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General Secretariat

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**LIMITE**

**JAI  
MIGR  
ASIM  
RELEX  
COWEB  
ELARG**

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**WORKING DOCUMENT**

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From: Presidency  
To: Delegations

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N° prev. doc.: WK 8506/2023 INIT; 17883/2022 INIT

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Subject: Updated Action file to follow up on the EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans

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In view of the COREPER meeting of 24 May 2024, delegations will find attached an updated Action file to follow up on the EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans.

**Operational coordination mechanism actions for  
the external dimension of migration**

**MOCADEM**

**ACTION FILE**

**Updated Action file to follow up on  
the EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans  
(doc 8506/2023 merged with some, possibly remaining actions from 17883/2022)**

17 May 2024

MOCADEM will revert to this action file and take stock of implementation during Q4 2024

Action	Lead actor(s)	Status	Way ahead incl. timeline	Comments incl. on results
<b>I. Strengthen border management along the routes</b>				
<p><b>1. Strengthen Frontex joint operations and deployments along the EU's external borders with Western Balkan partners based on the existing Frontex Status Agreements.</b></p> <p><b>Launch and swiftly conclude the negotiations of the revised Frontex Status Agreements with Albania, Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina,</b></p>	Frontex, Commission, MS	<p>Implementation is ongoing. Frontex Joint Operations in place (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (without executive powers), Montenegro and Serbia).</p> <p>Need to swiftly move to conclusion and implementation of the remaining status agreements, including through engagement at political level, when deemed useful.</p> <p>Council authorised negotiations on upgraded</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- [COM] First technical negotiating rounds with Bosnia and Herzegovina to be organised, with a view to swift conclusion of the Status Agreement, possibly by the end of 2024. <u>Timeline: Q2 2024</u></li> <li>- Serbia: Procedural steps on the Council side to be finalised for the Frontex Status Agreement to be ready for signature by Commissioner Johansson (visit to Serbia tbc)</li> <li>- [Frontex] Based on the mandate and subject to partners' approval, swiftly</li> </ul>	<p><i>DK: Supports all six partners in Western Balkans in enhancing border management through a regional capacity building facility on integrated border management (WBIBM). The project is implemented by IOM (MEUR 5) between 2021-2024.</i></p>

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<p><b>enabling Frontex joint operations and deployments along the borders between WB partners</b></p>		<p>Status Agreements on 18 Nov 2022 for Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Albania</p> <p>New Status Agreements were signed with: North Macedonia (October 2022), Montenegro (May 2023) and Albania (September 2023). They allowed new deployments in North Macedonia and Montenegro. The one with Albania allows for provisional application from 5 March 2024 (New deployments under the new Status Agreement: in the coming months - discussion on the new operational plan already very advanced).</p> <p>A final agreement on the text of the Status Agreement with Serbia was reached in March 2024. Signature of the new Status Agreement by Commissioner in Serbia in the coming weeks. Tentative timeframe for additional deployments under the new SA: in 2024.</p>	<p>organise and enhance joint operations and deployments, especially along the borders between WB partners, in line with the new Status Agreements. Provide WB partners with technical, operational and other kinds of relevant support. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- [MS] Provide necessary personnel and resources to ensure the availability of EU assets, notably in Frontex joint operations. <u>Timeline: ongoing</u></li> <li>- [MS] Continue and explore new possibilities for providing bilateral support to WB partners. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> </ul>	
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		With Bosnia and Herzegovina, COM stands ready to start the negotiations as soon as their negotiating team informs COM that they have concluded internal discussion on procedures and their negotiating stance. Technical discussions should start in April 2024, to be followed by formal negotiations.		
<b>2. Ensure the effective implementation of the adopted IPA programme to strengthen border management capacities</b>	Commission, Frontex	Two currently on-going regional programmes on border management in the Western Balkans: 1. IPA 2021 regional support to border security – MEUR 7, implemented by Frontex: contribute to increased implementation by the Western Balkan partners of EU compliant border security measures by capacitating partners to operationalise and implement Frontex Status Agreements (outcome 1); improving knowledge and better equipping partners to align their Integrated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Frontex organised the kick-off conference and initial visits to the beneficiaries. 2024 activities:</li> <li>- (outcome 1) IBM Working Group (WG) and Women in Border Police in the Western Balkans are established. Training for IBM WG is in progress. Next events for both WGs are scheduled;</li> <li>- (outcome 2) Planning and conduct of FIELDS workshops. Mapped the beneficiaries needs for firearms-related trainings. Assessment for the technical equipment needs is in progress. Trainings for border guards on border checks,</li> </ul>	<p><i>More in general, IPA 2023 Individual measure to strengthen migration management capacities in the Western Balkans for 2023 – MEUR 54 + MEUR 6 additional support to the regional anti-smuggling programme.</i></p> <p><u><i>Timeline: Roll-out in 2024, contracting ongoing</i></u></p> <p><i>Moreover, IPA 2024 support (MEUR 60) currently in adoption procedure after agreement of IPA Committee. Adoption expected in the Summer 2024. Includes MEUR 13 for returns and MEUR 47 for bilateral projects in Serbia, BiH and North Macedonia.</i></p>

		<p>Border Management (IBM) strategies with EU IBM standards (outcome 2); and increasing partners' expertise in setting up fully operational National Coordination Centres (NCCs), interoperable with the EUROSUR framework (outcome 3)</p> <p>2. IPA 2022 Individual measure to strengthen border management capacities in favour of the Western Balkans for 2022 – MEUR 39.2 (notably for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo* and Serbia).</p>	<p>surveillance, screening and debriefing, fundamental rights started. Situation analysis and needs assessment for English trainings ongoing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- (outcome 3): NCC fact-finding missions to the beneficiaries started.</li> <li>- Focus on enhancing situational awareness, especially at the airport BCPs in Sarajevo and Belgrade.</li> <li>- Strengthening of border control and screening at the airports, especially Belgrade and Sarajevo.</li> </ul>	
<b>3. Review and potentially increase Frontex support to Member States at the EU external borders</b>			Actions in the European Union	
<b>4. Support financially Member States who bilaterally support Member States and Western Balkan partners in their border</b>			Actions in the European Union	

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management activities				
<b>II. Ensure swift asylum procedures and support reception capacity</b>				
<p><b>5. Continue supporting Western Balkans partners in further strengthening and accelerating their asylum and registration procedures</b></p>	<p>EUAA, Commission, EUDEL, MS</p>	<p>Joint Roadmaps between EUAA and Western Balkans partners being updated and implemented</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Montenegro: The needs assessment for the Second Joint Roadmap will take place by March/April 2024, with its endorsement expected by end of June 2024.</li> <li>- Serbia: Third Joint Roadmap (2024-2026) being finalised in coming weeks.</li> <li>- Albania: Second Joint Roadmap 2024-2027 being finalised in coming weeks.</li> <li>- BiH: Joint Roadmap for 2023-2025 to be adopted.</li> <li>- North Macedonia: Third Joint Roadmap to be endorsed by June 2024</li> <li>- Kosovo: The Roadmap 2022-2024 with Kosovo has pending activities for implementation; the timeframe is being extended till February 2025.</li> <li>- [REDACTED]</li> <li>- [REDACTED]</li> <li>- [REDACTED]</li> </ul>	<p><i>EUAA supported the drafting of Montenegro's response and contingency plan in the context of mass inflow of persons fleeing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine (pending adoption).</i></p> <p><i>Implementation of the IPA III Regional Programme "EU Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management Systems in the Western Balkans – Phase III" is ongoing.</i></p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p><i>SE: support to Western Balkan partners through MPF project: 'Strengthening the regional cooperation on migration management between Western</i></p>

			<p>[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]</li></ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- [EUAA] Ensure implementation of the six EUAA Joint Roadmaps for cooperation, strengthening the asylum and reception systems in line with the Common European Asylum System and EU standards. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li><li>- [MS] Based on available capacities, provide the EUAA with national experts and practitioners or help EUAA organise exchange visits for WB partners to Member States. Cooperate with WB partners at a bilateral level on</li></ul>	<p><i>Balkans and neighbouring EU Member States in accordance with EU Acquis and international standards – MIRCO’ (MEUR 2, 2024-2026)</i></p>
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			development of reception capacities. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u>	
<b>6. Support the better management of reception capacity through targeted IPA actions</b>	Commission, EUAA	<p>Included in EUAA Joint Roadmaps with Western Balkan partners.</p> <p>Most reception centres in the region have been established thanks to IPA funds:</p> <p>Montenegro: two reception centres with a total capacity of 164 beds. A centre for unaccompanied children has 25 additional beds.</p> <p>Bosnia and Herzegovina: around 3000 places in four EU-funded temporary reception centres in the Una-Sana and Sarajevo cantons.</p> <p>Serbia: 11 reception/transit centers with a total capacity of 2800 places and additional 1500 places for short stay could be made available. This adds to 2 500 beds in asylum centres.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Four out of six Western Balkan partners showed an interest for Frontex/EUAA support for their Contingency Plans in early 2024.</li> <li>- The support started with Kosovo in February/March 2024, with high probability of Albania being the next partner to be supported.</li> <li>- [COM] Carry out targeted IPA actions to support accommodation for and basic needs of migrants and refugees. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> <li>- [EUAA] Continue work on strengthening reception capacity in the Western Balkans, notably by delivering technical support both through the EUAA's in-house expertise, as well as with EU Member State experts and practitioners. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> </ul>	<p><i>Bosnia and Herzegovina: needs to draw up concrete plans for transition to increased responsibility of domestic authorities in taking over the management of reception centres</i></p> <p><i>Serbia: extension of detention facilities ongoing.</i> [REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p>



		<p>Albania: total reception capacities (open centres) of 570 beds, no separate facilities for unaccompanied minors</p> <p>Kosovo: three reception centres with current capacities to host 600 persons.</p> <p>IPA regional project on protection-sensitive migration management on contingency planning, in 2023 Frontex has developed a coordinated methodological approach together with the implementing partner EUAA on contingency planning.</p>		
<b>7. Ensure accurate registration in Eurodac</b>			Actions in the European Union	
<b>8. Set up pilot projects in interested Member States for fast asylum procedures in line with the existing acquis</b>			Actions in the European Union	

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9. Swiftly implement the roadmap on better implementation of Dublin transfers			Actions in the European Union	
10. Step up the comprehensive migration management team in Greece, consider other MS			Actions in the European Union	
<b>III. Fighting migrant smuggling</b>				<i>This heading covers actions to tackle both migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings.</i>
<b>11. Make full use of the newly established EUROPOL Operational Task Force to tackle migrant smuggling</b>  <b>Enhance participation of all Western Balkan partners in the EMPACT cycle 2022-2025 and its Operational Action Plan</b>	Europol, Commission, MS	<p>Implementation is ongoing.</p> <p>All Western Balkan partners have a Liaison Officer present at Europol Headquarters. Albania deployed a second one while Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina deployed their first in 2023.</p> <p>All Western Balkan partners have nominated a National EMPACT Coordinator (NEC) – to facilitate participation in EMPACT actions. All have stepped-up their participation in EMPACT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- [Europol] Together with Western Balkan partners, ensure the effective implementation of operational agreements and working arrangements. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> <li>- [Europol] Continue the participation of liaison officers from WB partners deployed at Europol in the Joint Liaison Task Force on Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking of Human Beings. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> <li>- [Europol] Provide support through the Financial and Economic Crime Centre</li> </ul>	<p><i>Need for continuous enhanced engagement with Europol Taskforces, EMPACT, Joint Investigation Teams and exchange of SIENA messages.</i></p> <p><i>DK: Supports all six partners in the Western Balkans on enhancing regional cooperation and coordination in countering smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings. The project is implemented by IOM (MEUR 2) between 2021-2024.</i></p>

		<p>activities, including for some of them as leaders or co-leaders of operational actions.</p> <p>Increased exchanges of information via SIENA and participation in an increased number of Joint Investigation Teams.</p> <p>Active participation of Western Balkan partners, including deployment of police officers, in Operational Taskforces “Zebra” and “Ladder”, both dedicated to tackling migrant smugglers.</p>	<p>(EFECC) in the cases of joint migrant smuggling and financial investigations in order to trace, seize and recover criminal assets.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- [MS] Cooperate with relevant bodies in the fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human being, notably through the exchange of staff and field missions, as well as by implementing related EU funded projects. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> <li>- Encourage migrant smuggling investigations to systematically include financial investigations to trace, seize and recover criminal assets.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Milestones under the regional programme to date:</i></p> <p><i>November 2023, Skopje - the Joint Action Day South-East Europe resulted in the arrest of 566 people, including 218 related to migrant smuggling and to the opening of 121 new cases against criminal networks.</i></p> <p><i>December 2023 - as part of the Task Force Western Balkans (TFWB), AT and IT police forces launched a number of activities to intensify the exchange of information in the fight against migrant smuggling, including an operational early warning network. The TFWB covers the Western Balkans partners, EU MS, Frontex, Eurojust, Europol and Interpol.</i></p>
<p><b>12. Ensure the quick and effective implementation of the recently adopted IPA regional anti-smuggling programme</b></p>	<p>Commission</p>	<p>Implementation is ongoing, including outreach to beneficiaries.</p> <p>Regional Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership with WB partners launched at the EU-Western Balkans Justice and Home Affairs ministerial 3-4 Nov 2022.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- [COM] 18 October 2023 - 18 October 2024 - anti-trafficking media campaign in the form of a TV spot raising awareness against Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) will run in Kosovo.</li> <li>- 23 January 2024 - a first EMPACT awareness workshop</li> </ul>	

		<p>Immigration Liaison Officers' Network Regional meeting in Tirana on 28-29 March 2023 further operationalised the Partnership by strengthening links among practitioners from MS and Western Balkan partners.</p> <p>Regional IPA project (EUR 36 M) on anti-smuggling signed in June 2023, and being rolled-out in all Western Balkan partners.</p> <p>Participation at the High-Level International Conference on a Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling held on 28 November 2023. All joined the Call for a Global Alliance.</p>	<p>(co-organised with GIZ) was held in Sarajevo.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Further support to EMPACT activities with a focus on migrant smuggling and THB priorities, but also high-risk criminal networks; Discussions to include Türkiye in the scope of the programme to reflect "whole-of-route" approach are ongoing.</li> <li>- Montenegro: finalisation of the first International Operations Room in the region (expected for July 2024) to be followed by the other partners in the region.</li> <li>- Interoperability missions planned to take place in all Western Balkan partners to assess the needs at the border crossing points.</li> <li>- The EU-WB SOM of 16 April 2024 will discuss joint actions to fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings.</li> <li>- As a follow-up to the Global Alliance, the Commission is organising a conference on</li> </ul>	
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			digital smuggling on 29-30 April 2024. Western Balkan partners invited to participate.	
<b>13. Implementation of the Toolbox addressing the use of commercial means of transport to facilitate irregular migration to the EU</b>			<p>Actions in the European Union and with WB partners, as well as in other third countries.</p> <p>Targeted use of measures from the Toolbox on Transport Operators</p> <p>Timeline: Ongoing</p>	
<b>IV. Enhancing readmission cooperation and returns</b>				
<b>14. Increase EU action to step up returns from Western Balkan partners</b>	Commission, EEAS, Frontex, MS	<p>Support for assisted voluntary returns to countries of origin under a Regional IPA project implemented by IOM (especially from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina).</p> <p>Limited results on forced returns, except for Bosnia and Herzegovina. (120 non voluntary returns carried out primarily to Bangladesh and Türkiye)</p> <p>The EU-funded pilot project for forced returns</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- [COM] Use Joint Readmission Committees to strengthen cooperation and urge Western Balkan partners to ensure readmission of third country nationals, in accordance with the third-country nationals' clause of the readmission agreements. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> <li>- [EEAS, MS] Enhance support to WB partners in building readmission cooperation with key countries of origin. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> </ul>	<p><i>Meeting of Western Balkans route videoconference on 11 April 2024 focused on return and readmission issues.</i></p> <p><i>DK: Supports all six partners in the Western Balkans on enhancing national migration management and readmission systems through a regional capacity building facility on readmission (WBCAP). The project is implemented by IOM (MEUR 5) between 2021-2024.</i></p> <p><i>The project also supports all six partners in the Western Balkans on return and sustainable reintegration of migrants from</i></p>

		<p>with Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUR 500 000) has been extended to Serbia with a similar budget (remains to be contracted by Serbia).</p> <p>As part of the regional protection-sensitive migration management programme project, Frontex has increased its support, with training of return escorts, ongoing gaps assessment of return case management system, workshops with MS experts dedicated to engaging with specific countries of origin.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide diplomatic support in improving the return/readmission cooperation of the Western Balkans with the main countries of origin and transit, notably by concluding their own bilateral readmission agreements.</li> <li>- A NL Seconded National Expert has been deployed at EU Delegation to Serbia as of 2 April to provide support to Serbian authorities on returns.</li> <li>- Frontex to continue to support the Western Balkan partners e.g. with deployments of return specialists, on return case management systems, return counselling, on working with countries of origin, training and facilitating the acquisition of travel documents. Frontex may deploy a return coordination officer to Serbia provided Serbian authorities agree (answer pending since September 2023).</li> <li>- New regional IPA programme to cover both voluntary and non-voluntary returns for a total of MEUR 13 under</li> </ul>	<p><i>third countries. The project is implemented by IOM (MEUR 2) between 2022-2024.</i></p> <p><i>Implementation of the AMIF-funded action "Strengthening of Migration Management, Asylum and Return Procedures in the Western Balkans" by Hilfswerk International (HWI) supported by the Joint Coordination Platform of the AT MoI. Key objectives comprise strengthening capacities to align migration, asylum and return procedures with fundamental and human rights as well as the EU Acquis more broadly, fostering regional cooperation and reducing migratory pressures on the EU. Close cooperation with FRONTEX on standards and training to avoid duplication of efforts.</i></p>
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			process of finalisation (adopted by IPA Committee 22 March 2024).	
<p><b>15. Strengthen the operational capacities of the Western Balkan partners to carry out returns</b></p> <p><b>(See actions under point 14)</b></p>	Commission, Frontex, MS	Implementation is ongoing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- [Frontex] Provide support, together with IOM, to WB partners for conducting returns and developing return management systems under the IPA III regional protection-sensitive migration programme, with short term deployments of experts. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> <li>- [COM, EEAS] Continue financial support to the different components of return and readmission, including voluntary and non-voluntary returns.</li> <li>- [COM, Frontex, MS] Support partners in making full use of the Joint Coordination Platform (hosted by AT) to inter alia foster exchanges of best practices and strengthen cooperation on return at operational level. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> <li>- [Frontex] Provide complementary capacity</li> </ul>	<i>Additional IPA III support under finalisation (see previous point)</i>

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			building to Western Balkan partners under the Strategic Programme on Technical Assistance Projects for Third Countries on Readmission, Return and Reintegration (TAP4RRR SP).	
<b>16. Convene Joint Readmission Committees with Western Balkan partners bilaterally for effective implementation of the EU Readmission Agreements</b>	Commission, MS	<p>Yearly Joint Readmission Committees take place with the Western Balkans (except Kosovo), as per the Readmission agreements signed with the Western Balkan partners.</p> <p>EU-Albania Joint Readmission Committee on 5 October 2023.</p> <p>EU-Serbia Joint Readmission Committee on 15 March 2024. Issue with the implementation of the third country national clause still present but at smaller scale than in late 2022.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- [COM] Hold Joint Readmission Committees with Western Balkan partners. Timeline: Montenegro 19 April 2024 ; Bosnia and Herzegovina: Next Joint Readmission Committee planned for Q4 2024</li> <li>- [COM] North Macedonia: Next Joint Readmission Committee to take place in 2024 (no date yet)</li> </ul>	
<b>V. Achieving the alignment of visa policy</b>				

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<p><b>17. Swiftly align visa policy with the EU</b></p>	<p>[Western Balkan partners]</p>	<p>Western Balkan partners have taken steps since October 2022 to align their visa policy with third countries that were causing most issues in terms of irregular arrivals to the EU. [REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>Steps taken by Western Balkan partners since October 2022:</p> <p><b>Albania:</b> did not renew the seasonal visa exemptions for Egypt, India and Russia. [REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p>	<p><i>Continue monitoring legislative and operational developments on visa alignment, including during SOM visits to the region in early 2024, and at the EU-Western Balkans SOM of 16 April 2024.</i></p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p>	
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		<p><b>Bosnia and Herzegovina:</b> ended visa free regime for Bahrein in 2023 and for Oman in January 2024 but introduced seasonal visa free for Saudi Arabia. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]</p> <p><b>Montenegro:</b> reinstated visa requirements for Cuba, Ecuador and UAE residents. Uzbekistan was removed in 2024 from the seasonal visa free list. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]</p> <p><b>North Macedonia:</b> reinstated visa requirements for Botswana and Cuba. The decision to temporarily allow nationals from Azerbaijan to enter without a visa expired and was not extended. [REDACTED] [REDACTED]</p>		
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<p><b>18. Continue outreach and closely monitor operational developments on the ground as well as legislative actions by Western Balkans partners, including actions towards visa alignment</b></p>	<p>Commission, EEAS, MS</p>	<p>Outreach and monitoring are ongoing.</p> <p>Overall commitment to visa alignment expressed by all WB partners through the joint statement endorsed at the EU-Western Balkans Justice and Home Affairs ministerial in Nov 2022 and in October 2023 and in bilateral meetings in the margins of these ministerial meetings.</p> <p>The Tirana Declaration endorsed at the EU-Western Balkans Summit of 6 Dec 2022 stresses the need for swift visa policy alignment.</p> <p>The Brussels Declaration endorsed at the EU-Western Balkans Summit of 13 December 2023 welcomed the progress made on alignment with EU visa policy by several Western Balkan partners and called for further alignment to prevent abuse of EU Member</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- [COM, MS] Intensify high level contacts and raise visa alignment in all relevant contacts with WB partners, with a view to full alignment, encouraging concrete timeframes in particular on prioritized third countries. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> <li>- Continue to encourage Serbia to adopt further decisions in visa policy alignment in the coming months.</li> <li>- Western Balkan partners should be requested to strengthen cooperation with relevant airlines to increase vigilance in the application of the requirements for travelling to this region to help to prevent the abuse of visa free regimes, [REDACTED]</li> <li>- [COM, MS] Support and coordinate with WB partners and MS outreach towards relevant airlines regarding requirements for travel to the Western Balkans. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> </ul>	<p><i>Continue monitoring legislative and operational developments on visa alignment, including via Seventh Visa Suspension Mechanism Report, to be adopted in 2024.</i></p> <p><i>EU-Western Balkans SOM on 16 April 2024 (Brussels).</i></p> <p><i>Political outreach by Home Affairs Commissioner to WB Ministers to continue in 2024.</i></p> <p><i>SE: Support to Visa Capacity Building in Bosnia and Herzegovina (VCBB), MPF project to harmonize visa legislation and visa-related policies in accordance with EU Visa-code and Schengen (MEUR 1,2, 2024-26).</i></p>
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		<p>States' migration and asylum systems.</p> <p>Frequent outreach since Summer 2022 to all Western Balkan partners both at Commissioner's as well as SOM level visits to the region in 2023 and 2024 and at working level, including at Justice, Freedom and Security Subcommittees.</p> <p>████████████████████  ████████████████████  ████████████████████  ████████████████████  ████████████████████  ████████████████████  ████████████████████</p>		
<p><b>19. In the context of the visa suspension mechanism and in accordance with Article 8 of the Visa Regulation, ensure continuous monitoring and assessment of the action of the partners in the</b></p>	<p>Commission</p>	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>The Commission has proposed a general revision of the visa suspension mechanism to ensure that it is fully applicable inter alia in severe situations of non-alignment of visa policy.</p> <p>Visa alignment is one of the three main</p>	<p>The proposal to review the visa suspension mechanism should be adopted by the co-legislators as early as possible in the next legislative mandate. Encourage Western Balkan partners to strengthen measures to counter irregular migration including through the Toolbox on transport operators and control at airports, in particular until the revised visa suspension mechanism is in force.</p>	

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<p><b>region towards visa alignment</b></p>		<p>recommendations of the Sixth Visa Suspension Mechanism Report published in October 2023 for the relevant Western Balkan partners covered (all except North Macedonia).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Monitoring and assessment of the action of the partners on visa alignment in the Seventh Visa Suspension Mechanism Report, to be adopted in 2024.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>20. Issue joint demarches and coordinate messages by the EU delegations and Member State embassies in all Western Balkans partners as well as key countries of origin and transit</b></p>	<p>EEAS, Commission, MS</p>	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>Continue monitoring and assessment of the action of the partners towards visa alignment in the Seventh Visa Suspension Mechanism Report, to be adopted in 2024.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- [EEAS/EUDEL/COM] Contacts and coordination to be initiated by concerned EUDEL. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> <li>- [EEAS] Address the visa policy alignment issue regularly in HoMs' meetings with relevant partners' authorities. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> <li>- [MS] Intensify high-level contacts, coordinate messages and participate in joint demarches. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> <li>- [MS] Regularly participate in HoMs' meetings with relevant partners' authorities. <u>Timeline: Ongoing</u></li> </ul>	<p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p>

\*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.

## **Annex 1 – Common messages to the Western Balkan partners**

### **[General support]**

- Welcome the dynamic and recall the long-standing and close partnership between the EU and Western Balkan partners and express the EU's desire to continue and deepen this mutually beneficial cooperation, built around shared priorities.
- Express the commitment to maintain and further strengthen the EU-Western Balkan relations in line with the EU's enlargement policy.
- Emphasise the EU's political commitment to strengthening its relationship with the entire Western Balkan region, including in the Home Affairs area, and particularly with regard to border management, asylum and reception, return and readmission, the fight against smuggling and visa policy alignment, in line with the EU Action Plan on migration for the Western Balkans.
- Highlight promising outcomes of Ministerial Forums in Tirana in 2022, Skopje in 2023, and the need to put them in practice.

### **[Socio-economic support]**

- Highlight the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans. European Commission has unveiled a substantial BEUR 3.2 investment package to support transport, digital, climate and energy connectivity projects in the Western Balkans. The projects are designed to bring tangible benefits to all six partners in the region.
- Point out that the Economic and Investment Plan is set to mobilise up to EUR 30 billion of investments. The Plan will help close the development gap between the European Union and the region and support the post-pandemic economic recovery.
- Underline that the EU is providing humanitarian and development assistance to many of the key countries of origin from which migrants usually flows to the Western Balkans as well as to persons displaced from Syria and Afghanistan to neighbouring countries.
- Underline EU support to ensure that guarantees and protection will be provided to vulnerable groups of people in transit countries.

### **[Priorities in the field of migration management]**

- The EU remains committed to provide capacity building, with the aim of Western Balkan partners' taking full ownership of their asylum and reception systems. In the meantime, the EU is committed to continue providing material, technical, financial and operational assistance to ensure that the asylum and reception systems of Western Balkan partners are able to manage increased migration flows, while ensuring democratic values, respect for human rights and the rule of law.
- Emphasise the great importance to align visa policies in the region with the EU visa policy and ensure the implementation of commitments by Western Balkan partners in this regard.
- Stress the importance of accurate migration situational awareness and timely exchange of information.

- Underline the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach to migration governance, which entails tackling the root causes of irregular migration, combating migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons, ensuring dignified and sustainable return and reintegration, and other aspect of migration and mobility.
- Highlight the importance of awareness-raising and information campaigns which draw migrants' attention to the opportunities, risks and measures undertaken.
- Promote the increased joint operational efforts and coordination between EU Member States, Western Balkan partners and countries of origin to disrupt smuggling networks.
- Emphasise the regional EU-funded 'Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership' that was launched to strengthen cooperation through joint investigations, stronger exchange of information, joint training for law enforcement and the judiciary and capacity building. The Operational Partnership will build on several ongoing initiatives, including the 'Common Operational Partnership' (SCOPE) and the operational activities under EMPACT.
- Highlight that the implementation of the regional anti-smuggling and trafficking action for the Western Balkans worth MEUR 36 has started (June 2023), with the objective of strengthening cooperation on police operations, investigations and prosecutions.

#### **[Border management]**

- Emphasise the increased EU support for border management in the Western Balkans.
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- Highlight the need to improve the coordination and implementation of planned measures based on the European Integrated Border Management (EIBM).
- Underline that negotiations of Frontex status agreements with and Bosnia and Herzegovina should be concluded as a matter of urgency.
- Highlight that the Commission is implementing an assistance package worth MEUR 39 under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) to strengthen border management in the Western Balkans, mainly through the provision of specialised equipment and the operationalisation of migration facilities.
- Further insist that Western Balkan partners improve management of arrivals at airports, to mitigate consequences of visa free regimes.

#### **[Return and readmission]**

- The EU is committed to create a holistic approach to return management and cooperation on readmissions, including sustainable support for reintegration in countries of origin.

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- Underline that EU and Western Balkan partners agreed on the importance of returns and implementation of readmission agreements with an emphasis on the need to enhance asylum and reception systems across the region in line with EU standards.
- Highlight that the EU is willing to support and facilitate cooperation on return, readmission and sustainable reintegration between Western Balkan partners and the main countries of origin of irregular migrants.
- Highlight importance of efficient implementation of readmission agreements with WB neighbouring countries, notably in the area of shortened/accelerated procedures [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- Highlight the importance of efforts under the Joint Coordination Platform (JCP), which aim to support and coordinate operational measures implemented in the Western Balkans region, in particular in the field of returns and readmissions.
- Underline the EU's readiness to assist in building capacities with knowledge and skills on different aspects of return, readmission and reintegration.

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