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#### NOTE

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From:	European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex)
To:	Working Party on Frontiers/Mixed Committee / (EU-Iceland/Norway and Switzerland/Liechtenstein)
Subject:	External border management activities in the first half of 2023

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#### A. General overview of the Frontex operational response

In the first half of the year, Frontex implemented 21 Joint Operations (JOs) in 296 deployment locations. Currently Frontex deploys more than 2800 staff. From the technical equipment perspective 6 OPV, 12 CPV, 23 CPB, 11 FWA and 6 HELO are deployed and support MS/TC in border management activities. The JOs are based on the risk analysis and along the main migratory routes.

#### Additional information on the Joint Operations at the external borders of the EU

##### JO Focal Points Air

- This JO implements multipurpose operational activities at MS/SAC external air borders by deploying border management teams. The Standing Corps (SC) officers support the host authorities in border control, including prevention, detection of and combatting cross-border crime.
- In some MS (Czechia, France, Iceland and Portugal), the SC officers are granted with access to the national IT system (with the access to national and international databases) and individual border stamps to perform first line checks side-by-side with the local border guards.

- For the first time, debriefing teams were deployed at airports (Vienna-VIE and Brussels-BRU) for two months. The activity will be evaluated and may be further developed to other air BCPs.

#### JO Coordination Points Air, Land, Sea

- JO without executive powers in third countries where officers are deployed with support/advisory task.
- In order to reinforce the operational response along the Western Balkan route, the SC officers provide tailored support with awareness of matters related to irregular migration and cross-border crime activities at the designated BCPs which have a direct link to or influence on the Schengen area.

#### JO North Macedonia 2023

- Launch of JO North Macedonia 2023 on 19 April 2023.
- Currently 122 SC officers of all categories are supporting national authorities by performing border check activities, border surveillance and by collecting information on the operational situation (screening and debriefing activities).
- Since the beginning of the JO, 4,825 migrants were apprehended after crossing unauthorized land border with the Hellenic Republic. 29 people smugglers have been arrested.

#### JO Montenegro Land 2023

- On 16 May 2023, the EU and Montenegro signed an upgraded Status Agreement (SA) which, although the ratification process is still ongoing, was provisionally applicable from 1 July 2023.
- The amendment of the Operational Plan is currently under preparation to agree on the operational scope and size of the future JO Montenegro 2023 that might include border surveillance activities at the land border with Albania as well as to foster cooperation at the Border Crossing Points by vesting SC Officers with executive powers.
- Expanding operational activity is expected to be implemented in the second half of the year.

## JO Albania Land 2023

- During DP8 100 SC Officers of all categories are deployed in the OA, supporting local authorities in conducting border checks at BCPs, border surveillance and by collecting information through screening and debriefing activities.
- Since the beginning of the OY, 3.316 migrants were apprehended after crossing unauthorized land border with the Hellenic Republic. 9 people smugglers have been arrested.

## JO Serbia Land 2023

- The migration pressure remains high at the Serbian-Hungarian border.
- Priority area for deployment for FX deployments.

## JO Moldova 2023

- With the signing of Amendment 1 for the SAP of JO Moldova 2023, BCP Chisinau Airport was transferred under the framework of JO Moldova 2023 from under the framework of JO Coordination Points Air-Land-Sea 2023. Through this exercise, for the first time a Joint Operation has under the same coordination structure activities from 2 different domains (land and air). Chisinau Airport became a Focal Point and the SC officers deployed in the respective location gained full executive powers according to the Status Agreement signed by EU and Moldovan Authorities.
- Deployed SC Officers with border checks profile/task, especially the Romanian speakers use directly the Moldovan electronic border checks system and perform 1st line of control activities independently. When encountering a litigious situation, the person is referred to the local Border Guards for further steps according to their national legislation. It is foreseen to have the electronic working environment translated in English and thus to have all SC Officers working practically shoulder to shoulder with the Moldovan Border Guards.
- With Frontex support, MDA national procedures related to Interpol alerts were harmonized with European procedures and now a unified approach is in place, bolstering the operational results especially in the Stolen vehicles domain.

- It is the largest in size Joint Operation with 11 Host Member States: Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia

#### Bulgaria:

- In the framework of the European Councils' discussion on migration, the European Commission's President set out operational measures under four areas for immediate action, including strengthening of the external borders. The President highlighted in particular that the Bulgarian-Turkish border is a priority, open to the involvement of interested Member States.
- As a follow up of the European Council's conclusions, the Commission and the Bulgarian authorities agreed on a Pilot Project and a Roadmap was prepared to support Bulgarian authorities comprising various areas of Frontex activities (operational response, situational monitoring, capacity building and returns, with input from Fundamental Rights Office). Frontex has been actively engaged in the pilot project and has been supporting BGR Border Police with additional deployments, particularly at the border with Turkey, as well as in other areas, such as combatting cross border crime and fundamental rights monitoring.

#### Greece

- High priority area for deployments and the level of deployments is close to the maximum hosting capacity.
- Benefiting from the increased support, Frontex resources are actively patrolling in all operational areas on GRC-ALB and GRC-MKD border sections. The engagement of FX resources has increased in the operational areas on GRC-TUR border, especially referring to effectiveness in supporting of search cases with the positive results saving big groups of migrants in distress in Evros area.

## Croatia

- Supporting local authorities in conducting border checks at land border. Since the beginning of the operational activity (26 January), 488 migrants were apprehended after crossing unauthorized land border with Serbia, Bosnia and Montenegro. In all the cases, illegal migrants were found hiding inside the trailers, thank to TE provided by FX (HBDs and CO2D).

## Latvia, Lithuania

- Frontex supports countries bordering Belarus in border checks by deploying SC officers with various profiles (ALDO, MVCDO, CBCDO, BGO-BC) and technical equipment (HBDs, CO2 detectors, document inspection devices).
- External borders with Russia are enhanced by joint border surveillance patrols at the LVA-RUS (and EST-RUS) borders and deployments of SC officers at the BCPs at the POL-UKR, POL-RUS, and LTU-RUS borders.

## JO THEMIS 2023

- About 100 000 migrants were registered in the Central Mediterranean since January 2023, an 105% increase in the number of IBCs compared with the same period in 2022.
- Tunisian-Italian corridor remains the most active sub-route in 2023. Most of the migrants reported on that corridor were from Western African countries and were smuggled on board makeshift metal boats. By far, Lampedusa was the most affected area in this border section. Ivorians and Guineans were the top nationalities, nearly all departing from Tunisia, followed by Egyptians, Tunisians and Bangladeshi.
- Italian Authorities assign Ports of Safety in various locations, often out of the JO Themis Operational Area. Upon request of the authorities, the Frontex Migration Management Teams have been dispatched 42 times to the disembarkation locations to support the second line activities; in 15 of them out of the operational area.

## JO POSEIDON 2023

- Heavy Technical Equipment: The contribution of the participating Member States assets to border surveillance activities is considered effective.
- The response of the Turkish authorities to the alerts sent by the Greek authorities is close to 100%, resulting in the effective prevention of departures in the Turkish territorial waters of boats detected early.

## JO INDALO 2023

- Due to the increase in arrivals in JO Indalo, Frontex Surveillance Aircraft (FSA) continues supporting the surveillance activities and complements the support provided by participating MS assets for the patrolling and the interventions carried out on the sightings. The Danish Helicopter in Algeciras also responds to the possible new route/modus operandi concerning the smuggling of goods in the area.
- The operational area of Almeria remained the most targeted place for landings, with a noticeable increase in Cartagena.

## JO Seaports 2023

- 8 new BCPs have been activated (Varna (BGR), Copenhagen (DNK), Marseille and Sete (FRA), Palermo and Trieste (ITA), Reykjavik (ISL) and Oslo (NOR)). The foreseen activation of BCP Burgas (BGR) has been postponed due to the lack of SC officers (lower priority area).

## JO Albania Sea and JO Montenegro Sea

- The lack of aerial assets for maritime surveillance in some periods, hampers the proper implementation on that context.

## JO Opal Coast

- Ongoing discussions on ways to augment the operational communications and surveillance efficiency between all the national authorities involved in the “Channel situation”.

## **B. Prioritization of the operational response**

The operational activities are prioritized based on several criteria, such as risk analysis and vulnerability assessment, impact levels attributed to external border sections, strategic and political relevance and the existing capabilities of the European Border and Coast Guard<sup>1</sup> (EBCG). They also rely on the requests, the availability, and the hosting capacities of the MS.

Prioritization for the operational activities of the Agency in 2024 will be presented to the Management Board in September 2023.

## **C. Frontex Chain of Command (FC2) project**

The establishment of the Standing Corps marked a fundamental change in the context of how the Agency manages and implements the operational response activities in particular joint operations, rapid border interventions and return activities.

The growing deployments of the Standing Corps teams, including increased number of Agency's own staff requires a robust and effective management structure to ensure proper operational implementation in several operational locations. Complex organisations such as Frontex have a hierarchical structure that describes the tasks and responsibilities of individuals, teams, and entities. For the purposes of the Frontex operational activities, this is called the "Frontex Chain of Command" (FC2). It establishes a clear division into teams with their areas of work and reporting lines.

Frontex is currently implementing an operational pilot project (OPP) in Romania, OPP Centurion. The findings of the operational pilot shall be documented and evaluated. It is aimed to assess to what extent the new approach increases the efficiency of the standing corps deployments and whether a deployment of fixed teams will decrease the operational and administrative management burden to the Agency, compared with the individual management of every officer when it comes to the standing corps categories 1 and 2.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf article 9 in Regulation (EU) 2019/1896.

In accordance with the Regulation (EU) 2019/1896, the host MS/TC remain responsible for the command and control of the respective operational activities, while the FC2 is the Frontex hierarchical structure for organisational management of the SC.

The FC2 structure is composed of 3 layers:

- Frontex Field Contingent (FFC) led by Frontex Field Contingent Commander (FFCC)
- Section led by Frontex Section leader (FSL)
- Group led by Frontex Group leader (FGL)

#### Additional information

OPP Centurion 2023

On 14th of JUN 2023 Operational Pilot Project Centurion 2023 was launched by Frontex, involving 101 SCOs deployed in ROU along UKR and MDA land borders. There are ongoing discussions on the interim evaluation of the project with the host country and the possible extension of its scope and duration.

#### **D. External border management activities in the first half of 2023 - Return component**

- Return operations are a fast-developing branch of Frontex's operational activities, responding to a growing demand from MS. Increased number of third country nationals (TCNs) returned with Frontex support in 2023.

With 17.884 TCNs returned on board of Frontex scheduled and charter flights in the 1st half of 2023, the Agency has supported MS/SAC with the return of 60% more returnees compared to the corresponding period of 2022 (11.183 TCNs). This significant growth is mainly the result of more returns carried out in the voluntary manner and further development of Frontex scheduled flight mechanism.



The number of almost 25.000 TCNs returned with Frontex support last year gives a clear signal of the importance of Agency's returns as one of its core operational activities. The share of returns supported by the Agency at the EU level grew from 22% in 2021 to 31% last year.

- Growing share of Frontex voluntary returns

The share of Frontex-supported voluntary returns has been constantly growing. In 1st half of 2023, voluntary returns amounted to 52%, compared to 39% in the corresponding period of 2022. An increase of 113% in the number of third country nationals returned in the voluntary manner has been observed in first semester of 2023 in comparison to the corresponding period of 2022 (4.339 TCNs in 1st half of 2022 and 9.265 TCNs in 1st half 2023).

Voluntary returns supported by Agency are almost exclusively carried out by Frontex-coordinated scheduled flights. Almost ¾ of third country nationals returned by Frontex scheduled flights in the first semester of 2023, has returned in the voluntary manner.

- Development of Joint Reintegration Services (JRS)

As of 1 April 2023, the Joint Reintegration Services are active in 37 third countries. 24 MS are actively participating and submitted over 1.997 cases, covering approximately 2.596 persons inserted in RIAT (Reintegration Assistance Tool) during January-June 2023.

They are serviced by 5 reintegration partners under Framework Partnership Agreements (Caritas International Belgium, IRARA, ETTC, Weldo and LifeMakers Foundation). The Joint Reintegration Services provide for short-term assistance (up to 3 days, including support for charter flights) as well as long-term assistance (post-return assistance – up to 12 months after departure).

The services contain both post-arrival as well as post-return assistance. Since 1 April 2023, a new service was added to the JRS, namely the 'charter package', specifically for arrival support for third country nationals returning forcibly by charter flights.

Frontex is further extending the geographical scope of the JRS by concluding new partnership agreements. To that end, an open call for new Framework Partnership Agreements was published to attract applicants for new Framework Agreements to cover additional third countries. The evaluation is ongoing. Depending on the needs of the Member States, the Agency foresees extending the geographical scope by 1 April 2024, in line with the policy recommendations in the EU Return Coordinator's strategy for more effective returns (50+ countries). At the same time, the Agency will further sensitize Member States to participate in the JRS.

Furthermore, Frontex aims to develop the JRS by installing a robust Evaluation and Monitoring Framework, that will allow to ensure that the provision of reintegration is done in a proper way. In addition, more attention will be put on the communication aspects, ensuring that all stakeholders, including returnees have the proper information.

Finally, Frontex and the European Commission are currently discussing the future of RIAT, the Reintegration Assistance Tool, which is the digital platform (owned by the Commission) wherein the cases are managed. Frontex is considering integrating this RIAT system under the umbrella of IRMA 2.0.

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