in another Member State than the issuing Member State, giving an indication of exits from the Schengen area through another Member State. [eu-LISA]

3 INTERNAL SECURITY OF THE SCHENGEN AREA

Key messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following increased sea patrolling, the use of the Syria-Lebanon-Cyprus sub route on the Eastern Mediterranean route by migrant smugglers was suspended. In reaction to weather conditions and increased law enforcement activity, the use of the Central Mediterranean route also decreased. However, migrant smugglers continue to show high adaptability to external factors in their modi operandi and smuggling routes. • In the first half of 2024, the intensive law enforcement actions in the ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam contributed to a decrease in cocaine seizures, while there were more seizures of cocaine destined for Scandinavia and Spain. At the same time, cocaine laboratories have continued to be detected in EU countries with EU-based cocaine production/extraction becoming more professional. • The crisis in the Middle East is a catalyser for radicalisation to violent extremist and terrorist

²² Some Member States have been able to upload return alerts for return decisions taken before the return alert feature was introduced (7 March 2023), as also required by the Regulation.

²³ However, not all deleted alerts necessarily reflect effective returns, since an alert is also deleted when a person has obtained the right to stay, or it can be a technical deletion. Furthermore, not all real conversions of return alerts into a refusal of entry are recorded in the SIS since some Member States do not use the conversion functionality, but rather delete the alert and create a new one.

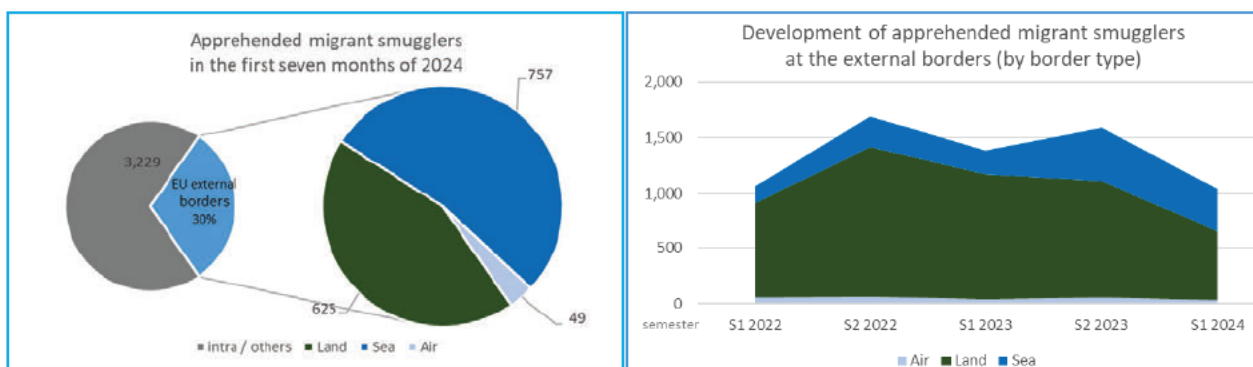
ideology. The main threat is represented by self-radicalised lone actors who are often influenced by terrorist and radicalising material circulating online.

Outlook

- Criminal networks are expected to continue taking advantage of the high demand in smuggling services, be it for entering or exiting the EU, moving within the EU, or fraudulently obtaining legal residence status in EU countries. Regional vulnerabilities, ongoing crises and changes in the geopolitical environment outside the EU will continue to act as compounding factors to the high demand for smuggling services, and thus for the operations of criminal actors.
- The threat of new sources of drugs, new modi operandi and (new) synthetic drugs emerging on illegal markets remains. A possible reduced availability of heroin may increase the risk of more potent substances such as nitazenes spreading in the EU.

3.1 Threats to the internal security of the Schengen area and EU response

Migrant smuggling



- In the first seven months of 2024, a total of around 4 660 migrant smugglers were apprehended and this marks a 36% decrease compared with the corresponding period of 2023, proportionate to the fall in detected irregular border crossings. [Frontex]
- Criminal networks continue to adapt their methods responding to law enforcement activity in the first half of 2024:
 - Smuggling events decreased on the **Central Mediterranean route** has been largely determined by the capacity, commitment and effectiveness of third countries authorities preventing irregular migrants from departing towards the EU.
 - The **Turkish-Italian corridor** was reactivated in May 2024 after being halted in winter. Nevertheless, between January and August the number of successful departures from Türkiye towards Italy dropped by 59% compared to the same period in 2023.
 - The **sub-route from Eastern Libya to Crete**, consolidated since the end of 2023, remained active in the first seven months of 2024. Criminal networks use generally smaller capacity fishing vessels whose ability to sail is largely regulated by the height of waves / sea-conditions regardless of the weather.
 - On the Eastern Mediterranean route, the **sub-route Syria/Lebanon-Cyprus** consolidated in the first quarter of 2024, with a peak in March 2024, only to become inactive since mid-April following the increased sea patrolling by Cypriot authorities. The main pressure continued to

manifest on the Eastern Aegean islands amid continued push factors in Türkiye and an adaptation of migrant-smugglers' *modi operandi* (use of speed boats; target previously less affected islands etc.).

- Small boats remain the primary means of crossing the **English Channel**, although criminal networks are also using lorries on ferries and experimenting with alternative methods like sailing vessels. Simultaneous departures and the use of larger boats are common, reflecting the ongoing high demand for smuggling services across the channel. [Europol]
- Migrant **smuggling by air** remains prevalent and **Greece** remained a key hub, in particular given the availability of fraudulent documents. [Europol]
- The **facilitation of secondary movements** via the Western Balkan region has largely shifted from the Serbian-Hungarian border to the **Croatian-Slovenian corridor to Austria, Germany and Italy**, following law enforcement activities at the Serbian-Hungarian border. Criminal networks also relocated low-level facilitators, in particular drivers, from other operational areas to this sub-route. [Europol]

Fight against organised crime and drug trafficking

- The **most threatening criminal networks** maximise opportunities in the legal world, with 86% of networks infiltrating or setting up legal business structures in sectors such as construction, hospitality and logistics. This allows the groups to stay under the radar and launder and reinvest their proceeds, with 1 out of 3 able to maintain power and survive over 10 years. These criminal networks operate across borders, often with an end-to-end control over the main part of the criminal process, and target children and young people to recruit as criminal soldiers. Half of the most threatening criminal networks active in the EU are involved in drug trafficking as their main criminal activity with a majority specialising in cocaine trafficking. [Europol]
- **West Africa** remains a key transit point for **cocaine** from Latin America. Criminal networks are increasingly using sailboats and other types of vessels (e.g. bulk carriers) alongside traditional container trafficking. Cocaine was the most seized drug at the external borders with over 33 tonnes seized in the first half of 2024, below the 2023 record of 47 tonnes. [Frontex, Europol]
- The EU is a major producer of **synthetic drugs**, including amphetamines and methamphetamines, which are increasingly trafficked globally. **New psychoactive substances (NPS)** are an emerging threat, with reports of increased production, use, and seizures in the EU, including possible links to Ukrainian criminal networks. EU-based cocaine production and extraction have also become more professional since 2023. [Europol]
- **Cannabis** remains the largest drug market in the EU, with indoor cultivation being the primary source. It continues to be heavily trafficked from North America and the Western Balkans. There are concerns about alternative sources with the detection of **herbal cannabis** shipments from North America. Varied trafficking routes and the rise of synthetic and semi-synthetic cannabinoids may lead to a diversification of cannabis products and an increase in their potency. [Frontex, Europol]
- Seizures at the external borders of **heroin** increased significantly from 33 kilos in the first half of 2023 to 238 kilos this year. Most of the heroin on the EU drug market is sourced from Afghanistan and smuggled into the EU overland via south-east Europe and the Western Balkans by Turkish, Iranian, and Pakistani organised crime networks. [Frontex]



Europol (April 2024): Decoding the EU's most threatening criminal networks

- 64 tonnes of drugs were seized in Frontex-coordinated joint operations in 2024. [Frontex]

Terrorist threats stemming from the conflict in Gaza

- Terrorist organisations are exploiting the conflict in Gaza to promote their narrative and radicalise and recruit vulnerable individuals. In particular younger users are targeted online. [HOME]
- In the summer of 2024, Europe witnessed two terrorist attacks connected to the situation in the Middle East in Germany and France and more foiled attacks in Austria, France and Germany. Many Member States keep their threat level high in relation to the events in Middle East, and the Islamist terrorist threat is still seen as the most relevant, stemming mostly from lone actors and small cells.

3.2 EU response and cross-border cooperation

Operational response with Europol support

- Europol’s European Serious and Organised Crime Centre (ESOCC) supported 798 law enforcements operations in the first half of 2024, 202 of which concerned migrant smuggling and 201 of which concerned drug trafficking. Europol also supported 213 Action Days across the Schengen area (32 related to drug trafficking and 27 related to migrant smuggling).
- The exchange of information between Member States and Europol via SIENA has seen a gradual increase over the years, with a high of 58 650 accepted contributions in the first half of 2024, 5 000 more than in January-June 2023. [Europol]
- There were 7 million searches of the Europol Information System (EIS), Europol’s central information and intelligence database, in the first half of 2024, a decrease of 1 million searches compared to the same period in 2023. The EIS contains information on more than 1,6 million objects or persons of interest possibly linked with serious or organised crime. It can be directly accessed by the competent authorities in the Member States. [Europol]
- **EMPACT 2023 results:** 15 644 investigations initiated, 13 871 arrests (of which 6 801 facilitators of migrant smugglers), EUR 797 million in assets and money and 197 tonnes of drugs seized, over 7 500 victims of trafficking in human beings identified. These results are better than in 2022, demonstrating the increasing added value of EMPACT cooperation. [Europol]

Dismantling criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling

In April 2024, authorities of 7 Member States, supported by Europol, dismantled a criminal network primarily composed of Egyptian, Iraqi, and Syrian nationals involved in smuggling migrants from Iraq through Belarus or Russia to the EU, with Germany and the UK as main destinations. The network adapted quickly to visa regulations and geopolitical changes, using cars, vans, and pickup trucks not intended for human transport. Operating across borders, they managed clandestine financial flows via the hawala network, accepting payments in cash and cryptocurrencies. Some illegal profits are suspected to have funded terrorism. Migrants were charged between €3,000 and €5,000 per person.

Europol deploys guest officers and staff in 11 Member States to help them fight migrant smuggling and has several regional Operational Task Forces (OTFs) ongoing on some of the main migrant smuggling routes.

EU policy response

Migrant smuggling

- The **Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling** has advanced through a series of thematic expert meetings to develop comprehensive cooperation. These efforts have focused on developing operational actions to counter digital smuggling, and other aspects of migrant smuggling, together with Europol, Eurojust and UNODC, setting the stage for concrete outcomes at the second International Conference and building on the work done thus far. [HOME]
- The Commission has launched a €12 million call for proposals to establish new common operational partnership projects (COPs) with third countries. This initiative aims to enhance prevention and law enforcement cooperation against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, reinforcing structured collaboration between EU Member States, third countries, and international organisations.
- The **legislative negotiations** on the proposal for the Directive laying down minimum rules to prevent and counter the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and stay in the Union are still ongoing in the Council. The new rapporteur has been nominated but a report from the Parliament has not been issued yet. A general approach has been reached on the proposal for the Regulation on enhancing police cooperation in relation to the prevention, detection and investigation of migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, and on enhancing Europol's support to preventing and combating such crimes. [HOME]

Drug trafficking

- The **new mandate of the EU Drugs Agency (EUDA)** equips it with tools to better address current and emerging challenges of the drugs situation in the EU.

Progress on the European Ports Alliance

Establishment of the European Ports Alliance Public Private Partnership:

Membership: EU Member States, European Commission, EU Agencies and bodies (Europol, Eurojust, EUDA, EPPO, MAOC-N), 31 ports²⁴, and 10 sectoral organisations²⁵.

The 2024 **workplan** agreed upon at a Senior Officials Meeting in April 2024 centred around 4 clusters:

1. Operational cooperation between law enforcement, customs authorities and the private operators working in the ports.
2. Fighting infiltration of organised criminal groups and corruption in ports to prevent corruption and threats to ports' workers.
3. Policy development and implementation of policy to reinforce the compliance with the international standards on the safety and security of the ports.
4. Using innovative technologies to strengthen the resilience of logistical hubs and shipping sector to drug trafficking.

Technical workshops to implement the actions under the 4 clusters of the workplan are taking place until November 2024. The output will feed into the **Senior Officials' Meeting** (end of 2024/beginning 2025 – indicative), which will prepare a **Ministerial Meeting** (first half of 2025).

Counter-terrorism and firearm trafficking

- EU response is three-fold:
 - **Protection of public spaces:** new PROTECT call for funding under the Internal Security Fund (ISF) from December 2023 to fund the protection of places of worship.
 - **Countering terrorism financing:** promoting exchanges of information between European investigators on financing to Hamas through the Counter Terrorism Financial Investigators Network. Europol created a specific working group in which Member States and third countries are cooperating.
 - **Countering propaganda, mostly online:** engagement with internet service providers, together with Europol, to remove violent and terrorist content online. Exchanges take place in the framework of the EU Internet Forum as well as globally through the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and the Christchurch Call Foundation. The Commission has prepared a Handbook on borderline content, including sections raising awareness about content that has emerged since 7 October 2023 that could lead to radicalisation.

²⁴ Antwerpen (BE), Varna (BG), Hamburg (DE), Algeciras (ES), Trieste/Monfalcone (IT), Gdansk (PL), Rotterdam (NL), North Sea Port (BE-NL), HAROPA (Le Havre, Rouen, Paris) (FR), Dunkerque (FR), Marseille (FR), Riga (LV), Helsingborg (SE), Göteborg (SE), Bremerhaven (DE), Barcelona (ES), Valencia (ES), Gioia Tauro (IT), Helsinki (FI), Amsterdam (NL), Genova (IT), Klaipeda (LT), Constanta (RO), Sines (PT), Rijeka (HR), Tallinn (EE), Koper (SV), Bilbao (ES), Burgas (BG), Stockholm (SE), Ploce (HR)

²⁵ AQUAPOL, ESPO, FEPORT, ECSA, WSC, ECASBA, CLECAT, ESC, DCSA, CoESS.

- In March 2024, the co-legislators reached a political agreement on the recast **Regulation on import, export and transit of civilian firearms**, introducing clear and harmonised procedures for the import, export and transit of firearms for civilian use, improving their traceability throughout the EU.

Cross-border cooperation

File	State of Play
Example of Member States established regional cooperation	<p>Schengen “whole-of-route” regional cooperation initiative (AT, BG, EL, HU, RO, SK) launched in February 2024:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aim: to reinforce the operational cooperation through joint compensatory measures to fight cross-border crime and prevent secondary movements. • Meetings held: Two meetings at the strategic level chaired by the Schengen Coordinator. Two meetings at technical level chaired by RO and BG. Upcoming meetings to be chaired by AT (October) and Hungary (November). The Schengen Coordinator will also call for another meeting to take stock of what was achieved at the technical level. • Results: reported better cooperation with neighbouring states, contributing to significant decrease of the migratory pressure along the route. Positive results from the cooperation on anti-migrant smuggling. Mutual understanding that improved situational awareness will help to address common challenges in a more coordinated way
Assessment of Council Recommendation (EU) 2022/915 on Operational Law Enforcement Cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation levels vary between Member States and different measures. • Operational law enforcement cooperation remains fragmented across Member States, complicating cross-border operational cooperation. • Best practices in some Member States are not replicated despite broader potential. • Limited progress on data collection and reporting, hampering the compilation of comprehensive statistics at Union level. • The Commission plans to establish a technical expert group to share best practices, address challenges and identify areas for improvement.
Commission Recommendation (EU) 2024/268 on Cooperation on Serious Threats to Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilateral discussions led by the Schengen Coordinator on the amended Schengen Borders Code and internal border control implications. • Third technical meeting for the regional cooperation initiative on the Western Balkan route planned for October 2024.
Reinforced Regional Cooperation (Schengen States and Partners Beyond the EU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second Schengen Senior Officials Meeting focused on regional cooperation held on 12-13 September 2024. • Conclusion: close regional cooperation between Member States significantly reduces the need for reintroducing internal border controls. Importance to structure and already associate the EU candidate countries to Schengen governance and cooperation.
Directive on Information Exchange Between Law Enforcement Authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member States must transpose the directive by 12 December 2024. • Directive mandates establishing and equipping Single Points of Contact (SPOC) with a single electronic Case Management System interoperable with SIENA. • Post-transposition, the Commission will evaluate implementation.

4 SCHENGEN EVALUATIONS AND SCHENGEN CYCLE DEVELOPMENTS

Updates on Schengen evaluations

Jan-Aug	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adoption of the thematic evaluation report on drug trafficking • Schengen evaluations of Croatia, Poland, and Hungary • Schengen evaluation of Norway and Sweden (visa - delayed due to COVID-19 pandemic) • Schengen evaluators' training and official certification • Adoption of the Schengen country evaluation reports for Lithuania and Finland • Schengen Coordinator visits to Latvia, Finland, Estonia, Croatia, and Poland
Sept-Oct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adoption of the comprehensive evaluation report for evaluation of Latvia • Schengen evaluation of Slovakia • Schengen Coordinator visit to Hungary • Schengen evaluators' training and official certification • On-site visits for the 2024 thematic evaluation on return (Italy, Norway, the Netherlands) • Verification visit to Greece (external borders)
Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schengen evaluation of Czechia • Revisits to Cyprus, Greece (return) and Ireland (internal security) • First-time evaluation of Ireland in parts of the Schengen acquis it requested to take part in (drugs cooperation, judicial cooperation in criminal matters, Art. 26 CISA)
Dec	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schengen evaluation of Denmark (visa - delayed due to COVID-19 pandemic) • Verification visit to Spain (large-scale IT systems) and Denmark (external borders) • Finalisation of the 2024 thematic evaluation on return • Finalisation of the follow-up assessment of the 2019 thematic evaluation on European Integrated Border Management
Jan-Jun 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schengen evaluations of Switzerland, Slovenia, and Austria

Schengen Cycle 2024/2025

