

COOPERATION FRAMEWORK BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, THE EU AGENCIES AND THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

Since March 2023, the Commission, Bulgaria and the EU Agencies have been working in the implementation of a Pilot Project building on good practices in the area of asylum, returns, border management and international cooperation. In line with the Commission's statement issued last December when the Council agreed on the full application of the provisions of the Schengen *acquis* in the Republic of Bulgaria and Romania, this Pilot Project has proven effective and deserves to be turned into a more structural arrangement.

Building upon the fruitful and solid collaboration and best practices established through this pilot project with Bulgaria, this **Cooperation Framework on border and migration management** aims to continue the implementation of and consolidate identified tools and best practices, based on the applicable Union and national legislation and with the support of the relevant EU Agencies¹. It will be implemented with the necessary support by the Commission and the relevant EU Agencies. In addition, substantial financial support from the Union for the protection of the Bulgarian external borders will continue to be provided to strengthen border control further.

The Framework takes into account that the Schengen *acquis* will be fully applicable in Bulgaria by, in a first phase, lifting the controls at the internal air and sea borders as from 31 March 2024, in line with Council Decision (EU) 2024/210 of 30 December 2023. Against this background, it includes actions to further reinforce cooperation between Member States and to boost border and migration management activities. The Framework builds on the important contributions by Bulgaria to the well-functioning of the Schengen area over the last years.

In view of establishing a sustainable operating environment, the Framework anticipates the upcoming requirement for Member States to formulate national implementing plans once the Pact on Migration and Asylum is formally adopted.

All activities under this framework are to be conducted in full respect of EU law, including fundamental rights.

- **National governance of migration management**

In view of the preparation for the implementation of the *Pact on Migration and Asylum*, Bulgaria will proceed to:

- Set up an **internal coordination mechanism** between relevant national authorities dedicated to the implementation of the Pact.
- Conduct comprehensive **needs assessments** to map the capacities of the national authorities involved in the migration management process.
- Initiate preparations for developing a national implementation plan for the Pact, including the development of workflows, content, and necessary implementing acts.

- **Border Management**

To ensure a constant level of preparedness at the external borders, notably at the Bulgarian-Turkish border, and building on the solid cooperation established between Bulgaria and Frontex in the context of the pilot project with the implementation of the existing Roadmap and *going forward*:

- Bulgaria and Frontex will revise the Roadmap to ensure that the existing and emerging needs also at the external borders with Türkiye and Serbia are sufficiently covered. Additional sufficient resources will be deployed to continue ensuring adequate border control capacities.
- Bulgaria will continue to implement a **strategic approach to apprehensions and border control**, with the aim to address irregular migration and prevent secondary movements.

¹ Frontex, EUAA, Europol, FRA

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- With the support of the EU agencies, Bulgaria will reinforce its capabilities for identification of undocumented migrants, including through the deployment of document advisers.
- In preparation of the implementation of the politically agreed Screening Regulation, the existing **national independent mechanism** to monitor fundamental rights compliance at the external borders will be enhanced. Bulgaria, the **EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)** and **Frontex** and its **Fundamental Rights Office** will continue to hold training and capacity-building activities.
- **Asylum & Reception**

Following up on the good practices established as part of the pilot project, and looking ahead in view of the preparations for the implementation of the Pact:

- Bulgaria will continue to make best use of the EU Asylum Agency's support as necessary and based on the Operational Plan signed in July 2023 to ensure effective implementation of Dublin Regulation, further strengthening of the Dublin unit and support to the reception system.
- With regard to the best practices that were initiated and well-advanced under the pilot project, Bulgaria will:
 - Finalise the **legislative amendment** for an effective implementation of the asylum accelerated procedure;
 - Adopt the concepts of safe third country and safe country of origin in accordance with the Asylum Procedures Directive and the proposed Asylum Procedures Regulation;
 - Advance the **asylum digitalisation** project, involving the EUAA;
 - Develop an overall **reception strategy**, including by updating the existing **contingency plans** and making use of the EUAA expertise.
- Bulgaria will consider options to improve the mechanisms for limiting absconding.
- **Return System**

Building up on the efforts towards more efficient return process and on the well-established cooperation with Frontex, Bulgaria will:

- Continue actions and best practices identified in the framework of the pilot project, in particular:
 - The tripartite **Working Group Returns** (Bulgaria, Commission, Frontex);
 - Operationalisation of the **Frontex Roadmap (returns component)** and the **BG-Frontex Action Plan on Returns**.
- Finalise the legislative amendment to enhance the link between asylum and return procedures, prepared under the pilot project.
- Implement the **revised AVRR programme**, developed under the Pilot project and as part of the Bulgarian AMIF 2021-2027 programme. Continue leveraging **reintegration possibilities** available under programmes supported by Frontex and with Union funding.
- Maintain participation in EU return /readmission meetings, including **High Level Network on Returns**, to enhance awareness of best practices from other Member States and facilitate exchange of knowledge and expertise.
- Actively participate in implementing actions from the Return Roadmap and Targeted Return Operations Plan, developed by the EU Return Coordinator.
- Implement measures on returns under the Commission Recommendation C(2023)8139 and the EU Presidency document on "making the return systems more effective" (st15925/23) endorsed at the JHA Council on 5th December 2023.

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- **Enhanced police cooperation in the Schengen area**

In line with the ongoing efforts at EU level led by the Schengen Coordinator to strengthen police cooperation in a coordinated manner to prevent cross-border crime and secondary movements, Bulgaria will:

- Step-up **police cooperation** with Member States facing related challenges, notably through regional initiatives with those in the Western Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean routes, to effectively combat cross-border crime and prevent secondary movements based on a whole-of-route approach. In this context, further implement Commission Recommendation C(2023)8139 of November 2023, in close cooperation with the Schengen Coordinator.
- Continue the efforts on investigations to dismantle migrant smuggling and trafficking networks and effective **secondary security checks** using the support of **Europol** as appropriate.
- Continue work on the **Operational Task Force** to counter migrant smuggling set up during the Pilot Project.
- Enhance Bulgaria's engagement in **EMPACT** and its various operational action plans dedicated to tackling the Union's priorities for the fight against serious and organised crime, with a particular focus on anti-smuggling, counter-terrorism and organised crime in line with Commission Recommendation C(2023)8139.