



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Ursula von der Leyen  
The President

Brussels,  
Ares (2023)

Dear colleagues,

*This year has seen the challenges of irregular migration manifest across different routes and different Member States. It has required constant vigilance and determined action. Alongside the essential work of building a sustainable migration and asylum framework, we have also seen concrete delivery on the operational steps we are taking today.*

*I take this opportunity to commend the Spanish Presidency, and others before it, for the tireless efforts to advance the **Pact on Migration and Asylum**. Trilogues are ongoing on the Asylum and Migration Management, Asylum Procedure, Eurodac, Screening and now also the Crisis proposals. We now need to keep up this momentum and **ensure swift progress towards an overall agreement** in the coming months – which calls for both flexibility and determination in our negotiations.*

*In parallel to working on the Pact, we have **consistently acted** in the face of this year's increases in irregular arrivals. The Central Mediterranean route has seen the steepest increases, culminating in the intense pressure seen on Lampedusa in September, where I set out a 10-point plan which we are currently implementing. There has also been a fourfold increase of arrivals to the Greek Islands, as well as heavy pressure on Cyprus and the Canary Islands, as shown recently. Despite an overall decrease in flows, changing patterns in the Western Balkan route demands constant vigilance. We have continued **acting along these routes** through the implementation of the dedicated Action Plans, and last week we presented the Eastern Mediterranean Action Plan, which we are now implementing. Every Member State, whether at the EU's external land and sea borders, or dealing with a rise in secondary movements, is affected by this truly European challenge.*

*All **fifteen priority actions** I noted in my letter to you in January are being addressed, and the Commission has driven forward results. Important steps have been taken – with support to Member States through Frontex and the EU budget; with action to address use of flights for irregular migration; with proposals to update and strengthen our visa suspension mechanism, and with the pilot projects spearheaded by Romania and Bulgaria, which have showcased the effectiveness of fast asylum and return procedures.*

***Relations with our partners** have been taken forward in all key regions. This has included intensified direct contacts. For example, outreach by Commissioner Johansson in the context of Article 25a of the Visa Code, and the recent missions conducted by Vice-President Schinas to a number of countries of origin and transit in West Africa are important to foster cooperation on readmission. Similarly, outreach on visa policy alignment brought improved results as regards the Western Balkans. We need to maintain this work and ensure that we send consistent messages.*

*The **external aspects of migration** are essential for the successful implementation of our policy. These consist of establishing wide-ranging partnerships with key countries, addressing the root causes of migration, preventing irregular departures, fighting the smuggling of migrants, and increasing returns, as well as encouraging frameworks for legal migration. As Team Europe, we can draw on a range of initiatives and tools – such as economic partnerships, legal migration, Global Gateway initiatives, as well as GSP, visa and mobility schemes. It is precisely **comprehensive partnerships** built on areas of mutual benefit that allow us to work with partners on areas such as prevention of irregular migration, returns and readmission cooperation. This is the way forward and we should intensify and broaden our efforts, including as part of the Union's strategic partnership with Africa.*

***First**, we are raising our game on **strengthening external borders and prevention of irregular departures**.*

*We need to **tackle irregular migration at its roots and work closely with partners** to address their challenges as well as our own, in a comprehensive manner. The Memorandum of Understanding with **Tunisia** is a clear example, and we are accelerating work to fully implement all five pillars. We need to address the causes of irregular migration through support for education, job creation and climate adaptation. At the same time, we need to build up the capacity of our partners to conduct effective border surveillance and search and rescue operations. We are providing support to many key partners with equipment and training to help prevent unauthorised border crossings. All five vessels promised to **Libya** have been delivered and we see the impact of increased patrols. Under the Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia, we have delivered spare parts for Tunisian coast guards that are keeping 6 boats operational, and others will be repaired by the end of the year. More is expected to be delivered to countries in North Africa in the coming months. Our support to IOM and UNHCR remains indispensable: protecting migrants along the routes from unsafe situations and returning them home with support to rebuild their lives, is an essential part of limiting onward movements.*

*We will continue to step up our **tailor-made approach to develop partnerships** that can demonstrate the mutual interest of working with the EU on preventing irregular migration that puts so many lives at risk. This needs to be done along all migratory routes. In particular, on the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic route, we need to continue fostering and reinforcing our cooperation on migration management with **Senegal and Mauritania** based on a comprehensive approach.*

*Our priority should also be to establish a strategic and mutually beneficial partnership with **Egypt**. Egypt's role is vital for the security and stability of the Middle East, it hosts growing numbers of refugees, and we have a responsibility to support it. Also, the pressures on partners in our immediate vicinity risk being exacerbated and therefore continued support for and engagement with **Türkiye, Jordan and Lebanon** are particularly important.*

*To strengthen external border control, Member States, on a proposal of the High Representative, could consider enhancing the tasks of **Operation IRINI** by giving more priority to combatting human smuggling and trafficking in the Mediterranean through increased aerial surveillance. We should also constantly work to support partners in strengthening their borders, not only at the borders exploited for irregular departures to the EU, but also at points of entry by migrants at land borders.*

***Second***, we must strengthen joint work on responding to irregular movements by fighting the smuggling of migrants and increasing returns.

We need to take robust action – together and with partner countries – to tackle migrant smuggling along the key routes and at external borders. A first step is joint action to close down the supply chains of organised gangs through information exchange, operational cooperation and campaigns to raise awareness of the risks. The Commission will be making proposals at the end of next month to update our legislative framework to strengthen our collective action on smuggling of migrants, with a strong focus on maximising the impact of Europol and relevant agencies and ensuring that those who engage in illegal acts exploiting migrants pay a heavy price. The current EU legislative framework is 20 years old, and we can do much more to ensure that criminal offences are harmonised, assets are frozen, and coordination strengthened.

Meanwhile, we continue to work with our agencies to build up our cooperation with partners in the Western Balkans and North Africa on anti-smuggling. International cooperation – including at the UN level with the UNODC – is crucial to ensure that we and our partners share the same understanding of the crime of people smuggling, as well as working on operational cooperation and joint investigations to be better equipped to dismantle smuggling networks. This is why the Commission will be hosting an International Conference on 28 November 2023 to create a Global Alliance with a Call to Action, launching a process of regular international exchange on this constantly evolving crime.

Strengthening cooperation on returns and readmission is another central plank of our response to irregular movements, and our strongest dissuasive tool. The return of irregular migrants remains a challenge that we need to overcome together. The recent terrorist attacks in France and Belgium have revealed the need to enhance cross-border law enforcement cooperation and information exchange, as well as to step up efforts to ensure swift and effective returns of irregular migrants.

By the end of July this year, there have been 290 000 return decisions and nearly 64 000 effective returns, which means that the overall share of returns carried out remains low at 22 %. To substantially increase these figures, it is necessary for Member States to pool resources and capacities together under a common EU return system.

The Commission is ready to work in teams with Member States on targeted return actions, with a lead Member State or Agency for each action. We will develop a roadmap that could focus on (1) ensuring that return decisions are issued at the same time as a negative asylum decisions (2) systematically ensuring the mutual recognition of return decisions and follow-up enforcement action; (3) carrying out joint identification actions including through a liaison officers' network in countries of origin; (4) supporting policy dialogue on readmission with third countries and facilitating the issuance of travel documents, as well as acceptance of the EU laissez passer; and (5) organising assisted voluntary return and joint return operations with the support of Frontex.

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***Third***, we need to ***use our collective leverage better***, as part of a ***broader understanding with partner countries***.

*In the course of the year, we have advanced well in laying the groundwork for **Talent Partnerships with five countries in North Africa and in Asia**. In a few weeks' time, we will bring forward proposals for a range of measures to strengthen recognition of the qualifications and skills from abroad that our European economy needs. Skills' gaps in many sectors affect all Member States. In complement to harnessing talents from within the Union, our dynamic green and digital sectors as well as many others will need talent from outside the EU to prosper.*

*Developing labour migration with our partners can be a mutual gain, that feeds expertise and remittances back into the economy of the country of origin. However, for this to be pursued at a significant scale, we need to make clear that **local investment and opportunities for legal migration must go hand in hand with strengthened cooperation on readmission**. Launching mobility schemes in a Team Europe approach, under the banner of Talent Partnerships, would allow the EU to exercise its collective leverage and attain results of a new level of ambition. To that end, the **Commission stands ready to support and facilitate the work of those Member States** who, on a voluntary basis, are willing to pool their weight and take forward this approach. To that end, Commissioner Johansson will invite Member States for a first high-level meeting in November.*

*All of this also points to growing budgetary needs to address the multifaceted migration-related challenges as much for our engagement with third countries as for internal support to Member States. Therefore, the opportunity to ensure that migration priorities – both on the internal and external dimension – are reflected in the **mid-term review of the Multiannual Financial Framework** becomes all the more relevant.*

*Finally, we must be able to act in a **unified manner to guarantee both the security and freedom of our citizens**, strengthening the external borders and avoiding the reinstatement of internal border controls. In this regard, renewed emphasis is needed to ensure that all irregular migrants and asylum seekers are registered in Eurodac, and to enhance the effective implementation of Dublin rules, including resuming transfers where possible.*

*In this time of geopolitical uncertainty and enhanced concern on security, it is more important than ever that we can show citizens that we are able to deliver practical, effective steps on challenging issues such as migration. By working together, we can ensure that migration is managed in an orderly, humane, and fair way, protecting fundamental rights. That means using our collective weight to the maximum: the progress made this year offers a tangible demonstration of how the EU is determined to keep up the momentum to deliver our common work on migration and to reassert the effectiveness of our borders.*

*Yours sincerely,*



Ursula von der Leyen