



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Ursula von der Leyen
The President

Brussels, 20 March 2023

Dear colleagues,

At last month's Special Meeting of the European Council, we agreed to strengthen and accelerate our work with an ambitious set of operational measures on migration and border management. Ahead of our next meeting, I would like to update you on progress. The terrible loss of life in the shipwreck off the coast of Calabria at the end of February was a vivid reminder of the urgency for action.

While the challenges of migration are constantly evolving, the solutions share a common thread. A fair and sustainable solution can only be found in a European and balanced approach. We can achieve much more when we act together.

This is true for all our key goals: effective external borders, working with partners to prevent irregular departures and break the business model of the smuggling networks, supporting those in need of international protection, offering safe and alternative legal pathways, and returning those with no right to stay. Our discussion on competitiveness will also serve as a reminder that, in addition to reskilling and upskilling our labour force, facilitating access to the labour market for third-country nationals, including through the recognition of skills and qualifications, can help answer our own needs. It is also an important element in our engagement with partner countries.

Balance is at the heart of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, and this is why we must keep up the momentum to advance in line with the Joint Roadmap of the European Parliament and Council towards agreement before the end of this legislature.

In the meantime, the operational measures set out in my letter and discussed in our February meeting show how much we can already do now. I outlined four areas for immediate action: on strengthening external borders; on border procedures and expedited returns; on addressing secondary movements and ensuring effective solidarity; and on working with partners to improve migration management and return. In the space of just one month, there has already been progress in all these areas.

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Strengthening external borders: On 14 March, the Commission set out a new strategic approach on European Integrated Border Management for the next five years. This is the result of close collaboration with Member States and the European Parliament. It provides a clear framework for cooperation and coordination for over 120,000 European Border and Coast Guard officers from Member States' national authorities and of Frontex.

We need to target our means effectively, to make best use of the EUR 600 million being made available shortly to substantially support Member States with border control and technological equipment. A first objective would be the key border between Bulgaria and Türkiye, where the Commission is working with the Bulgarian authorities to finalise an assessment of needs. Frontex has also been taking a fresh look at overall needs at all external borders. It is expected to reach conclusions at its Management Board next week, identifying key operations for strengthening border protection.

We have continued our close cooperation with partners in North Africa, and the delivery of vessels to Libya continues to reinforce search and rescue capacities. The European Search and Rescue Contact group has been relaunched, offering a platform for Member States to engage with the aim of setting up an enhanced cooperation framework for search and rescue. The Commission has also taken contacts with several Member States on identified discrepancies in the registration of irregular arrivals, and we have agreed with Member States to step up the work of the Blueprint Network to establish a common EU situational awareness and early warning system.

In the Western Balkans, Frontex has started deploying its border guards in Serbia, with already 130 standing corps deployed at its borders with Hungary and Bulgaria. Recently Serbia confirmed its commitment to swiftly start negotiations on a new status agreement which will allow the deployment of standing corps also between the borders of the Western Balkan partners. Negotiations with Montenegro and Albania on status agreements allowing for deployments and joint patrols have taken a decisive step forward. In addition, the new EUR 40 million border protection assistance package for the Western Balkans with modernised equipment is underway.

Border procedures and expedited returns: An agreement has been reached with the governments of Bulgaria and Romania to set up pilot schemes showcasing good practices in accelerated asylum procedures and effective returns, border management and reinforced cooperation with neighbouring countries based on applicable EU and national law. These pilot schemes will contribute to prevent irregular migration, as well as strengthen border and migration management. They are being set up with the financial and operational support of the Commission, Frontex, Europol and the EU Agency for Asylum.

On 14 March, the Commission also adopted a recommendation on mutual recognition of return decisions, made possible by the entry into operation of the revamped Schengen Information System, and expediting return. The aim is to speed up returns by increasing synergies between asylum and return procedures, facilitating faster returns close to external borders and stepping up measures to prevent absconding. The EU Asylum Agency is preparing a guidance document on Safe Third Countries, following discussions in its Management Board this month. Work continues to address different routes, and the Commission is working with the Member States most concerned on the

Action Plans for the Atlantic/Western Mediterranean and the Eastern Mediterranean, while pursuing efforts to implement the EU-Turkey Statement.

Secondary movements and effective solidarity: *New procedures for the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism have been agreed in the Solidarity Platform and the first transfers have now taken place from Spain and Malta, complementing those from Italy and Cyprus. On this basis, it will now be important to continue accelerating transfers.*

We are also monitoring progress with implementation of the Dublin Roadmap, including registration in Eurodac, supporting work that will reduce incentives for secondary movements. The Commission will report on the implementation of the Dublin Roadmap later in the year, as set out at the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 9 March. New support amounting to EUR 200 million will target help on reception, addressing key concerns such as the reception of unaccompanied minors, increasing capacities close to external borders and meeting needs of specific Member States.

Working with partners to improve migration and return management: *Since our last meeting, contacts have been stepped up with key partners. High Representative/Vice-President Borrell, Commissioner Várhelyi and Commissioner Johansson visited the Western Balkans – and we see both growing visa policy alignment and cooperation with Frontex, leading to sustained decreases of irregular migration along the route. We have assisted Bosnia and Herzegovina in stepping up returns to the countries of origin, with similar arrangements to be launched soon also with Serbia. A new EUR 30 million anti-smuggling regional project is bringing together EU and Member State experts to support the Western Balkans partner countries in the fight against smuggling. The Commission will strengthen its monitoring of the visa policy alignment and will present a comprehensive report paving the way for a legislative proposal amending the visa suspension mechanism.*

With partners in North Africa, we continue to equip and train border management and search and rescue services, while also developing the law enforcement and prosecution cooperation essential to countering the organised crime gangs behind migrant smuggling. The first phase of our border protection assistance package for Egypt is being implemented. We have intensified our cooperation across the region to step up returns from North Africa directly to the countries of origin. These are key goals for the more than half a billion euros devoted to current border protection and anti-smuggling projects in North Africa and the Western Balkans. The Commission is also supporting Türkiye to prevent irregular migration flows at the Eastern borders with a new EUR 220 million project for state-of-the-art surveillance equipment.

Given the increasing migratory pressure, the Commission stands ready to mobilise an additional EUR 110 million in 2023 for projects in North Africa on top of the already committed EUR 208 million to support voluntary return, anti-smuggling cooperation, equipment, and training. On 1 March, Commissioner Várhelyi signed five cooperation agreements with Morocco including EUR 152 million in migration budget support. Vice-President Schinas will be visiting Egypt on 26-28 March and Commissioner Johansson will be joined by Italian and French Ministers in a visit to Tunisia soon. We believe in engaging closely with partners in a Team Europe approach.

I therefore encourage you to contribute to these efforts to enhance our common response, including with Commission and Member States' joint visits to partner countries.

Reinforced cooperation with Bangladesh following a comprehensive engagement on migration and proposed measures under the Visa Code has brought real results. Further engagement, including a visit by Commissioner Johansson in November last year, combined with work on the Talent Partnership for labour migration, resulted in nearly all readmission requests now being accepted. Frontex's first return flight to Bangladesh on 15 March is a major landmark.

Planning for the EU Ministerial Forum on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways in May is now advancing, with a specific focus on innovative practices such as well as humanitarian corridors. The Commission will provide at least EUR 480 million in funding for resettlement and humanitarian corridors until 2025, offering to support the resettlement of around 50 000 persons. The Forum will be prepared at technical level with Member States and the EU Asylum Agency.

To continue advancing in our work with external partners we will need to support them in addressing root causes of irregular migration and harness all leverages and tools, including by providing for safe and orderly legal pathways. Over time, we have been building some powerful tools: the Post-Cotonou Agreement is a good example, the most comprehensive legally binding framework on return and readmission and irregular migration yet agreed with 79 African, Caribbean, and Pacific partners. The signature of this agreement is crucial for us to continue supporting cooperation activities in partner countries.

We have shown in the past year how powerful our impact can be when the European institutions and Member States work together in a whole-of-government, Team Europe approach. We will only bring our collective weight to bear if we work together in very practical ways. Pooling our efforts, speaking with one voice, and ensuring that partners see us working together as a single entity, are all essential to keeping up the momentum of action.

Yours sincerely,

Ursula von der Leyen

Follow-up after February Special European Council (situation as of 17 March)

President's letter/EUCO conclusions	Follow-up
<p>1. Strengthening key external borders through targeted Union measures, combining Frontex deployments of personnel and equipment, mobilisation of EU funds to support Member States in reinforcing border control capabilities, means of surveillance and equipment and bilateral funding (including through the voluntary solidarity mechanism). The Bulgaria-Türkiye border to be a priority, open to the involvement of other interested Member States.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-annual strategic policy for European Integrated Border Management adopted by Commission on 14 March. • Frontex review of deployments and priorities ahead of Management Board on 23 March; call for equipment to be put at the disposal of Frontex closed in January 2023, applications from 13 Member States being evaluated. • Launch of a Commission call in mid-2023 to support the purchase of electronic surveillance systems at the external border. • Bulgarian-Turkish border: Commission-Bulgaria joint needs assessment is underway and will be concluded by end March. Actions to support the purchase of equipment at the Bulgarian-Turkish border to be launched in April 2023.
<p>2. Reinforced border management in partner countries:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforced regional cooperation in the Mediterranean to strengthen coordination of search and rescue capacities and border surveillance at sea and land borders of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Increased support for equipment and training will be provided. This will complement continued support to UNHCR and IOM to assist these countries to build their capacity for asylum and reception of those in need of international protection. Work with North African countries and IOM to return people with no right to stay. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search and Rescue: European Search and Rescue Contact Group meeting on 31 January followed up with discussions on situational awareness and private vessels (27-28 February). Cooperation with North Africa partners to be taken forward in upcoming missions (point 11). • Following first delivery in February, two more boats to be delivered to Libya in coming weeks. • Reactivation of the trilateral EU-AU-UN Task Force to support safe pathways and assisted voluntary returns out of Libya confirmed in principals meeting in Brussels on 20 March. • Funds contracted in January 2023, tendering underway for radar equipment to strengthen Tunisia's coastal surveillance and Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre. Support to be expanded to meet Tunisia's needs for maintenance, surveillance equipment, and vessels. • Equipment and capacity building for Egypt: Market search ongoing to find vessels to refurbish, to strengthen Search and Rescue capacity. Second programme being prepared for July 2023 to strengthen management of land and sea borders (drones/electro optical systems).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deployment of border guards from Frontex and joint patrols to support border management in the Western Balkans through the conclusion of new status agreements with Albania, Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This should be complemented by specific support from Frontex and Member States on return. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status Agreement with North Macedonia enters into force on 1 April, deployment of Frontex Standing Corps mid-April. • Technical negotiations concluded with Montenegro and Albania on 22-24 February, now consultation with Member States. • Need to launch formal negotiations with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina underlined in Commission visits.

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	<p>During the visit of Commissioner Johansson to Serbia on 16 March together with the Executive Director of Frontex, Serbia confirmed readiness to start the formal negotiations on the new status agreement.</p>
<p>3. Achieving 100% registration of irregular arrivals of third country nationals at external borders through an assessment by the Commission, in cooperation with Member States, of the state of registration, identifying key measures to reach that objective.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following technical exchange on Eurodac discrepancies, Commission presented gap analysis at Schengen Council on 9 March. • Bilateral meetings between Commission and all Member States underway in the context of the Dublin roadmap implementation (see point 10).
<p>4. The Commission will work with Member States and agencies to develop a common EU situational awareness and improve early warning and operational response, by combining information from sources to include intelligence services and an accelerated deployment of the European border surveillance system.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission and Member States agreed on 14 March to step up the work of the Blueprint network to establish an EU situational awareness and early warning system. • As part of the revamped Blueprint network, EU INTCEN (EU Intelligence and Situation Centre) will provide periodic briefings on migration.
<p>5. Pilot scheme, in the first half of 2023, with interested Member States and in cooperation with partners, for instance along the Western Balkan route, to apply an accelerated border procedure to cover screening (identification), fast asylum procedure (safe third country/first country of asylum, safe country of origin, and security grounds) and immediate return. This would be supported by Frontex, the EU Asylum Agency and Europol.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreement has been reached with the government of Romania on a pilot project for accelerated asylum procedures and effective returns, border management and cooperation with Serbia; exchange of letters between Commissioner Johansson and Romanian Minister of Interior Bode and joint statement published on 17 March. • Agreement has been reached with the government of Bulgaria on a pilot project for accelerated asylum procedures, effective returns, border management and cooperation with neighbouring countries; exchange of letters and joint statement published on 20 March. • Commission and EU agencies will provide the necessary operational, technical and financial support for the successful implementation of these pilot projects.
<p>6. Mutual recognition of return decisions and expedited return procedures: a recommendation by Spring 2023 to use a new feature in the Schengen Information System to identify where someone has already received a return decision by a Member State and to recognise that decision, and to make full use of the existing legal framework to expedite returns.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission Recommendation on mutual recognition of return decisions and expediting returns adopted on 14 March. • The new Schengen Information System was launched and became fully operational on 7 March.
<p>7. The EU should have common lists of Safe Third Countries and Safe Countries of Origin. The Commission and the EU Asylum Agency will support the co-legislators to establish such lists. In the meantime, to support Member States in using existing options on safe third countries and safe</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Asylum Agency guidance document discussed by Management Board on 6-7 March to support the application of these concepts by the Member States based on the current legislation. • Negotiations on provisions on Safe Third Countries and Safe Countries of Origin ongoing under proposals for Asylum Procedure Regulation; the guidance document by the EU

President's letter/EUCO conclusions	Follow-up
countries of origin more efficiently, the EU Asylum Agency will conduct a mapping of the state of play and provide guidance to increase the use of these principles.	Asylum Agency will also support these discussions.
8. The EU Asylum Agency will develop an overview by mid-2023 and report regularly on the reception conditions for asylum seekers, including on detention, in all Member States. The Commission and the Agency will also provide technical assistance to Member States to ensure compliance with reception standards.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As part of the Dublin roadmap, the EU Asylum Agency has gathered information from Member States on reception and detention of asylum seekers for a consolidated assessment. • New call for proposals to support reception capacity for unaccompanied minors (€70 million) and reception capacity near external borders (€50 million). €80 reserved for dedicated programmes for specific priorities (including Cyprus first reception).
9. To ensure implementation of the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism , participating Member States – based on the improvements identified by the Commission – should agree on a significant simplification of the existing relocation processes in the first quarter of 2023 and accelerate pledging, including alternatives to relocation such as financial contributions. The Commission will use the Solidarity Platform to coordinate the matching of pledges with the needs of Member States.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revised Standard Operating Procedures for the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism speeding up selection of candidates for transfer endorsed by the Solidarity Platform on 24 February. • 524 relocations took place so far, 397 from Italy, 111 from Cyprus, 34 from Spain and 16 from Malta. The transfers took place to Germany, France, Croatia, Romania and Luxembourg.
10. Work on the full implementation of the Dublin Roadmap , with the support of the EU Asylum Agency, will be taken forward as a priority to address bottlenecks in the implementation of Dublin transfers. The Commission will monitor this work closely.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dublin Contact Committee on 16 March took stock of Roadmap implementation reviewing actions so far. • Commission will conduct bilateral meetings with all concerned Member States by the end of May to identify and resolve gaps in the implementation of the Dublin system.
11. Central to the EU's work of deepening overall relations with key partners such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Nigeria is to put in place specific initiatives on migration management, in particular to improve returns and readmission , including by increasing returns from the third countries along the route, and to prevent departures . These will include ambitious legal migration pathways, such as Talent Partnerships, boosting international mobility and the development of skills in a mutually beneficial way.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programming of projects in all six countries underway. • Article 25a: next report to be presented by autumn. <p>OUTREACH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bangladesh: Commissioner Urpilainen met Prime Minister Hasina on 7 March; Comprehensive migration and mobility dialogue; Talent Partnership round table on 1-2 March. First Frontex return flight on 15 March, readmission requests now routinely accepted. • Pakistan: Comprehensive migration and mobility dialogue; Talent Partnership round table on 14-15 March. Three joint return operations in February and March to Pakistan, post-arrival assistance provided to returnees by the EU. • Morocco: Commissioner Várhelyi visit to Morocco (1-2 March), signed €624 million package including €152 million migration budget support (first €35 million disbursement made). Talent Partnership round table on 13 April. • Tunisia: Commissioner Gentiloni in Tunis on 26-27 March to discuss Macro Financial Assistance. Commissioner Johansson to travel to Tunis with interested Member States soon, preceded by joint Commission/EEAS Senior Officials

President's letter/EUCO conclusions	Follow-up
	<p>delegation on 21-22 March following FAC discussion on 20 March. Talent Partnership round table (Q2 2023).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Egypt: Vice-President Schinas mission on 26-28 March. Talent Partnership round table (Q2 2023). • Nigeria: next mission being planned to discuss reinforced engagement on migration in the context of readmission negotiations; timing to be confirmed.
<p>12. The Commission will launch new anti-smuggling operational partnerships with Tunisia and Egypt in 2023, building on those in place with Morocco, Niger, and the Western Balkans, with the support of Europol and Eurojust. Regional initiatives should include joint operational teams with prosecutors and law enforcement authorities of Member States and partners. The Commission will also advance Frontex Status agreements with Mauritania and Senegal.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-smuggling operational partnership (ASOP) in Niger operational: building on Joint Investigation Teams, the ASOP will consist of support for investigation and prosecution, border management including with Frontex and EU CAP Sahel, information campaign on risks and legal alternatives to irregular migration. • ASOPs in consolidation phase: Morocco, with Member State-led cooperation to be broadened, including with Niger and Europol; Western Balkans meeting of all partners with EU agencies on 28-29 March. • ASOP partnerships to be launched with Egypt (March) and Tunisia (April) • Funding support: new regional anti-smuggling programme for North Africa (€30 million) for adoption by July will provide capacity building and equipment for criminal justice, border management and international cooperation. Regional anti-smuggling programme with the Western Balkans (€30 million) signed March 2023. • Negotiations for Frontex working arrangements with Niger, and Senegal ongoing. Negotiations with Mauritania (latest round on 8 March) on status agreement.
<p>13. The Commission will complete work in the first half of 2023 on a targeted toolbox of measures to ensure that transport operators do not facilitate irregular migration, including through targeted outreach to transport operators.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission held meetings with relevant airlines on 10 March; follow-up workshops bringing together EU experts and airlines' operational teams to take place in April. • Another aspect of addressing the consequences of using air travel is by confirming and extending the action already taken by Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania to align visa-free access to the Western Balkans.
<p>14. The Commission will work with Member States to ensure a targeted use of resettlement and complementary pathways along the main migratory routes and provide new funding to expand safe and legal avenues for protection.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The EU will provide at least EUR €480 million funding for resettlement and humanitarian admission for 2023-2025 to settle around 50000 persons, and further develop community sponsorship. • High-Level Resettlement Forum will meet in May to discuss resettlement pledges and humanitarian admission, stepping up innovative practices; this will be supported by technical discussions with Member States.
<p>15. To attract skilled workers to the EU, particularly in new technologies, and to facilitate the recruitment process including through easier recognition of skills and qualifications, the Commission will present new initiatives by the end of 2023, and it will</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call launched under the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund for complementary pathways linked to labour mobility (17 January). • June: Commission initiative on the recognition of qualifications of third country nationals.

President's letter/EUCO conclusions	Follow-up
develop a new online platform to support employers in finding talent that matches labour market need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autumn: Commission proposal for a new EU Talent Pool

EU Action Plans - In force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Action Plan for the Central Mediterranean adopted on 21 November with 20 Actions: all either completed or ongoing • EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans adopted on 5 December with 20 Actions: all either completed or ongoing
- Under preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Action Plan on the Eastern Mediterranean route: draft in preparation, political contact taken with Member States most concerned (launched on 9 March) • EU Action Plan on the Atlantic and Western Mediterranean route: draft in preparation, political contact taken with Member States most concerned (launched on 10 March)