

Leaders' Meeting on the Western Balkans Route

Draft Leaders' Statement

The unprecedented flow of refugees and migrants along the Western Balkans route is a challenge that will not be solved through national actions. Only a determined, collective cross-border approach based on pragmatic cooperation between national, regional and local authorities can succeed. This is the only way to restore stability to the management of migration in the region and to slow down the flows.

Countries affected should not only talk about and at each other but also with each other. Neighbours should work together not against each other.

Refugees need to be treated in a humane manner along the length of the Western Balkans route to avoid a humanitarian tragedy in Europe. Migrants who are not in need of international protection should be returned to their countries of origin swiftly. All countries have responsibilities and obligations under the Geneva Convention and EU Member States have to fully respect EU law. These obligations must be respected.

The European Commission, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Frontex and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) will support Leaders in the swift implementation of the following operational measures as of Monday:

Permanent exchange of information

1/ Leaders commit to nominating contact points in their private offices to facilitate the exchange of information and coordination; these should be nominated within 24 hours to allow daily exchanges and coordination to begin immediately to achieve the gradual and controlled movement of persons along the Western Balkans route;

2/ Leaders will work with the European Commission to intensify the EU support, using all the tools available, based on joint needs assessments to be launched within 24 hours; immediate efforts should be focused on the provision of temporary shelter and support for all arrivals.

Supporting refugees and providing shelter

3/ Leaders commit to increasing the capacity of their countries to provide temporary shelter, food, health, water and sanitation to all in need. Where these fall short, Leaders commit to make their needs clear and to trigger the EU Civil Protection Mechanism;

4/ Leaders commit to immediately exchange information about these capacities to ensure their optimal collective use;

5/ Leaders will work with the UNHCR who has committed to support their efforts in facilitating this exchange of information and in improving the effective collective use of capacities; they request that UNHCR support be strengthened immediately in particular as regards reception capacity and the provision of humanitarian support;

6/ Leaders will engage in immediate operational contacts with International Financial Institutions such as the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Development Bank of the Council of Europe which are ready to support these efforts financially; they commit to engaging with these International Financial Institutions to act in a coordinated manner.

Managing the migration flows together

7/ Leaders will ensure a full capacity to register arrivals, with maximum use of biometric data. This is vital at the point of first entry into the EU. Registration does not replace the obligation for EU Member States of mandatory registration in line with the common European asylum system rules;

8/ Leaders will immediately exchange information on the size of flows through their countries and where requested on all arriving refugees and migrants on their territory;

9/ Leaders will work with EU Agencies in particular Frontex and EASO to swiftly put in place this exchange of information; these EU Agencies will provide technical assistance in this endeavour;

10/ Leaders commit to step up their national and collectively coordinated efforts to return of migrants not in need of international protection. Technical assistance will be provided by Frontex;

11/ Leaders will work with the European Commission and Frontex to step up practical cooperation on readmission with third countries as part of the implementation of the EU Action Plan on Return; cooperation will be intensified with Afghanistan, in particular in the area of returns.

Secondary Movements

12/ Leaders commit to refrain from facilitating the movement of refugees or migrants to the border of another country of the region without the agreement of that country. A policy of waving through refugees to a neighbouring country is not acceptable.

Border Management

13/ Leaders commit to immediately increase their efforts to manage their borders and increase the coordination of their actions relating to border management. This will include:

- Supporting the full implementation of the EU-Turkey Action Plan;
- Upscaling the Poseidon Sea Joint Operation in Greece in particular Frontex's presence in the Aegean Sea and to significantly strengthen Frontex support to Greece in registering and fingerprinting activities;
- Supporting the commitment of UNHCR to place a particular emphasis on the border between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;
- Looking forward to the immediate implementation of bilateral border-related confidence-building measures between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;
- Setting up a new Frontex operation at the external land border between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania, to focus on exit checks but also the registration of refugees and migrants who have not yet registered in Greece;
- Deploying new Frontex support to detect irregular border crossings and support registration and fingerprinting in Croatia;
- The deployment by Wednesday of 400 border guards and essential equipment through the activation by Slovenia of the Rapid Border Intervention Team (RABIT) mechanism;

14/ Leaders reconfirm the principle that a country may refuse entry to third country nationals who, when presenting themselves at border crossing points, do not confirm a wish to apply for international protection (subject to a prior non-refoulement check).

Tackling smuggling

15/ Leaders commit to stepping up actions against migrant smuggling and call on Europol and Interpol to support Western Balkans Route-wide operations to combat people smuggling.

Monitoring

16/ Leaders agree that the implementation of these commitments should be monitored on a weekly basis.