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**NOTE**

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From: Presidency  
To: Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)  
Subject: The migratory situation on the Western Balkans route

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In the external dimension of migration, one of the main objectives of the Hungarian Presidency is to organise comprehensive and forward-looking discussions regarding all the main migratory routes, which will be concluded by evaluating the state of play of the Western Balkan route in the framework of EMWP.

1) Joint efforts to reduce irregular migration

Our close cooperation with the region is essential to effectively address common political, security and migration challenges. Cooperation in the area of migration is particularly important given the region's position as a major corridor for migrants to the EU, especially from the Middle East, Asia and to a lesser extent, Africa. The EU and the Western Balkan countries share a common goal of maintaining regional stability and security, and regular dialogues, including at Ministerial level, and joint action plans help to foster cooperation. In addition, Frontex is actively involved in strengthening border management in the Western Balkans, including through joint border surveillance operations and capacity building activities. The partnership also plays an important role in the EU's enlargement policy, as addressing migration issues is part of the EU's accession criteria. Frontex also implements a regional programme aimed at strengthening border security capacities of the Western Balkan partners.

The European Union and its Member States are fully committed to provide assistance to the countries of the region, as reflected in the political, financial and instrumental support they have consistently delivered over the years. Cooperation in the field of migration intensified in recent years due to increased migratory pressure in the region. The EU provides substantial support to the Western Balkan countries to strengthen border management, tackle migration and improve asylum systems. A key element of cooperation is the fight against irregular migration, including combating migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, as well as in the framework of the Global Alliance against migrant smuggling launched at EU level in November 2023, and the establishment of effective return mechanisms. On 5 December 2022, the European Commission published a 20-actions Action Plan for the Western Balkans region. Its implementation is being monitored by an Action File established in the framework of MOCADDEM. The implementation of the measures included in the Western Balkans matrix has been assessed by MOCADDEM on 25 October 2024 (WK 12653/2024) and the updated document will be presented to Coreper II on 27 November 2024.

Years of joint efforts by the Commission, EU Member States, Western Balkan partners and EU Agencies have resulted - according to Frontex data - in a 80% reduction in the number of irregular border crossings into the EU via the Western Balkans migration route in the first 8 months of 2024 compared to 2023. Overall, the main nationalities of migrants detected so far in 2024 on the Western Balkans route are Syrians (32%), Turkish (28%), Afghans (9%) and Iraqis (3%). Following Serbia's police operation since the end of October 2023, the busiest part of that route in terms of irregular border crossings remains the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. While figures on the Serbia-Hungary border remain low in absolute numbers, they have been on a slight upward trend in recent months, with some fluctuations, as smuggling networks have also been recently observed partially shifting their activities back to this border. Data from the IOM show that a total of 49,297 arrivals were registered in the Western Balkans partners up to October 2024 (192,182 in 2022 and 163,521 in 2023), and 91% of illegal border crossers are men and 9% are women.

## 2) Cooperation on returns

In recent years, the enhancement of return systems in partner countries, including by concluding readmission agreements with key countries of origin, has become a key priority. EU's additional financial and technical support, facilitated through Frontex, is aimed at enhancing cooperation on returns and readmission with countries of origin. To this end, the EU has concluded new status agreements with nearly all Western Balkan countries allowing Frontex to deploy additional European Border and Coast Guard standing corps teams in the region to strengthen cooperation in the area of addressing irregular migration, strengthening border management. New status agreements - based on the extended mandate of the 2019 EBCG Regulation - were signed with North Macedonia (October 2022), Montenegro (May 2023), Albania (September 2023) and Serbia (June 2024). Negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina were launched in February 2024 and the agreement is expected to be signed in early 2025. The revised status agreements enable Frontex joint operations and deployments also along the borders between Western Balkans partners. For them, the support provided by Frontex is an essential component and they consider, as a matter of priority, the exploration of potential future possibilities of return operations to be supported by Frontex from a third country to a third country, in particular those countries where Frontex is already deployed.

In 2024, a total of 315 persons were returned to 37 countries of origin from the Western Balkans partners (Bosnia and Herzegovina: 136, Serbia: 90, Montenegro: 38, Albania: 21, Kosovo: 23, North Macedonia: 7) through the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes conducted by the IOM with EU support. This figure already surpasses the total number of returns for 2023, which was 213. The main countries of origin are Türkiye (47), the Russian Federation (28), Azerbaijan (25), Nepal (21), Bangladesh (19), Egypt (16) and Morocco (15). This year, the IOM has registered the highest percentage of women returning to countries of origin, averaging at 20% of total returns, compared to an average of 15% for the past 7 years.

Forced return operations to countries of origin remain limited, with the notable exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which effectively conducts such operations to Türkiye, Pakistan, Morocco, Bangladesh, and other third countries, facilitated by strong diplomatic relations. The pilot project in Bosnia and Herzegovina has carried out 53 forced returns.

Return and readmission operations for Western Balkan nationals are functioning effectively, with no significant challenges or restrictions reported by EU+ countries.

### 3) Visa alignment

While progress has been achieved recently in terms of readmission to the Western Balkans countries, visa-free arrivals in these countries and the increased activities of migrant smugglers and human traffickers, often accompanied by violent actions against law enforcement agencies, remain a major challenge impacting on the volume of irregular arrivals registered in the EU. According to Europol, migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings remain prevalent throughout the Western Balkans. Most reports pertain to smuggling operations from Bosnia and Herzegovina through Croatia and Slovenia towards Austria, Italy, and Germany. Among the smuggled nationalities, Syrians and Turkish people are predominant, though Afghans, Egyptians, Chinese and other nationalities are also involved. Smuggling takes place through passenger cars, vans, and trailers, some of which are equipped with hidden compartments to transport irregular migrants.

The Western Balkan partners have taken steps towards visa harmonisation, but most of them still operate visa-free regimes with some third countries, including Türkiye, China, Belarus and Russia, which contributes to the increasing irregular migration pressure into the EU.

### 4) Outcome of the last meeting at ministerial level with our Western Balkans partners

On the occasion of the EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Forum held on 28 October 2024, the EU and the Western Balkan partners reaffirmed their commitment to address irregular migration, strengthen border protection and fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. Discussions focused on establishing sustainable asylum and reception capacities and ensuring effective return of irregular migrants to their countries of origin. On behalf of the EU, the Hungarian Presidency and the Commission underlined the importance of supporting the region, and encourage Western Balkan partners to take further steps towards EU visa policy alignment, given its proven ability to reduce illegal border crossings along the route. The Western Balkan partners were committed to align their visa policies. They also communicated that they would continue to rely on EU capacity building support for returns to countries of origin and reaffirmed that, despite declining numbers, developing reception capacities is a priority, alongside the fight against smugglers, but that further improvements are needed, for which EU support (alongside international organisations, notably IOM and UNHCR) is key.

Questions for Member States:

- 1) *How do Member States envisage migration cooperation with the Western Balkan countries for the upcoming period? What should be the key priorities for the EU's future cooperation with the Western Balkans on tackling irregular migration? In your view, what are the main achievements so far and the future key areas where further progress is needed? How might changing geopolitical dynamics in the Western Balkans affect the EU's migration cooperation efforts?*
  - 2) *How can the EU help foster deeper regional cooperation on migration among Western Balkan countries to create a more unified response to migration challenges? How can the EU and those countries work together to address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement, such as poverty, conflict, and instability in migrants' countries of origin?*
  - 3) *How should the EU and its Member States adjust migration policies to address emerging challenges in the region, in particular to tackle trafficking in human beings and migrant smuggling including prevention of these crimes?*
  - 4) *In your opinion, what are the main challenges that the Western Balkan countries' authorities face while working on issues related to irregular migration? How could they be better supported, through either EU or bilateral instruments, to effectively overcome the difficulties that may arise?*
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