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**NOTE**

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From:	Bulgarian delegation
To:	Council
Subject:	Pilot project at the Bulgarian-Turkish border

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Bulgaria will update the Member States on the implementation of the pilot projection preventing irregular arrivals, strengthening border and migration management, launched with the European Commission as a follow-up to the letter of the President of the European Commission of 26 January, the Western Balkans Action Plan and the European Council Conclusions of 9 February 2023.

The project was launched on 20 March 2023. The pilot foresees the implementation by Bulgaria of targeted tools for border management and screening of third country nationals, conduct of an accelerated asylum and return procedure and cooperation in the fight against migrant smuggling. The project is implemented with the operational and technical support of the relevant JHA agencies (EUAA, Europol and Frontex). It builds on Bulgaria's good practices and experience, including its excellent cooperation with its neighboring countries and the EU agencies present in Bulgaria. The duration of the pilot is 6 months.

After launching the project, two Steering Committee meetings were held, so far. In addition, two technical missions to Bulgaria were carried out by the Commission and relevant agencies.

Bulgaria will update the Member States on the state of play of the implementation of the pilot and the progress achieved so far.

Bulgaria is working to further improve the accelerated asylum procedure and to increase the effectiveness of return. Work is ongoing on legislative amendments for issuing of a return decision at the same time with a negative decision for international protection. Bulgaria is also working on drawing up a list with designated safe countries of origin in line with the Asylum Procedure Directive. Negotiations are ongoing with EUAA on an updated Operational plan in the field of asylum.

In order to streamline the implementation of the asylum and return procedures, Bulgaria started improving the digitalization of the asylum and return systems with the support of the EU agencies and the Commission.

Bulgaria makes full use of Frontex capacity in the areas of border management and return. A Roadmap for strengthened cooperation, including provision of technical equipment and increased deployment of personnel, is pending finalization. The national hosting capacity has been significantly increased. Joint Action Plan on Return will be signed in the margins of JHA Council.

Bulgaria is actively working on national and EU level to improve the cooperation with third country partners on return.

Bulgaria enhanced the cooperation with Europol on anti-smuggling activities to limit secondary movements. An Operational Task Force for countering migrant smuggling is to be set up.

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