



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 18 September 2020
(OR. en)

10742/20

LIMITE

**JAI 695
ASIM 61
MIGR 92
COWEB 117
RELEX 632**

NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum
Subject: Western - Balkans - Initiative and "Operational Platform Eastern
Mediterranean Route"
- Presidency discussion paper

I. Introduction

The number of irregular arrivals via the Eastern Mediterranean route last year reached its highest level since the EU-TUR Statement was concluded in 2016, and a significant number of migrants/refugees made their way further towards Northern and Western Europe. As a result, the countries along the Western Balkan route were exposed to considerable challenges along the Eastern Mediterranean route. This will not change in the foreseeable future. The Eastern Mediterranean / Western Balkans region is of great strategic importance for the EU in terms of migration management.

The importance of the Western Balkans has been underlined in various fora and the objective of strengthening the EU's engagement in the region and improving the coherence and coordination of EU Member States' actions has been reaffirmed¹. A stocktaking of non-EU funded cooperation and activities of Member States in the field of migration management carried out by the Croatian Presidency provides a very good basis for operational implementation. Among other things, it has shown that 15 Member States are providing assistance with 228 activities in the region, mostly in the areas of border management and the fight against smuggling of migrants.

Following an assessment of the status quo, SCIFA reached broad agreement on 15-16 July 2020 on the need for the Western Balkans partners to carry out a structured needs assessment that the EU's tailor-made support is carried out in a coordinated manner in the areas of: integrated border management, strengthening of asylum systems and reception capacities, return and readmission and the smuggling of migrants. This operational approach will be based on close cooperation with partners in the Western Balkans and will take into account existing initiatives funded by the EU, the UN etc., in order to avoid duplications. Many Member States, FRONTEX, eu-LISA and EASO expressed their willingness and desire to contribute to a more structured dialogue with the Western Balkan partners and to support the development of a common gap and needs assessment. The Commission underlined its readiness to play a strong active role in this context. There was also a discussion in the framework of the conference between the Heads of the European Border Agencies and the European agencies Frontex and Europol on 12 and 13 August, held under the German Presidency, that targeted coordination and allocation of assistance and operational cooperation with the Western Balkans could be enhanced. A concrete first proposal for the implementation of this operational approach is to take into account the ideas discussed at the Ministerial Conference organised by Austria on 22 and 23 July in Vienna.

1 5312/20 : Joint EASO, Europol and FRONTEX report 'Tackling migrant smuggling in the Western Balkans: Illegal immigration along the Western Balkan Route and neighbouring countries, July 2018 - June2019 '

I. Operational approach in support of the Western Balkans

1. Establishment of the "Operational Platform Eastern Mediterranean Route" and structured approach

In this light, the German Presidency welcomes the clear political support emerged during the Ministerial Conference on 22/23 July 2020 in Vienna and expressed in the Declaration on the “Effective Combating of Irregular Migration along the Eastern Mediterranean Route” to reflect in concrete terms on the establishment of an "Operational Platform Eastern Mediterranean Route" (OP EMR) to promote better coordination of measures against irregular migration in the region. All existing initiatives and structures should be taken into account and close cooperation and coordination between all relevant actors will be ensured. In this regard, the OP EMR should fully respect and complement the EU agencies’ mandates.

The OP EMR will focus on a better coordination of measures among Member States and partners in order to ensure the most coherent use of resources in the field of border management, return and readmission, migrant smuggling as well as asylum. It is intended to contribute to a comprehensive situational overview of the migration situation and related challenges as well as facilitating the rapid matching of needs with additional support offers along the route, including networking of actors and coordination of support offered and its implementation. A concept for the establishment of the OP EMR including its working methods and possible structure is currently being developed at expert level.

These activities will not interfere with the existing mandates and activities of EU agencies. A deliberately streamlined structure, which is still being developed and will be implemented in phases, is intended to ensure capacity to respond rapidly to urgent needs arising, as well as increase flexibility, in particular to prevent and manage crisis situations.

Western Balkan partners, interested EU Member States, Frontex, EASO and Europol as well as the EU Commission and other relevant actors will be involved in the definition of the process and in future activities carried out under the coordination mechanism. EU Delegations should be also closely involved in the shaping of future activities. A demand-oriented approach from the perspective of all partners involved must always be chosen.

2. Emergency action in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Since 2018 the Commission has allocated an amount of EUR 60.5 million for migration management in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH), including both under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and humanitarian assistance funds. These funds have, among other things, contributed to the funding of six temporary reception centres, as well as a COVID-19 emergency tent facility.

Nevertheless, the refugee and migration situation in BIH is again deteriorating. The arrivals of refugees and migrants are now resuming and are likely to increase ahead of winter. By 15 September, some 6,000 persons were registered in the reception centres of the country. In addition, around 3.500 refugees and migrants remain outside, in particular in the Una Sana Canton. The number of people in search of protection or an opportunity to move further on to the EU, is likely to exceed the number of those registered. Most of them come from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, also the number of people from North Africa continues to increase. As weather conditions worsen towards winter, the humanitarian situation is likely to deteriorate further.

Therefore, it is proposed to put an operational focus on coordinated support to BIH in the short term. This could be an impetus for further support activities under the umbrella of OP EMR. Should other Member States wish to make a concrete contribution, an initial coordination in the sense of the OP EMR could take place. It is essential that this is done in close concertation with the EU Delegation in Sarajevo, which plays a leading coordination role for all EU assistance in the country.

III. Further Action

Therefore, general support for OP EMR and concrete involvement in support activities for BIH is requested. Following a structured needs assessment, further coordinated actions will be undertaken.

IV. Question

How can Member States provide concrete support on OP EMR and on a common co-ordinated approach to a BIH emergency action?
