

Outsourcing borders

Monitoring EU externalisation policy

Bulletin 13

3 February 2026

“Nothing is inevitable, the future is not written and we are not powerless.”

Ann Fordham, International Drug Policy Consortium

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Thematic and regional developments

Official EU documents summarised here, and those published with previous editions of the bulletin, are contained in our [document archive](#).

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Border management

Schengen Snapshot 2025

An internal EU report obtained by *Statewatch* offers an update on efforts to strengthen border and immigration controls in the Schengen area in the first half of 2025.

The [Schengen Barometer+ report \(pdf\)](#) is produced twice a year by the European Commission and provides a ‘health check’ for the Schengen area – the zone of 25 EU states and four non-EU member states in which internal borders have supposedly been abolished.

Overall, the report reflects **a desire to step up the anti-migrant policy agenda** pursued by European policymakers in recent years – **more deportations, more surveillance and more militarisation of borders**.

A full analysis of the document is [available on the *Statewatch* site](#).

The EU’s ‘long-term’ migration strategy: more of the same

A [presentation \(pdf\)](#) outlining the EU’s ‘Long-term European Asylum and Migration Management Strategy’ was presented to a meeting of Justice and Home Affairs Counsellors (a working group of the Council of the EU) on 12 January 2026.

The presentation contains few surprises, but presents a reasonably comprehensive overview of the strategy’s six priority areas, which are described as:

- Migration diplomacy
- Strong EU borders
- A fair, firm and adaptable asylum and migration system
- Returns and readmission
- Legal pathways and labour mobility
- Strategic use of financial resources and enhancing operational support

It is noteworthy that:

- The report mentions as a priority the **‘finalisation of (deportation agreement) negotiations with Nigeria and Kazakhstan’**.
- In what might be either a drafting error or deliberate, under ‘migration diplomacy’, the word “reduce” in reference to irregular migration has been struck through, **replaced with “prevent”**.

Significant activity on digital border regime in second half of 2025

In the latter half of 2025 there was a lot of activity and discussion in the Council of the EU's various working parties regarding the EU's new digital border regime. Documents reporting on discussions suggest potential synergies between internal and external border management.

EU Digital Travel application regulation

The presidency's [compromise proposal \(pdf\)](#) for the EU Digital Travel application regulation was discussed in the meeting of Justice and Home Affairs Counsellors on [13 November 2025](#). An [impact assessment](#), [executive summary](#) and regulatory [scrutiny board opinion](#) (all pdfs) of the regulation have also been published.

The regulation concerns itself with digitalising the system for visa applicants (typically short-stay) and crossings at the EU's external borders. [A full analysis](#) of the overall project of digitalising the Schengen area's borders, albeit from some years before the application was proposed, is available on the [Statewatch](#) site.

There is a general emphasis on migration as a security risk and the liberal use of biometric databases such as facial recognition. Also of note within the proposed regulation and accompanying documents are:

The potential impact on externalisation of enshrining a system of visa pre-check before people travel:

The EU initiative... offers the opportunity to improve the travel experience for individual travellers and increase security by enabling border authorities to carry out checks in advance and in a new way, based on digital data in travel documents submitted by travellers before they travel.

This system enhances the EU's ability to screen and reject people *before they are able to travel*. In light of the current policy agenda regarding Safe Third Countries and Safe Countries of Origin, such a tool may prove useful in the future for pre-rejecting people from countries the EU expects asylum applicants to travel from.

The potential for 'home-grown' digital systems to be exported to other countries:

...the proposal contributes to the further development of European integrated border management by introducing uniform standards for managing external borders more effectively and efficiently.

In implementing a large-scale interoperable system, the EU Digital Travel application may serve as a proof of concept for application in other areas. Given the EU's tendency to push its border solutions on third countries, it could be imagined that such a system could feature in future externalisation partnerships. (See also '[EMWP delegates reportedly discussed exporting digital visa systems](#)' in the 'Other' section of this bulletin)

Other documents related to the digital border system can be found at the end of this bulletin.

Update on Visa Facilitation Agreement with Armenia

[A note from the Commission to the Council's Visa Working Party](#) (pdf) for a meeting on 19 September 2025 sums up the current status of visa cooperation between Armenia and the EU. It reports a **perception in Armenia that some member states deliberately avoid applying the visa facilitation rules in order to issue refusals**. In that light, the Commission stated that disclosure of the document “would undermine the protection of the public interest as regards international relations” when *Statewatch* requested it.

Visa restrictions for Georgian diplomats (and maybe citizens)

In January 2025, the EU announced it would [suspend visa-free travel](#) for diplomats from Georgia. Throughout the year, as perceived “democratic backsliding” continued, EU member states have urged more concrete action, potentially suspending visa-free travel for all Georgian citizens, according to [a Council presidency note to the Visa Working Party on 19 September 2025](#) (pdf).

The presidency invited delegates to consider their options for invoking the Visa Suspension Mechanism for some or all Georgian citizens. The questions point to continued debate on the issue in the Visa Working Party. This discussion is especially relevant given internal EU reporting that Georgian citizens rank high among people “illegally staying” in the EU and lodging “unfounded applications for international protection” (see the [article on the ‘Schengen Barometer’ report](#)).

Deportation and readmission

France, other member states, displeased with limited use of Article 25a visa sanctions

An [informal note from the French delegation to a meeting of the Visa Working Party on 19 September 2025](#) (pdf) discusses “visa sanctions” as a tool for garnering deportation cooperation. Visa sanctions can be invoked under [Article 25a of the EU’s Visa Code](#).

The note praises the “clear progress” made in using Article 25a to pressure countries into deportation cooperation:

“Over time, third countries have proved to be quite sensitive to visa measures taken by Member States as a response to limited cooperation on readmission, and taking such measures at EU level should maximize their effect.”

The Schengen Barometer+ report described earlier reports [improved deportation cooperation from Bangladesh and Iraq](#), apparently in response to threats of Article 25a sanctions.

The French delegation bemoans, however, that only two countries have so far been subjected to visa sanctions. Apparently speaking on behalf of other member states, it makes their displeasure clear:

“our collective expectations have not been fully met. The fact that Article 25a has only been used against Gambia and Ethiopia so far, has limited its credibility and impact.”

It also argues that the particular measures under Article 25a – increasing visa costs and processing times and suspending facilitation agreements – “may not be strong enough”.

To address these concerns, the French delegation suggests:

- Making it quicker and easier to invoke Article 25a sanctions, with more clarity on cooperation targets for third countries (in a proposed recital of the amendment: *“(Article 25a) activation should not be considered as exceptional, whenever diplomatic outreach has not led to the desired increase of readmission cooperation of a given third country”*)
- Gradually ratcheting up the pressure by introducing harsher penalties
- More union-wide cooperation on Article 25a measures
- Stressing to third countries that poor readmission cooperation will affect Commission assessments of migration risk, potentially increasing the issuance of visa refusals entirely. In other words, **‘do what we say or no visas at all’**: **“Commission’s assessments must be taken more seriously by our partners and used as a basis for measures”**.

The note goes on to propose various amendments to Article 25a along the above lines.

Deputy home commissioner updates parliament on readmissions cooperation

Johannes Luchner, deputy director-general at DG HOME appeared before the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) committee of the European Parliament on 26 January, to discuss deportations cooperation with third countries. His comments offer some insights:

On cooperation with specific countries:

- In December 2025 **negotiations were launched with Kazakhstan** on a deportation agreement, in parallel to a visa Facilitation Agreement. **Negotiations are similarly ongoing with Nigeria**, though with several issues still outstanding. The commission will attempt to “resuscitate” the matter with Nigeria
- ‘Non-binding readmission arrangements’ exist with Afghanistan, Guinea, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, the Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire
- Since May 2026, joint committees and working groups were held with Guinea, Ethiopia, Côte d'Ivoire, Bangladesh, Armenia and Pakistan, as well as technical dialogues with Somalia and Senegal. Dedicated workshops have taken place with Egypt, Côte d'Ivoire and Ethiopia. The next joint working group with Ethiopia will take place 18 February in Addis Ababa
- **“Substantial and sustained progress” has been observed with Bangladesh, and the Commission withdrew its proposal for Article 25a visa sanctions in November 2025**
- Cooperation has improved with Côte d'Ivoire
- Ethiopia's cooperation has “substantially improved” since visa sanctions were adopted in 2024
- Cooperation with Western Balkans EU candidate countries, as well as Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia, is generally described as satisfactory
- Visa sanctions remain in place for the Gambia, despite “continuous dialogue”. After the commission proposed visa sanctions in July 2025, there has been “strong political commitment” from Guinea to cooperate on readmission, though this commitment is yet to “translate into operational reality”
- The Commission **proposed visa sanctions on Senegal in 2022**. Since then, multiple discussions are yet to produce “sustained progress”
- The Commission also **proposed visa measures for Somalia in 2024**, though this does not appear to have produced the desired result.

Other noteworthy statements:

- Luchner alluded to the possibility that **the ongoing digitalisation of the EU's border systems may allow quicker assessment of cooperation in the future**
- When asked, with reference to **Afghanistan**, how the Commission ensures that **people who are deported are not then prosecuted or executed**, Luchner stated **this is done by “raising the question, not only once, but several times”** and referred to those assurances being limited to “oral engagement”
- Luchner also confirmed that **he, along with Belgian delegates, visited Kabul in January 2026 to discuss deportations**. He said the Taliban were willing to work with them on the matter. Mehdi Kassou, director general of the NGO BelRefugees, has written an incisive commentary for the Belgian news site Le Soir and it has been republished in English by ECRE

The Commission targets Guinea for Article 25a sanctions

A proposed Council implementing decision (pdf) of 15 July 2025, discussed at the Visa Working Party meeting of 19 September 2025, concluded that **“cooperation has remained insufficient” on deportations with Guinea**, despite diplomatic overtures and “clear messages” from the EU. It therefore proposed Article 25a visa sanctions.

A full analysis of the proposal and its implications by researcher Cezary Dziółko will soon be on the *Statewatch* site.

Statewatch has requested comment from the Commission on the current state of Article 25a measures against Guinea and had not received an answer at the time of this bulletin. Comments from the Deputy Home Affairs Commissioner (above) suggest the relationship has not improved.

Ukraine and the EU are working on a Frontex status agreement

A heavily redacted note from the Commission to the Working Party on Frontiers meeting of 5 November 2025 (pdf) reports that **Ukraine “has now firmly indicated its interest” in negotiating a Frontex status agreement**. This would allow Frontex to deploy border guards and other officials in Ukraine.

The note goes on to explore the opportunities and implications of such cooperation. It also notes that after the Commission recommends opening negotiations, it typically takes one to two years before a status agreement enters into force.

The EU is beginning to think about ‘returning’ Ukrainian refugees

Temporary protection for Ukrainians in Europe is projected to end on 4 March 2027. Around 4.5 million people benefitting from temporary protection are living in the EU+ region as of August 2025. EU policymakers’ attention is turning to how these people can be **encouraged to return to Ukraine** before the deadline.

To that end, a [discussion paper](#) (pdf) was circulated by the Danish Presidency of the Council of the EU and discussed at the 27 October 2025 meeting of the Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum.

The paper broadly outlines the issue, and expresses a desire that “timely discussions” take place ahead of the March 2027 deadline, to avoid millions of people suddenly finding themselves without residence status in the EU.

There is a strong emphasis on **voluntary returns and readmission support**, with an additional emphasis on the EU’s overall recovery support to Ukraine. Various incentives and programmes are explored to encourage voluntary returns.

While the concept of forced returns is studiously avoided in this paper, it does note **very low, and decreasing, return intentions among Ukrainians in Europe** and alludes to the possibility of Frontex assisting “in cases where organised departures would be needed”, though this would appear for the moment to be in reference to mass ‘voluntary’ returns.

Frontex submits report card for 2025

At a meeting of the Working Party on Integration, Migration and Expulsion held on 13 January 2026, Frontex presented its 2025 report card [“Implementation of Frontex activities in the field of return”](#) (pdf).

The presentation gives a broad overview of the agency’s activities in 2025. Highlights include:

- 63,493 Frontex assisted-returns in 2025, of which around 23,000 were forced. Overall returns increased around 50% from 2023 (39,231)
- 5911 Syrians ‘voluntarily’ returned with Frontex assistance in 2025 (operations were resumed 17 March). More than three quarters of these people were returned by [Cyprus](#) and Germany alone
- 10 people ‘voluntarily’ returned to Afghanistan by 24 November 2025
- The launch of two new projects: ‘Vulnerability Check Application’ and ‘RECAPP’

The presentation also lightly sketches out the process for a Frontex qualitative assessment, the results of which are to be disseminated to DG Home by 13 March 2026. Frontex has also published its [Annual Brief for 2025](#), a broad outline of migratory trends in 2025 and projections for 2026.

Migration partnerships



Place of safety arrangements: a “new and innovative solution” for offshoring migration control

In search of new ways to push the EU’s border control beyond its territory, [a Council presidency paper to the 13 November 2025 meeting of the Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration](#) (pdf) explores “place of safety arrangements”.

These arrangements, [previously referred to as “disembarkation platforms”](#), are **agreements with third countries to have them intercept and detain irregular migrants before they arrive in Europe**.

A full analysis of the document will soon be on the *Statewatch* site and Nikolaj Nielsen has [reported on the document](#) for EUObserver.



The EU is funding a pullback coordination centre in Benghazi

[A report by German journalist and activist Matthias Monroy](#), originally published on the German news site *nd*, **reveals plans for the construction of an EU-funded Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Benghazi, in the eastern region of Libya controlled by General Khalifa Haftar.**

According to the *nd* article, an MRCC would serve as the base of operations for eastern coastal forces, allowing enhanced cooperation with the EU’s border force Frontex, and offering considerable international legitimacy for Haftar’s forces.

The plan appears to be in the initial stages, with start-up funding of €3m via the EU’s ‘European Peace Facility’ budget.

Other



Visa Working Party discusses AI in “visa shopping”

A [European Commission note to the Visa Working Party meeting of 9 October 2025](#) (pdf) discusses ‘visa shopping’ – where a third country citizen shops around Schengen states in order to find the ‘easiest’ visa, even if they don’t intend to travel to that particular member state. The report **describes alleged use of AI and “dishonesty” in visa application processes** and invites delegates to discuss solutions.

When *Statewatch* requested the document, the Council of the EU stated that full disclosure “would have a negative impact on the relations between the European Union and the third countries concerned as it would reveal sensitive information on visa procedures”.



EMWP delegates reportedly discussed exporting digital visa systems

According to the news site [VisaHQ](#), the idea of funding digital border systems in third countries, based on the EU’s Entry/Exit System, was discussed at the 13 November 2025 meeting of the Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration. Finland is reported to have pushed the issue in particular. This discussion does not appear on the [public meeting agenda](#) (pdf).



The EU and Lebanon discussed future of Syrian refugees

At the ninth [EU–Lebanon Association Council](#) meeting on 15 December 2025, the EU and Lebanon reported discussing Syrian refugees in Lebanon, with a particular focus on the idea of them returning in the future:

“Within a feasible timeframe, the EU and Lebanon are committed to continue working with all relevant stakeholders for durable solutions where Syrians can rebuild their homeland and earn a dignified living in Syria”



The UK is making more inroads on migration cooperation in Europe

On 28 November 2026, the UK published the text of a [bilateral cooperation framework](#) with Malta. It includes deeper “cooperation on the external dimension of migration” and “opportunities for collaboration between the UK and (Italy, Spain, Greece, Cyprus and Malta)” on migration issues. It followed on from the [Kensington Treaty](#) signed in July 2025 between the UK and Germany, which includes similar migration cooperation.

Italy and Germany to partner more closely on migration in Africa

On 26 January 2026, Italy and Germany signed [two agreements](#) for enhanced cooperation on migration, among other matters. Referencing the '[Rome Process](#)' – an initiative to prevent irregular migration spearheaded by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni – the two countries agreed to collaborate on "**increased external action and internal aspects, mutually beneficial comprehensive partnerships with countries of origin and transit**, more effective protection of EU external borders, and **stepping up returns**" particularly with regards to African countries. Italy and Nigeria have also "[expressed renewed commitment](#)" to cooperation on migration matters.

Criminalised for checking the weather: the UK introduces absurd new migration-related offenses

Writing for Oxford University's Border Criminologies, Vicky Taylor explains a [raft of new offences](#) targeting irregular boat crossings across the English channel. Building on years of legislative work criminalising people attempting to seek shelter in Britain, the new offences under the 2025 Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act "use broad terms that enable anyone arriving on a dinghy to be prosecuted", according to Taylor. These terms apparently make it possible that people could be prosecuted **simply for looking up the weather or tide times**.

Portuguese MEP demands clarity on Solidarity Pool

In a [written question](#) to the Commission, MEP Ana Catarina Mendes (Socialists & Democrats) has asked whether the Portuguese government has requested a reassessment of its migratory situation by the Commission. These assessments determine EU countries' contributions to, or benefits from, the 'Solidarity Pool'. Mendes asked when the Commission could be expected to publish findings. The question follows [earlier reports](#) that Portugal had opted to pay in around €8m to the pool rather than accept its "quota" of 420 people for resettlement in the country.

Frontex and EU Agency for Asylum publish new cooperation agreement

The two agencies agreed a [new framework agreement](#) on 22 January 2026. Among its provisions, it provides for greater operational cooperation and data exchange.

Civil society scores rare win on Frontex judicial review

On 18 December 2025, the Court of Justice of the European Union [ruled on appeal](#) on two cases related to an individual's right to make a claim against Frontex. According to Catharina Ziebritzki, writing for Verfassungsblog: “The court held that **Frontex can, in principle, be held responsible for fundamental rights violations via EU liability law.**”

Read Ziebritzki's [full analysis here.](#)

Updates to the document archive

The [Outsourcing Borders document archive](#) hosts key documents from the Council of the EU and the European Commission.



External Aspects of Asylum and Migration Working Party (EMWP)

[New and innovative solutions to prevent and counter irregular migration - Place of Safety Arrangements](#): Presidency Paper to meeting of 13 November 2025 (14360/25, LIMITE, 7 November 2025, pdf)

Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum

Follow-up on Council recommendation on a coordinated approach to the transition out of temporary protection for displaced persons from Ukraine: Operationalisation of the pathways for return to Ukraine – [discussion paper](#): Presidency paper to meeting 27 October 2025 (13992/25, LIMITE, 22 October 2025, pdf)

Working Party on Frontiers

[European Union Support to Ukraine's Border Management Authorities](#): Commission note to delegates for discussion at meeting of 5 November 2025 (14396/25, LIMITE, 30 October 2025, pdf)

[The Future of Frontex: Frontex presentation](#) (almost entirely redacted) to meeting of 5 November 2025 (14989/2025, LIMITE, 6 November 2025, pdf)

Visa Working Party

[Visa facilitation agreement with Armenia](#) – background paper: Commission note to meeting of 19 September 2025 (12405/25, LIMITE, 10 September 2025, pdf)

[Visa restrictions as a policy tool – Georgia](#): Presidency note to meeting of 19 September 2025 (12243/25, LIMITE, 5 September 2025, pdf)

[Upholding and improving Article 25a](#): informal note from French delegation to meeting of 19 September 2025 (12988/25, LIMITE, 18 September 2025, pdf)

[Visa shopping – best practices and way forward](#): Presidency note to meeting of 9 October 2025 (13256/25, LIMITE, 1 October 2025, pdf)

Working Party on Integration, Migration and Expulsion

[Implementation of Frontex activities in the field of return](#): Frontex presentation to meeting of 13 January 2025 (409/2026, LIMITE, 14 January 2026, pdf)

Other documents

["Long-term European Asylum and Migration Management Strategy"](#) – Presentation to JHA Counsellors meeting 12 January 2026

[Proposal for a COUNCIL IMPLEMENTING DECISION suspending the application of certain provisions of Regulation \(EC\) 810/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council with respect to Guinea](#) (15 July 2025, pdf)

Other documents related to Schengen border regulation:

[REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL on the state of play of preparations for the full implementation of the VIS Regulation in accordance with Article 11\(3\) of Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1134](#) (11143/25, 2 July 2025, pdf)

[Travel information policy: state of play and possible way forward - compilation of written replies](#) (8718/2025, LIMITE, 22 September 2025, pdf)

[The Entry/Exit System at the external borders](#): Presidency note (13307/25, LIMITE, 2 October 2025, pdf)

[Updated rules on border control of cruise ships under the Schengen Borders Code](#): Council document (10652/2025, LIMITE, 28 August 2025, pdf)

[Frontex enhanced role for yellow link recategorization after the MID transitional period](#): Frontex note (12117/2025, LIMITE, 23 September 2025, pdf)

About this bulletin

This project, carried out by *Statewatch* and *migration-control.info* and funded by *Brot für die Welt*, *Misereor*, *medico international* and *Pro Asyl*, aims to make the EU's externalisation policies, plans and practices public. In doing so it seeks to highlight their impact on the rights of people on the move, as well as democratic standards, transparency and accountability. It addresses a lack of public information by publishing relevant EU documents, in this phase primarily those produced or discussed by the Council of the EU. It also tackles the overflow of information that results from a variety of EU institutions, working groups and national governments involved in the externalisation agenda by summarising thematic and regional developments, and by analysing key issues in depth.