

## **EU Action Plan for the Eastern Mediterranean route**

Managing migration effectively is a challenge that requires a comprehensive European response. The EU takes a comprehensive approach, combining actions in and with partner countries to enhance the effective control of its external borders and strengthen the efficiency of procedures and the safeguards within the EU, in compliance with EU and international law, EU principles and values, and the protection of fundamental rights.

The European Council<sup>1</sup> invited the Commission to present an **Action Plan on the Eastern Mediterranean route**, as part of a broader approach to help alleviate the pressure on Member States faced with large numbers of irregular arrivals along the route.

This Action Plan identifies operational measures that will contribute to addressing the ongoing challenges along the Eastern Mediterranean route, complementing the actions under way through the EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans<sup>2</sup>, the Central Mediterranean route<sup>3</sup> and the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes<sup>4</sup>. Complementarity between the implementation of the Eastern Mediterranean Action Plan and the other Action Plans will ensure consistency in the overall whole-of-route approach. Furthermore, the Commission continues to actively monitor the situation along different migratory routes and remains ready to act rapidly to address needs emerging from new developments.

Priority actions focus on preventing irregular departures, combatting the smuggling of migrants, , strengthening border management, enhancing return and readmission cooperation, and ensuring effective migration management, improved asylum procedures and sufficient reception capacity and providing legal migration pathways.

In 2022, **43 906** irregular border crossings were detected on the Eastern Mediterranean route, a **113%** increase compared to 2021. **Greece and Cyprus** were particularly exposed to increased migratory pressure in 2022, with arrivals increasing by 89% and 123% respectively compared to 2021. Irregular arrivals in **Bulgaria** remained at lower levels compared to Greece and Cyprus but increased by 113%. In 2022, smugglers further exploited **the route from Türkiye to Italy** with arrivals to Italy registering a 22% increase.

In 2023, the migratory pressure along the route decreased by **14%** from January to August compared to the same period last year, **while irregular arrivals by sea to Greece more than tripled during the period, and boat landings to the government-controlled areas of Cyprus more than doubled**. On this route Syrians, Palestinians and Afghans were the top reported nationalities. Türkiye remains an important transit country for irregular arrivals into the EU via the Western Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean routes.

Efforts of the EU's neighbouring countries in managing migration and addressing forced displacement are significant. There are over 5.2 million refugees from Syria hosted in Türkiye, Lebanon and Jordan. Türkiye hosts over 4 million refugees, including more than 3.3 million registered Syrian refugees. Since 2016 the EU has directed close to EUR 10 billion to assist

---

<sup>1</sup> [European Council conclusions, 9 February 2023](#)

<sup>2</sup> [EU action plan for Western Balkans](#)

<sup>3</sup> [EU action-plan on Central Mediterranean](#)

<sup>4</sup> [EU action plan on Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes](#)

refugees and host communities in Türkiye. In Jordan and Lebanon, respectively hosting 1.3 and 1.5 million refugees from Syria, the EU remains strongly committed to helping both countries in coping with the impact of the Syrian crisis, by providing assistance benefiting both the host communities and the refugees. In 2023, the EU has adopted EUR 90 million for Jordan and EUR 140.5 million for Lebanon. Whenever possible, the EU support works holistically on strengthening of national systems and capacities in the different sectors of intervention to ensure sustainability.

This Action Plan also addresses the need to stem irregular migration through concrete actions targeting relevant **countries of origin and transit** along the Eastern Mediterranean route, including Türkiye and countries in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

The **EU-Turkey Statement** remains the main framework for cooperation on migration along the Eastern Mediterranean route. After the Statement, the loss of life along the route has drastically reduced, and resettlement opportunities for Syrians have increased. The Statement contributed to the overall decrease of irregular arrivals compared to 2016<sup>5</sup>. The EU remains committed to continuing its engagement with **Türkiye**<sup>6</sup>. Together with its Member States, and in accordance with the EU-Turkey Statement, the EU will continue to work with Türkiye to provide support to the Syrian refugees and host communities. The EU and its Member States will continue to step up engagement with Türkiye in a Team Europe approach. Political and technical dialogue is ongoing with Türkiye on migration and security. The next EU-Türkiye high-level dialogue on migration will take place on 23 November 2023 and work is ongoing to identify operational outcomes for the Dialogue.

The Commission expects Türkiye to uphold its commitments under the EU-Turkey statement, in line with the European Council conclusions of October 2021, including prevention of irregular migration from land and sea routes, and resuming returns. Both the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement and of the UN Palermo Protocol against the smuggling of migrants by land, sea and air would send a powerful message by the EU and Türkiye to deter smugglers. The alignment of Türkiye's visa policy with that of the EU is also important in the management of irregular migration.

The cooperation between the Commission, EU Agencies (The European Border and Coast Guard Agency ('Frontex'), European Asylum Agency - EUAA, Europol) and Member States' authorities on migration and border management along the Eastern Mediterranean route is complemented by targeted initiatives, such as the Memoranda of Understanding with Greece<sup>7</sup> and Cyprus<sup>8</sup> agreed in 2020 and 2022, respectively. As of 20 March 2023, Bulgaria and Romania have successfully been implementing a pilot project with the support of the Commission and the EU Agencies<sup>9</sup> on preventing irregular arrivals and strengthening border and migration management.

The EU institutions, Agencies and Member States will need to work jointly to achieve the goals set out in this Action Plan and to ensure its effective implementation in a Team Europe approach. Reporting and monitoring through the existing Commission and Council mechanisms are instrumental to that end.

---

<sup>5</sup> [Managing-migration: EU-Turkey statement](#)

<sup>6</sup> This Action Plan is without prejudice to the report that the High Representative and the Commission will submit on the state of play of EU-Türkiye relations as tasked by the June 2023 European Council.

<sup>7</sup> C(2020) 8657 final

<sup>8</sup> C(2022) 1129 final

<sup>9</sup> [The European Commission launches a pilot project with BG](#)

The implementation and effectiveness of the actions contained in this Action Plan will be regularly monitored and assessed. Depending on developments, existing actions may be modified or new actions might be added.

## I. Preventing irregular departures, combatting migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings as well as providing legal migration pathways

*Smuggling activities on this route have varied over the years. Criminal networks have used the Evros River, the land border with Greece and Bulgaria and sea routes to the Greek Aegean islands and to Italy to smuggle migrants into the EU. Most of these irregular migrants have sought to continue their journey onwards to other Member States. As regards Cyprus, many irregular migrants arrived in Türkiye legally, often through visa-free arrangements, and then travelled by air or sea to the non-government-controlled areas of the Republic of Cyprus, crossing illegally the Green Line<sup>10</sup> to the government-controlled areas, with the help of smuggling networks. Recently, there has been a decrease in arrivals through the Green Line, but a steep increase in boat arrivals to Cyprus from Syria and Lebanon. Against this background, to prevent irregular departures and arrivals, to provide legal migration pathways and to counter smuggling activities, the EU will step up the work to:*

1. **Strengthen comprehensive engagement with relevant countries of origin and transit in Asia and Africa**, to address the root causes of irregular migration to the EU, to support durable solutions for displaced and vulnerable populations, and to tackle the smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings, including, *inter alia*, via measures promoting skills development, vocational training and sustainable reintegration. In this context, continue to support the implementation of programmes such as the Global Action addressing Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Migrants<sup>11</sup> and the PROTECT programme<sup>12</sup>. Continue cooperation within the framework of the comprehensive migration and mobility dialogues launched with Bangladesh and Pakistan in 2023 and explore the possibility to develop with them Anti-smuggling Operational Partnerships. Roll-out an EU-funded Common Operational Partnership project (EASTEAMS) between Pakistan and EU Member States, aimed at preventing and fighting against migrant smuggling.
2. Implement the **measures of the toolbox on transport operators**<sup>13</sup> engaged in facilitating irregular migration<sup>14</sup>. This includes exploring with partner countries along

---

<sup>10</sup> Since 1974, the Government of the Republic of Cyprus does not exercise effective control over the northern part of the country (35,2% of the territory). The ceasefire line (referred to as the "Green Line") demarcates the areas under the effective control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus and those areas, in which it does not exercise effective control and extends for approximately 180 km across the island. The line does not constitute an external border of the EU.

<sup>11</sup>[https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/projects/global-action-against-trafficking-persons-and-smuggling-migrants-asia-and-middle-east\\_en](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/projects/global-action-against-trafficking-persons-and-smuggling-migrants-asia-and-middle-east_en)

<sup>12</sup> PROTECT programme aiming at strengthening migration management and supporting Migrant Resource Centres targeting Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, and at increasing the effectiveness of responses to trafficking in human beings and the smuggling of migrants in the above countries and Iraq.

<sup>13</sup> [Toolbox addressing the use of commercial means of transport to facilitate irregular migration to the EU](#)

<sup>14</sup> As set out also in the [EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans](#) of 5 December 2022.

the route **the possibility to post liaison officers at key airports to strengthen operational cooperation** and facilitate exchange of information with airlines and competent national authorities. Work on this is already ongoing with Turkish authorities and airline companies and will continue as to improve the effectiveness of passenger screening and border controls at Istanbul airport.

3. Resume and swiftly conclude negotiations on the Commission proposal for a **Regulation on measures against transport operators that facilitate or engage in trafficking in persons or smuggling** of migrants in relation to illegal entry into the territory of the EU. Once adopted, this legal instrument will be fundamental in addressing migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings.
4. **Continue cooperation with Türkiye to counter migrant smuggling**, including through a new Common Operational Partnership project (SCOPE II) aiming to support operational law enforcement and judicial cooperation with the Turkish Police, Gendarmerie and Coast Guard, and actions aimed at implementing Türkiye's Integrated Border Management Strategy, operationalising the National Coordination and Risk Assessment Center (NACORAC), and enhancing passenger screening at airports, funded notably through the EU Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA).
5. Continue support for the **establishment of the International Migration Cooperation Centre in Istanbul** as a coordination and cooperation platform for strengthen border and migration management, including on the fight against migrant smuggling and on return and reintegration.
6. **Enhance cooperation between EUROPOL, Frontex and EUROJUST**, in accordance with their respective mandates, notably by increasing active participation and information sharing of all relevant partners in the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) policy cycle 2022-2025 and its operational action plans (OAPs). **Build synergies between the EMPACT OAP on migrant smuggling and SCOPE II and EASTEAMS projects.**
7. **Provide support to targeted information and awareness raising campaigns** on the risks of irregular migration to the EU, based on lessons learnt from ongoing campaigns with the involvement of EU Delegations and Member States concerned. Convene the European Migration Network Information and Awareness Raising Campaigns Working Group to identify actions supporting knowledge exchange and coordination between Member States and EU bodies on the conception and implementation of migration information and awareness raising campaigns in third countries of concern.
8. Continue offering safe and legal avenues to protection, including through sustained efforts for the **resettlement** of refugees in need of international protection under the 2024-2025 EU resettlement and humanitarian admission scheme. In this context, the EUAA will continue providing operational support to EU+ countries through the Resettlement Support Facility in Istanbul aimed at resettling refugees from Türkiye. The EUAA is also actively exploring the potential for the implementation of similar services in other third countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.
9. Continue efforts to create **legal migration** and mobility opportunities, including through discussions over the coming months involving partner countries such as Egypt, Bangladesh, and Pakistan and interested EU Member States to operationalise Talent Partnerships. .

10. Explore with Member States the possibility to further streamline (Schengen) visa procedures, in line with EU legislation, and to facilitate processing of visa applications.
11. Reinstate the **temporary scheme of short-stay tourist visits** from certain Turkish coastal areas to selected Greek islands in the eastern Aegean to promote people-to-people contacts between Greece and Türkiye.

## II. Strengthened border management

*Reinforcing **effective border management** along the Eastern Mediterranean route, including in countries of origin and transit, is essential to reducing irregular flows. In this regard, the Commission's multiannual strategic policy for European Integrated Border Management<sup>15</sup> provides policy priorities and strategic guidelines to address challenges identified at the EU's external borders. It also provides support for Member States to efficiently use EU funding possibilities, in particular funding available under the Member State national programmes for border management<sup>16</sup>. In this context, the EU Union will step up the work to:*

12. Support **border management capacities at Türkiye's borders**, including through the effective implementation of the EUR 220 million support to increase Border Surveillance Capacity at Türkiye's Eastern border with Iran. Continue engagement with other countries as relevant, notably, in the framework of ongoing border management projects<sup>17</sup>.
13. **Reinforce and improve border management and control** at EU external land and sea borders, by making efficient use of pre-arrival information, efficient border checks procedures and registrations, adequate infrastructure and equipment. This can be achieved by ensuring a sufficient number of trained staff and applying enhanced border surveillance measures. Reiterate that all border management activities must be implemented in full respect of Union and international law, particularly the fundamental rights obligations provided for therein, and that national authorities are expected to ensure such respect, including by giving full support and cooperation to the monitoring mechanisms of the relevant EU agencies on this topic.
14. Continue to support **regional cooperation** among partners in the Southern Neighbourhood, notably Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt.
15. Provide assistance to Greece in **establishing the national integrated maritime surveillance system (NIMSS)** (envisaged under the Greek programme of the Border Management and Visa (BMVI) fund); to Cyprus in making operational the new National Coordination Centre (envisaged under the Cypriot BMVI programme) and to **update the coastal surveillance system**; to Bulgaria for border surveillance equipment (envisaged under the Bulgarian BMVI programme).

---

<sup>15</sup> [COM\(2023\) 146 final](#), adopted on 14 March 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Equipment purchased shall be in line with the requirements of Regulation (EU) 2021/1148, in particular Article 13 on registration in the Technical Equipment Pool of Frontex and with the standards established by the Agency, where such standards exist.

<sup>17</sup> Such as: as the 'Integrated Border Management in the Silk Routes Countries' project covering Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan; Border Management Programme in Central Asia and Afghanistan (BOMCA) supported by Frontex, or the RPAK project implemented in Pakistan (Support to Federal Investigation Agency's capacities for enhanced risk management).

16. Foster the **renewal of cooperation between Frontex and Türkiye** in particular by strengthening cooperation on risk analysis by reinvigorating the Frontex-Türkiye risk analysis network, as envisaged in the Cooperation Plan. Support the implementation of the BMVI project to strengthen border control and the NACORAC capacity building project.
17. **Improve situational awareness at the sea borders, in cooperation with Frontex** and ensure that assistance to persons found in distress at sea is swiftly provided, in accordance with international and EU law. Enhance sea border surveillance in Greece and Cyprus to ensure greater situational awareness and effective reaction capabilities including through stepping up joint work between Member States in the framework of the **European Contact Group on Search and Rescue**. Notably, enhance cooperation by collecting and exchanging information, using EUROSUR, and by engaging in discussions, among others, on the main parameters of various search and rescue scenarios in different areas of the Mediterranean. In this context, provide assistance to develop practices contributing to increased situational awareness for external border control, and maritime search and rescue, e.g. via the BMVI funded European Multinational Mission Surveillance Project (EMMOS).

### III. Enhance return and readmission cooperation

*Strengthening cooperation on returns and readmission remains a priority for all third countries of origin and transit. The EU will therefore continue to engage with relevant third countries of origin on the effective implementation of EU readmission agreements and arrangements. In this context, the EU will step up the work to:*

18. Continue to engage with Türkiye to promote the **full and effective implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement and the EU-Turkey readmission agreement** towards all EU Member States, and to hold regular meetings of the Joint Readmission Committee set up under the agreement.
19. Enhance cooperation between Member States on the Eastern Mediterranean route, Frontex and the Commission to step up returns from the EU, by **strengthening national operational and infrastructural capacities**. Further support the development and implementation of national IT return case management systems based on the RECAMAS model, with the support of Frontex as necessary, and including through targeted gap analyses.
20. Together with Frontex, continue to provide expertise and operational support to Cyprus, Greece and Bulgaria for using to the maximum extent the support available under the **Action Plans on returns agreed between Frontex and each of the three Member States**.
21. Under the Bulgaria pilot project, continue to work to enhance returns through, *inter alia*, the **deployment of return specialists and interpreters**, and support Bulgaria's engagement with third countries on non-voluntary returns, while considering a tailor-made Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programme.
22. Coordinate **joint diplomatic outreach vis-à-vis third countries** of origin and transit, in particular in South Asia and in Africa, with concrete steps to improve readmission, in the framework of the existing EU readmission agreements and arrangements, and of Article 25a of the Visa Code. Joint outreach of Member States can support such

efforts by raising readmission issues with a third country government in a coordinated manner.

23. Support sustainable reintegration in the countries of origin, such as Iraq, including with specific measures to address the social, psychological and professional reintegration of returnees in the origin countries.

#### **IV. Ensure efficient migration management, improve asylum procedures and support sufficient reception capacity**

*The Commission, together with EU Agencies<sup>18</sup> that provide support on the ground, cooperates closely with both Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria to provide a **coordinated response to migration challenges** and establish **an efficient, effective and future-proof migration management system** at national level. In September 2020, the Commission, EU Agencies and Greece signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the joint Pilot for the construction of reception facilities on the islands<sup>19</sup>. Similarly, in February 2022, the Commission and the EU agencies signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Cyprus to significantly step up support to improve migration management<sup>20</sup>. The joint Pilot with Bulgaria also focuses on the implementation of swift asylum and return procedures, with the support of the relevant EU Agencies. Moreover, the Commission supports third countries of origin and transit along the route to improve their asylum and reception systems.*

*To further enhance asylum and reception capacities and procedures, including first reception, the EU will step up the work to:*

24. Support Member States to provide adequate **reception capacity for children and adults**, including by responding to the needs of vulnerable persons and unaccompanied minors. In this context, encourage the full and effective use of national and EU resources to ensure sufficient legal guardians and specialised staff for unaccompanied minors.
25. Ensure adequate **contingency planning**, in line with the relevant EUAA standards and with the support of the Commission and EU Agencies, including as regards screening, asylum procedures and reception capacity in case of higher inflows.
26. **Support Member States to further improve their national asylum and reception systems**, through the full delivery of technical and operational assistance by the EUAA by means of their Operational Plans.
27. **Ensure that sufficient national resources are devoted to migration management**, in view of **further developing IT systems throughout** the migration management chain, aiming at maximum digitalisation and interoperability.
28. **Accelerate further the implementation of the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism (VSM) relocation transfers** from Greece and Cyprus with the active support of the Commission, in cooperation with EUAA and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) by enhancing flexibility and streamlining processes. Moreover, ensure

---

<sup>18</sup> Frontex, Europol and EUAA [and FRA in the case of Greece]

<sup>19</sup> The asylum and reception systems in Greece have been supported through financial and operational assistance since 2015, including the construction of new facilities on the Greek islands (Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Kos and Leros).

<sup>20</sup> Cyprus received support under the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) for the construction of a new open reception centre for applicants for international protection, a new specialised detention facility for returns as well as the reconstruction of the 'Pournara' First Reception Centre.

that **the opportunity for VSM financial solidarity is exploited** to the largest extent possible, including by ensuring swift implementation of the relevant projects.

29. **Continue cooperation with Türkiye on strengthening its asylum and reception systems**, in line with the Common European Asylum System and EU standards, and through the Roadmap for Cooperation between the EUAA and Türkiye's Presidency of Migration Management.