



Council of the  
European Union

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LIMITE

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SCHENGEN 12  
COMIX 89  
JAI 289  
FRONT 60  
MIGR 83  
ASIM 21  
ENFOPOL 90  
IXIM 64  
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**NOTE**

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From: Services of the Commission

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To: Delegations

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Subject: Overall state of the Schengen area – Schengen Barometer +

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**DOCUMENT PARTIALLY ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC (24.04.2024)**

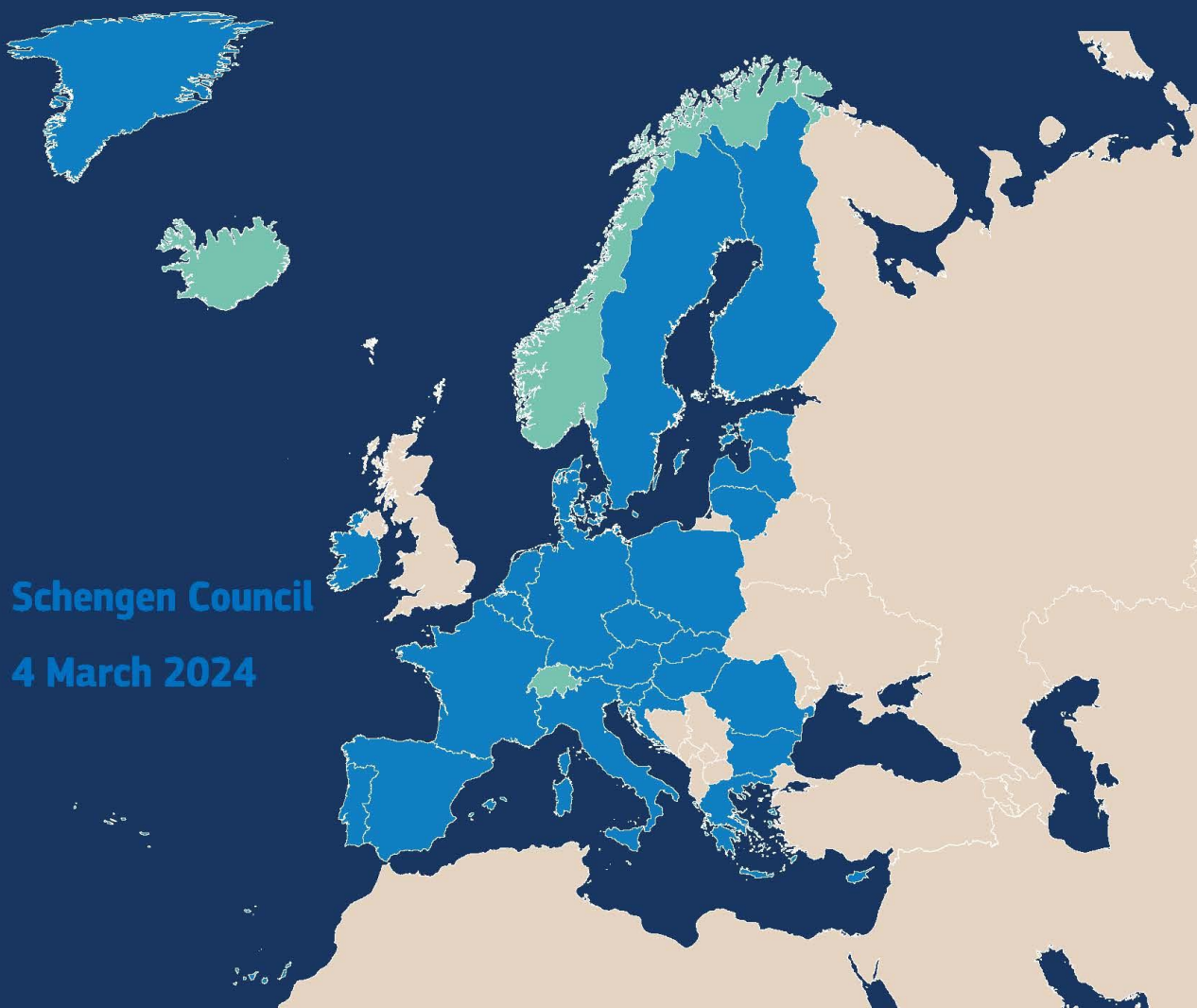
Delegations will find in the Annex the Schengen Barometer +, as provided by the services of the Commission, with a view to the meeting of the Working Party for Schengen Matters on 22 February 2024 and the meeting of the Schengen Council on 4 March 2024.

SENSITIVE  
19 February 2024



# SCHENGEN BAROMETER+

PUBLIC



Schengen Council  
4 March 2024

## SCHENGEN BAROMETER+

The Schengen Barometer+ is a key tool of the Schengen cycle, steering political coordination of Schengen matters and enhancing facts-based policy making. It provides a comprehensive situational picture of the drivers having an impact on the stability of the Schengen area by presenting an overview of the recent developments and emerging threats for the Schengen area, using the most up-to-date data<sup>1</sup>. As such, the Schengen Barometer+ allows to identify vulnerabilities, risks, and operational gaps requiring a timely and coordinated EU response. The identified focus areas allow the Schengen Council to enhance policy coordination and endorse actions in the form of operational cooperation.

### The Schengen Barometer+ in short

#### Building on 2023...

- The Schengen area received more than **half a billion** visitors in 2023, facilitating secure travelling and boosting the EU's competitiveness in a time of growing global challenges.
- In December 2023, the Union, its Member States and Schengen Associated Countries delivered on vital **long-standing commitments**. The **political agreement** reached on the Pact on Migration and Asylum will improve migration management at the external borders and within the area of freedom, security and justice. The Council Decision on the full application of the Schengen *acquis* in **Bulgaria and Romania** will expand the Schengen area to the benefit of all EU citizens.
- The Schengen accession of **Croatia** reinforced ties and resulted in closer cooperation. Joint patrols with Slovenia doubled. Increased irregular migration in the region to the Croatian borders through Bosnia-Herzegovina calls for a coordinated response.
- **Irregular migration** remained a challenge across Member States and Associated Countries. While still far from 2015 levels, there were 380 000 irregular border crossings into the Schengen area, 17% higher than 2022. The increase was linked with widespread instability in the European southern neighbourhood, with surging arrivals on all maritime routes into the EU.
- Tragic events over the summer, including at least 4 000 reported dead or missing while crossing the Mediterranean and the Atlantic routes in 2023, as well as the continuous increase of irregular migration predominantly facilitated by smugglers, prompted stepped up response at Union level in the fight against **migrant smuggling** with the launch of a Global Alliance against migrant smuggling and legislative proposals to tackle this crime more effectively.
- **Asylum systems** across the EU remained under significant pressure with more than 1,1 million new applications. A quarter of these were submitted by nationalities benefitting from visa-free regimes, highlighting the relevance of the Commission Proposal to review the **Visa Suspension Mechanism**.
- The unprecedented increase of illicit drugs available in Europe signals a concerning development in global **drug trafficking**. The implementation of the EU Roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime has already begun with the conclusion of the 2023 thematic Schengen evaluation on drug trafficking and the launch of the European Ports Alliance.
- **EU Agencies** continued to provide vital and indispensable support to ensure the well-functioning of the Schengen area. EUAA assisted in over 50 000 asylum registrations (+36%) and conducted almost 9 000 asylum interviews by October 2023. Frontex continues to be a key player at the external borders and beyond with 2 500 staff available to support Member States in managing the external borders and supporting 40% of all returns from the Schengen area. Europol increased its operational support with

<sup>1</sup> Data from Frontex, EUAA, Europol, Eurojust and eu-LISA is provisional and may differ from validated data published by Eurostat or national authorities. The figures in this document only give an estimation of the current situation in as near to real time as possible. Data from Europol and Eurojust are only a partial picture since they can only reply on the cases referred to them.



supported law enforcement operations.

... looking forward to 2024

- The recent political agreement on the Pact on Migration and Asylum calls for the timely launch of the EU and national implementation plans whilst finalising the review of the legal texts and final votes.
- Passenger flow will likely continue to rise in 2024, in line with the trend seen so far, also triggered by large-scale sports events, attracting millions of visitors over the summer alone. It is imperative to address vulnerabilities when conducting border checks, particularly the need to ensure systematic consultations of relevant databases and adequate verification of entry conditions.
- There are Member States facing delays in the preparations of the Entry-Exit System. It is urgent to take immediate and effective measures to rectify these to ensure a timely implementation of the interoperability architecture.
- The working age population in the EU is estimated to shrink by 1 million people a year on average by 2050. The launch of various initiatives on legal migration in 2023, particularly the Talent Partnerships, need to be fully operationalised in 2024 to make the Schengen area more attractive to talent and the renewed Single Permit Directive and Long-Term Residence Directive to facilitate internal mobility.
- The risk of instrumentalisation of migrants at the external borders will remain high, calling for increased preparedness and contingency planning.
- The Israel-Hamas war represents a significant risk of destabilisation of the wider region. This situation may also provide fertile grounds for the actions of militant terrorist groups, favouring cooperation with criminal networks and increasing threats of radicalisation and terrorism.
- The high number of return decisions pending implementation in the EU/Schengen area, coupled with the foreseen irregular border crossings will require an increased EU coordination for more effective returns through the effective implementation of the 'Return Roadmap' in close cooperation with the EU Return Coordinator. Frontex needs to remain an active player in this area.

**Missing connections across data**

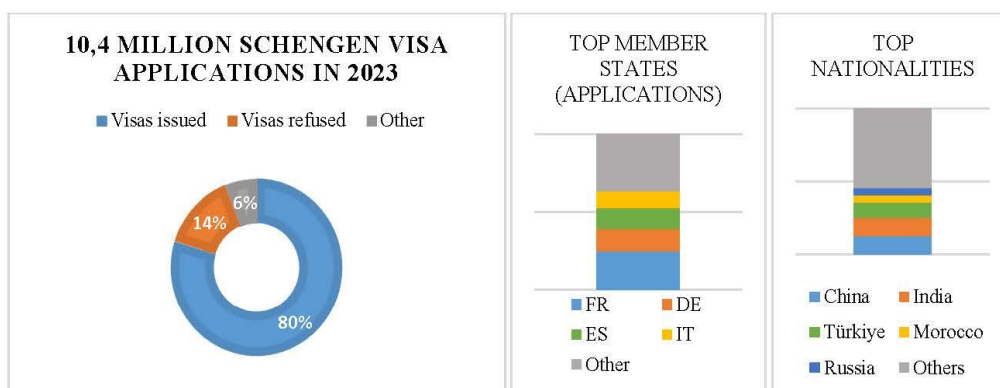
In December 2023, the Schengen Barometer+ identified important data gaps across Schengen matters. The Belgian Presidency has indicated their intention to address these limitations and enhance situational awareness in the Schengen area. Beyond the data gaps, important linkages between indicators are missing, hampering fact-based decision-making for the effective management of the Schengen area. In particular:

- The total number of asylum applications in the EU (1,1 million) was almost triple the number of irregular border crossings (380 000). While around 250 000 applications were lodged by visa-free nationals entering the Schengen area legally,

## 1. THE SCHENGEN NEIGHBOURHOOD

Key messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In 2023, the Schengen area gained traction as a destination for tourism and work for foreign nationals. Increasingly visible labour shortages across the EU highlight the need to attract and retain targeted labour migration. Important steps in that direction were taken in 2023 with the development of the EU Talent Partnerships, the Commission proposal to establish an EU Talent Pool and the agreement on the revision of the Single Permit Directive.</li> <li>Bulgaria and Romania are taking all necessary steps to ensure the smooth lifting of controls at the air and sea internal borders as of 31 March 2024.</li> <li>Asylum applications by third-country nationals enjoying visa-free travel to the Schengen area, accounting for almost a quarter of all asylum applications in 2023, put a heavy burden on national systems and procedures. The Commission proposal to revise the Visa Suspension Mechanism needs to be adopted urgently to address these challenges and decrease the influx.</li> <li>There is a need to improve the current intelligence picture of the Schengen area and operational response in third countries, streamlining information flows originating from liaison officers deployed by the EU, including the EU agencies, and the Member States, and ensuring all risks and vulnerabilities are effectively covered through a strategic alignment between national and European deployments.</li> </ul>

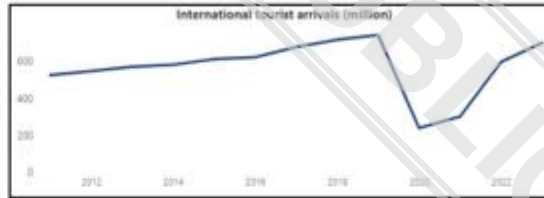
### 1.1. Travelling to the Schengen area



- In 2023, Croatia joined the Schengen area and started to issue Schengen visas contributing to increased tourism of bona fide travellers to the Schengen area and supporting the EU's competitiveness. In 2023, Croatia issued over 29 000 Schengen visas. [eu-LISA]
- Since 1 January 2024, Kosovo\* passport holders enjoy visa free travel for short stays. The EU currently has visa-free regimes in place with 61 partners<sup>2</sup>, bringing significant economic, social, and cultural benefits and boosting travel and the tourism sector.

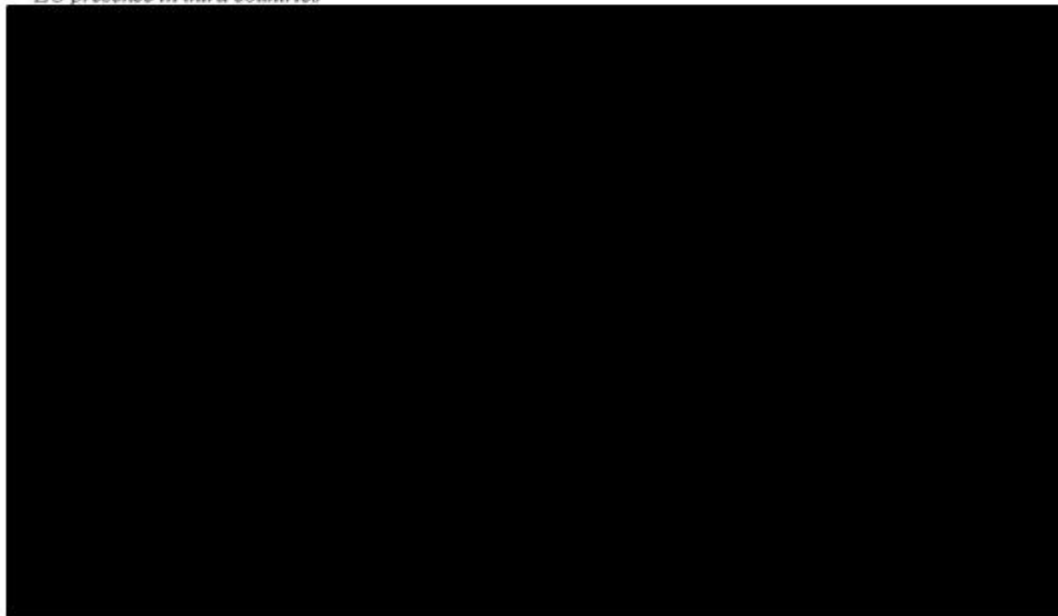
\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

- Europe received **700 million tourists in 2023**, accounting for more than half of global tourism. While tourist arrivals are nearly back to pre-pandemic levels (now at 94% of arrivals in 2019), the tourism industry has surpassed the pre-pandemic situation in 2023 with 2,92 billion estimated stays at tourist accommodations. [UNWTO, Eurostat]
- The passenger flow in the Schengen area is only partially known. Despite the underreporting, with 590 million regular border crossings in and out of the Schengen area, there were at least 25 million more regular border crossings in 2023 than in 2022<sup>3</sup>. [Frontex]
- From 31 March 2024<sup>4</sup>, the **Republic of Bulgaria** and **Romania** will start applying the Schengen *acquis* in full and the largest area without controls at internal borders will cover a population of 450 million.



## 1.2. EU measures in third countries

### *EU presence in third countries*



<sup>2</sup> [Redacted]

<sup>3</sup> Austria, Cyprus, Ireland and Portugal do not report to Frontex on regular border crossings. Data is missing from Latvia (April and July), the Netherlands (October on exit) and Switzerland (August). For France, only partial data covering certain border-crossing points is available. For around one third of the passenger flow reported, the citizenship was unknown.

<sup>4</sup> Council Decision (EU) 2024/210 of 30 December 2023 on the full application of the provisions of the Schengen *acquis* in the Republic of Bulgaria and Romania.



**European Liaison Officers to advance Integrated Border Management and the internal security of the Schengen area**

*Immigration Liaison Officers*

- 500 national Immigration Liaison Officers (ILOs) and 11 European Migration Liaison Officers (EMLOs)<sup>6</sup> deployed by the Commission.
- 6 Frontex Liaison Officers (FLOs)<sup>7</sup> and 9 European Return Liaison Officers (EURLOs)<sup>8</sup> managed by Frontex.

*'Security' Liaison Officers*

- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

Several Member States deploy Liaison Officers to third countries with the aim of advancing police or judicial cooperation. For instance, the Benelux cooperation agreement allows for a joint presence in third countries to address security threats. [REDACTED] deployed. In the framework of the EU Roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime, the Commission is exploring options to work toward an EU overview and framework for the deployment of Liaison Officers in third countries to advance police or judicial cooperation.

While Liaison Officers play a key role in ensuring the well-functioning of the Schengen area, there are **operational challenges** limiting their potential:

- No full alignment and coordination between national and European deployments, undermining their full potential and limiting the full added value of the European deployments.
- Limited harmonisation in terms of place of deployment, which poses challenges for coordination, identification with EU objectives, and integration into the host environment. Only some liaison officers are based in EU Delegations.
- Insufficient information sharing and integration of this information in the EU and national situational pictures, limiting situational awareness.

- At the end of 2023, Frontex deployed [REDACTED] staff in [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] (see map in 2.1).

<sup>5</sup> Some Liaison Officers have regional mandates extending beyond their place of posting.

<sup>6</sup> Three EMLOs are currently evacuated to Europe (Sudan, Niger, Lebanon). EMLOs for Georgia, Egypt and Nigeria are expected to be deployed in early 2024, while EMLOs for Pakistan, and the Gambia by the summer 2024.

<sup>7</sup> The 6 FLOs cover 15 third countries. Frontex is planning to deploy a FLO to Pakistan (following approval by the Management Board and Pakistani authorities) and Morocco (following the approval of the Management Board).

<sup>8</sup> [REDACTED]

- Frontex engages with third countries through:
  - **Status agreements** allow the deployment of joint operations in third countries and exchange of information through EUROSUR. Joint operations on the basis of Status Agreements between the EU and the third country: [REDACTED]
  - Working arrangements: concluded with 18 partners<sup>9</sup>.
  - Strategic information exchange.
- The 2023 evaluation of the EBCG Regulation found that Member States widely support the cooperation with third countries in the framework of the Frontex International Cooperation Strategy, acknowledging its effectiveness in addressing external border challenges with successful deployments in multiple partner countries.

#### *EU Monitoring*

One fourth of all asylum applications in the Schengen area in 2023 were submitted by visa-free nationals, on a rising trend since 2015. The top nationalities from visa-free countries in 2023 were Venezuela, Colombia, Georgia, Peru and Albania, all in the top 30 asylum nationalities. There has been a shift in top nationalities since 2015, from nationals of the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood to mainly Latin American nationalities. [EUAA, DG HOME]

- The **recognition rate**<sup>11</sup> of visa-free nationalities varies widely, with the highest recognition rates for Venezuela and the lowest rates were for North Macedonia (1%), Moldova (2%), Serbia (4%) and Montenegro (5%) in the period 2021 – Q3 2023. [EUAA, DG HOME]
- Since 2015 until 2022, on average around 140 000 visa free citizens of the top-15 visa-free nationalities were apprehended annually for illegal stay in the EU, with the annual figure gradually increasing since 2015. [Eurostat]
- While **return rates** for visa-free nationals are higher than the average for all nationalities (due to positive cooperation on readmission), less than half returnees from visa-free countries have been effectively returned. Return rates were lowest for Peru (26%), Brazil (27%) and Moldova (35%), though all above the EU average. [Eurostat]
- **EU readmission agreements** are in place with the Western Balkan partners and with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. No EU readmission agreements are in place with Latin American countries.

<sup>9</sup> Provisional application of the new EU Status agreement with Montenegro, replacing the 2020 agreement, pending its full ratification.

<sup>10</sup> Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus (*cooperation on hold*), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Cape Verde, North Macedonia, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Nigeria, the Russian Federation (*cooperation on hold*), Serbia, Türkiye, Ukraine and the United States. A working arrangement with the United Kingdom has been negotiated and adopted by the Frontex Management Board. Discussions are currently ongoing between Frontex and a number of other third countries on new or updated working arrangements.

<sup>11</sup> [REDACTED]

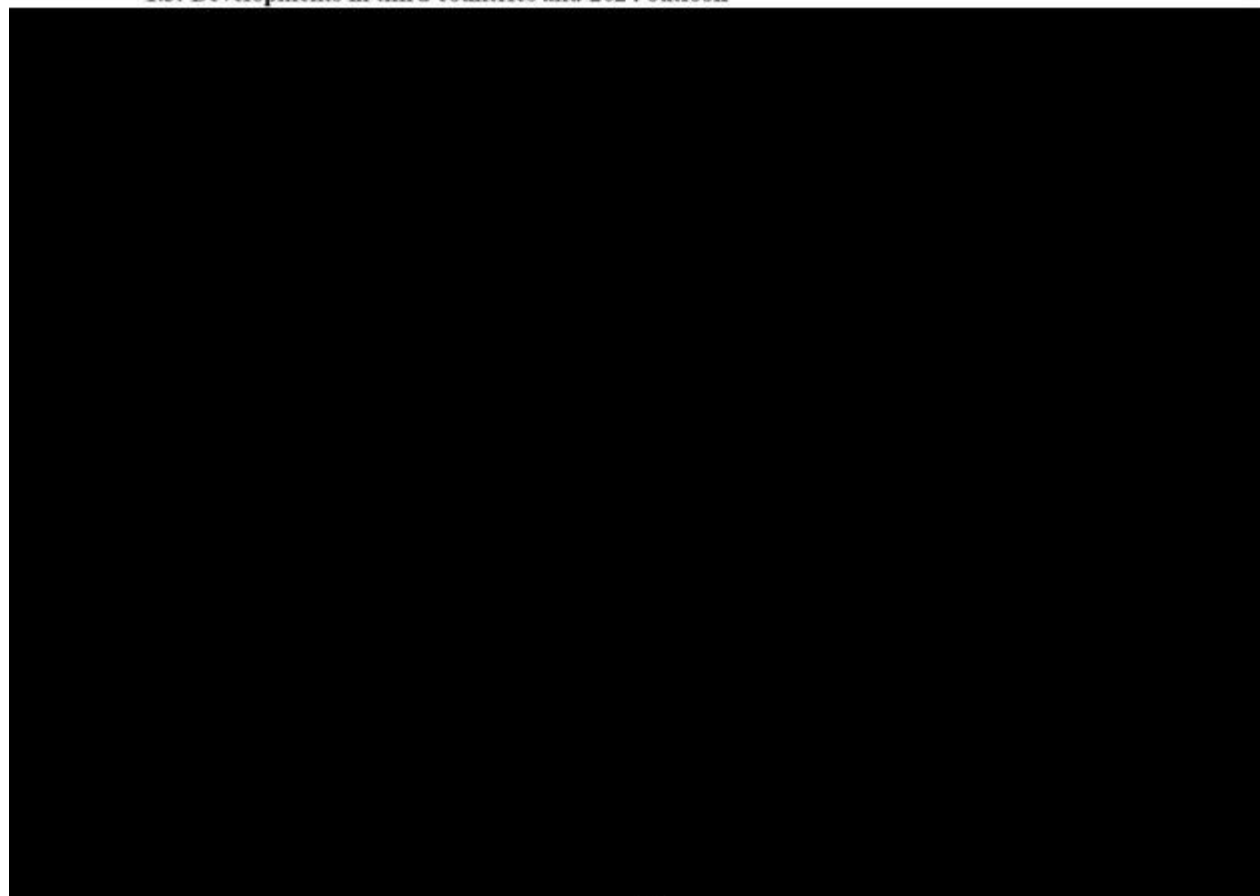


#### Next steps

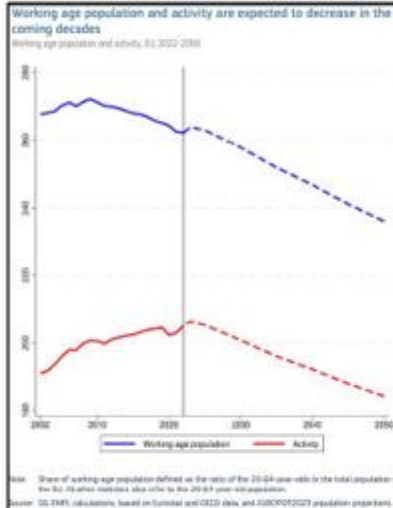
Since its launch in 2013, the Visa Suspension Mechanism has only been triggered once, with regard to citizens of Vanuatu. The limited use of the Mechanism can be partly ascribed to the high thresholds set in the current Regulation. In October 2023, the Commission adopted a proposal to review the Visa Suspension Mechanism to make it easier for Member States to propose a suspension by expanding the grounds to suspend visa-free regimes, increasing the duration of the current procedure to allow more time for remedial actions and strengthening the Commission's monitoring and reporting obligations. The proposal is in negotiations by the Council and the European Parliament. In the Council, the proposal was well received and Member States have proposed amendments to further facilitate the triggering of the mechanism.

The launch of the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) will help Schengen countries to better manage arrivals by visa-free nationals by imposing an obligatory advanced check on visa-exempt third-country nationals travelling for a short stay. Upon completion of an online application form, these individuals will be pre-assessed to determine whether they present a security, irregular migration or high epidemic risks. Those travellers who are not considered to pose a risk will be granted a travel authorisation. The Entry/Exit System (EES) will lead to better awareness on who enters and leaves the Schengen area, allowing to identify overstayers.

### 1.3. Developments in third countries and 2024 outlook



#### 1.4. Avenues for legal migration



#### Working age population in Europe

- Peak of 272 million in 2009, down to 265 million in 2022
- Predictions 2050: estimated shrinking of the working age population to 236 million: around 1 million people per year
- 2021: relatively higher migrant participation in occupations facing persistent labour shortages (13,8% compared to average 8,2% migrant participation in non-labour shortage occupations)
- No data available on legal migration indicators from 2023 due to low periodicity and data delays, preventing an effective monitoring of legal migration flows and challenges and agile response.

#### Migration response:

1. Improved participation of migrants in the labour market – removing obstacles
2. Targeted labour migration to address shortages and boost economic activity

[Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2023 report]

Skills and Talent Package				EU Blue Card Scheme
Talent Partnerships	Talent pool	Single Permit Directive	Long-term Residence Directive	Revised Blue Card Directive
Implementation stage	Commission Proposal of 15 November 2023	Political agreement on 18 December 2023	Final trilogues ongoing	Transposition deadline on 18 November 2023
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-Level Meeting of 1 December 2023 with Commissioner Johansson</li> <li>• 9 Member States joined the initiative</li> <li>• Roundtables took</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full transposition: AT, CZ, DE, EL, HU, IT, LT, MT, PT</li> <li>• Partial transposition: BE, ES, FR, LV, NL, RO, SK</li> <li>• No transposition: BG, CY, EE, FI, HR, LU, PL, LI, SE, SI</li> </ul>

## 2. SCHENGEN AREA – EXTERNAL BORDERS AND MIGRATORY IMPACT

Key messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With 380 000 irregular border crossings into the Schengen area, 2023 marks the third consecutive year of increased migratory pressure, with a 17% increase of crossings, slowing down the increasing trend compared to 2022. The increase in irregular border crossings in 2023 primarily by nationals from Western Africa, especially Guineans and Ivorians, leaving from Tunisia to Italy. All maritime routes to the EU saw increased irregular arrivals, while there were decreases at the land routes into the EU, notably the Western Balkans.</li> <li>The first data from 2024 reveals a shift of irregular border crossings, with strong decreases on the Central Mediterranean (-60%) and Western Balkan route (-88%) but strong increase of arrivals to the Canary Islands (+857%) on account of the increasingly worrying security situation in Mali, leading to increased departures from both Mauritania and Senegal (see section 1.3)<sup>12</sup>.</li> <li>The share of women and children in migratory flows has increased, especially on the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes. The number of unaccompanied minors arriving to the EU increased by 28% compared to 2022, up to over 20 000 in 2023.</li> <li></li> <li></li> <li>As of 30 January 2024, there were 4,3 million active registrations for temporary protection in the Schengen area, on a stable rising trend.</li> <li>More than half of the 1,1 million asylum applications lodged in the Schengen area in 2023 were lodged by nationalities having a low recognition rate.</li> <li></li> </ul>

Outlook for 2024
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li></li> <li>The worrying trend of instrumentalisation of migrants at the EU Eastern land borders could likely recommence in 2024. The risk at the Russian-Finnish border is high with a potential increased proactive involvement of the Russian regime. Increasing risk flights from the Middle</li> </ul>

<sup>12</sup> 2024 operational data until 11 February, compared to the same period in 2023.

East into Minsk and Moscow, possibly with ties to the Russian regime, call for increased monitoring as they could lead to onward irregular border crossings into the Schengen area. The EU Delegation has already started its outreach.

- In 2024, a diversion of migratory routes toward maritime routes may be expected. The rising trend of maritime arrivals to Cyprus from Lebanon in 2023 could be expected to continue into 2024. Changes in visa regimes will continue to be abused by migrant smuggling networks to facilitate irregular journeys into and inside the Schengen area.
- In 2024, national asylum and return systems at their current capacities of national systems will likely not be able to keep pace with the expected high caseload stemming from the increased irregular migration into the Schengen area and high number of asylum applications lodged. The systems need to increase preparedness to effectively manage the incoming caseload.
- The entry into operation of the Entry/Exit System at all external border-crossing points will create unparalleled opportunities to keep track of third-country nationals entering and leaving the Schengen area.

## 2.1. Protection of the EU external borders

### *Joint measures and EU support*

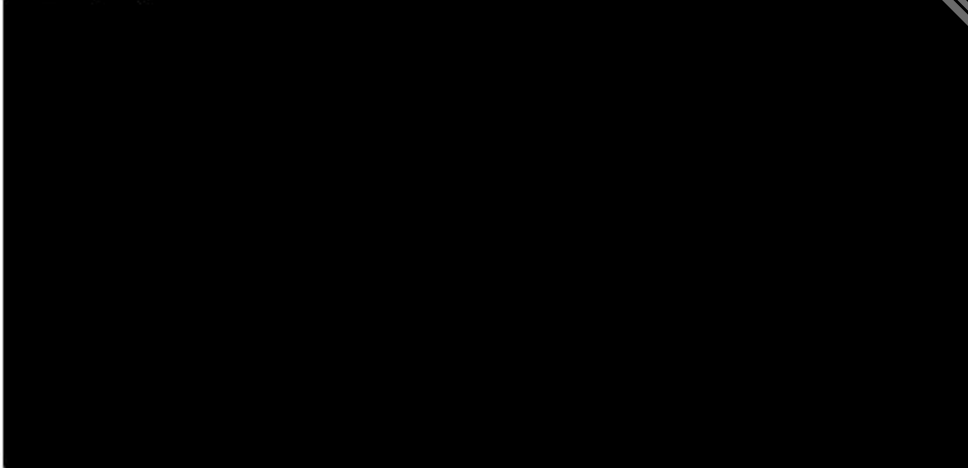
- At the end of 2023, Frontex had deployed 2 429 staff in the Schengen Area and third countries.
- 24 joint operations in 2023 (2022: 15).
- Frontex is in discussion with several Member States to increase the capacity in line with emerging needs. In preparation of Bulgaria and Romania's full application of the Schengen *acquis*, these Member States have sent a request to Frontex to increase the deployments. Bulgaria has increased the hosting capacity from 124 to 264 in all domains.
- The Commission is analysing potential additional funding possibilities to reinforce border control at key sections of the external borders.



The EBCG evaluation concluded that Frontex's operational support has contributed to an effective management of the external borders:

- Joint planning of operations functions well, but challenges remain due to cumbersome operational planning, disparities in the availability of specific categories of Standing Corps profiles, with up to 65% gaps reported for certain profiles despite overall improvement.
- Challenges in information access for Frontex, as it is dependent on agreement with the host Member State; nine Member States and Schengen Associated Countries report difficulties, only four (CZ, FR, PT, and IS) allowing some access, yet language barriers persist when information is available; technical delays in implementing access to the Schengen and Visa Information Systems further limit Frontex's support for effective border checks, as also observed in Schengen evaluations.

*Border control quality*

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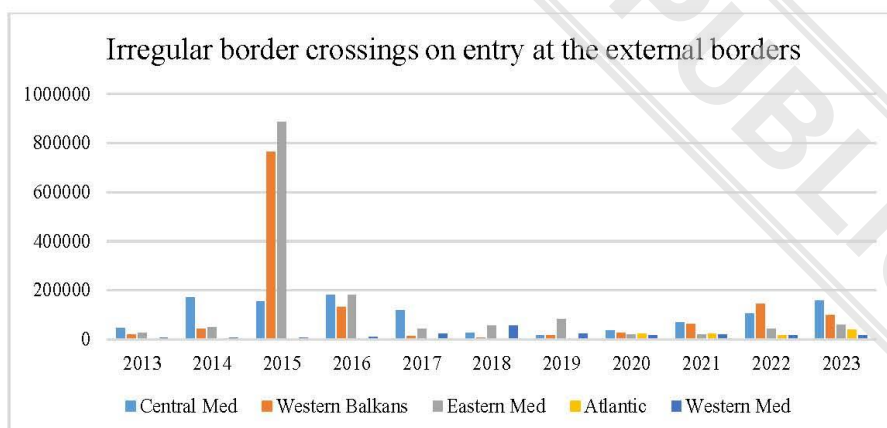
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## 2.2. Irregular migration



- The **Central Mediterranean** was the busiest migratory route in 2023 with almost 160 000 irregular border crossings on entry, about 50% more than in 2022. Guineans, Tunisians, and Ivorians were the top three nationalities reported. Irregular migrant arrivals from Tunisia were at the highest level ever recorded by Frontex (at around 98 000, roughly triple the figure for 2022, while GI-TOC reports around 39 800 preventions of departure, +34% compared to 2022).
- Strong decrease by one third of irregular border crossings via the **Western Balkans** in 2023 compared to 2022, though absolute figures remain high (99 000). The reported migrants were mostly Syrians, Turks, and Afghans. Part of the pressure on the Serbian-Hungarian border shifted to the EU's borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina (+68%) following Serbian police operations since October.
- **Eastern Mediterranean**: around 60 000 detections were reported in 2023, the second consecutive year with a clear rebound in crossings after the pandemic low. Syrians, Afghans, and Palestinians\*, were the most often reported nationalities, and increased arrivals of vessels from Lebanon and Syria to Cyprus were registered in greater numbers (+365%).
- 2023 was a record year on the **Atlantic route** (40 000, +161%), mostly driven by increased arrivals from Senegal. Arrivals from Mauritania increased at the end of 2023. Ever larger *cayucos* were used on this route. Of the identified nationalities, most of the arriving migrants were nationals of Senegal, Morocco, and Mali.
- The **Western Mediterranean route** saw an increase of around 12% in relation to 2022, with Moroccans and Algerians by far the largest migrant groups detected. The use of powerful speedboats to transport migrants was a frequent occurrence in 2023.
- **Eastern Land Borders**: a 12% drop in illegal border-crossings was reported, mostly reflecting the stable situation at the borders with Belarus. The sudden surge of asylum applications at the Finnis-Russian border-control points in 2023 led to their closure, prolonged into 2024.

\* This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue. These departures are likely mostly on account of departures from Palestine before 7 October 2023.

- **Exits towards the UK:** sustainable decrease of 12% departures to the United Kingdom in 2023 compared to the previous year, owing to enhanced surveillance activities and the adoption of early detection measures by the French authorities.

#### **Towards an enhanced coordinated response**

The cross-border cooperation set up between the EU and partners on the **Western Balkan migratory route** in 2023, in the framework of the EU Action Plan addressing irregular migration along the Western Balkans route, has proven successful. Considerable decreased arrivals were noted for nationalities which had their visa-free status rescinded in one or several countries of the region, foremost among them Serbia. The most pronounced drops on this route were observed for Tunisians (-99%), Indians (-95%), and Pakistanis (-68%).


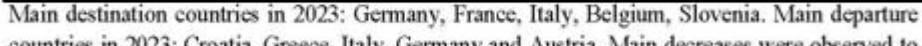
Strengthened cooperation with neighbouring third countries have resulted in decreased irregular entries. In particular:

- **Hungarian-Serbian border:** strong decrease in irregular border crossings since October 2023 after Serbian police operations (83 115 IBCs recorded at this border section in 2023, -38% compared to 2022). Following the success of this approach, Serbia has also increased its activities at the borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina since January 2024.
- **Romanian-Serbian border:** overall absolute numbers in 2023 remained low (around 40), which represent a decrease of 92% as compared to 2022.
- **Bulgarian-Turkish border:** the enhanced political and operational cooperation between Bulgaria and Türkiye has resulted in a 13% decrease in irregular border crossings into Bulgaria compared to 2022 (1 555 IBCs recorded at this border section in 2023).
- **Greek-Turkish land border:** slight increase in crossings in 2023 compared to 2022 (6 951, +8%), mainly by Syrian, Turkish and Iraqi nationals.

However, **Turkish nationals**, who continue to enjoy visa-free travel in the region, were reported as the third nationality in terms of asylum applications lodged in the EU (applying in vast majority to Germany, followed by France), representing an 80% increase compared to 2022. The bilateral readmission agreement between Romania and Türkiye has already led to positive results, with a return rate of 67%. Serbia is in the process of setting up a readmission agreement with Türkiye.

At EU level, the second High Level Dialogue on Migration and Security with the EU in November 2023 reconfirmed the willingness of both sides to strengthen bilateral cooperation, building on the progress on the ground in 2023 and in line with the overall approach on Türkiye set out by the Commission in its report in the run-up to the European Council in December 2023.

### **2.3. Impact of irregular migration in secondary movements between Member States**

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- **Main destination countries in 2023:** Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Slovenia. **Main departure countries in 2023:** Croatia, Greece, Italy, Germany and Austria. Main decreases were observed to Austria (most notable decreases from Greece, Bulgaria and Romania) and from Austria (most notable decreases to France and Switzerland). This decrease was continued into January 2024.



- In the context of the Pilot Projects, good practices were observed in **Bulgaria and Romania**: acceptance of charter flights for transfers back, transfers outside of working hours. Bulgaria does not apply any threshold on the incoming transfers that can be carried out per day. EUAA has deployed two officials in the Bulgarian Dublin unit and the Agency stands ready to deploy more staff to both Bulgaria and Romania, in case of increase in the numbers.

#### Secondary movements within the Schengen area

The magnitude of secondary movements within the Schengen area can only be estimated by **approximation** as its calculation is based on a number of proxy indicators, notably Eurodac hits and Dublin decisions.

Eurodac generates a hit when an individual has been registered in one Member State and then moves to another Member State. The quality and completeness of this indicator is directly dependent on the level of registrations carried out by Member States. Eurodac data reveals the limited registering in some Member States (mainly Hungary) when compared to data on irregular border crossings. This could also be due to undetected irregular entries.

Data on Dublin decisions only concerns third country nationals that have lodged an application for international protection in at least one Member State while they might have a connection with another Member State (such as a prior asylum application, a registration of irregular border crossing, visa issuance or family ties). Therefore, those that will not apply will not be counted.



The Pact on Migration and Asylum contains instruments that will support measuring this phenomenon in a more effective manner. The Eurodac Regulation will require Member States to register people found illegally staying on their territory. However, measuring secondary movements by Eurodac hits will



remain highly dependent on the actual registration of persons carried out by Member States. Once the new legislation enters into force, registration will be an essential part of the screening procedure at the external border. Furthermore, the rules on responsibility for examining an asylum application were strengthened through the Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management (AMMR) aimed at disincentivising unauthorised secondary movements. The new border procedures will limit the possibilities for third country nationals with low recognition rate to move throughout the Schengen area.

#### 2.4. Asylum

- 1 144 000 asylum applications have been lodged in the EU+<sup>17</sup> in 2023 (+18%), just under the 2016 level, around 90% of which have been registered in Eurodac. Almost all asylum applicants (91%) were first-time applicants. [EUAA and eu-LISA]
- In 2023, the top countries of origin across the EU were: Syria (16%), Afghanistan (10%), Türkiye (9%), Venezuela (6%) and Colombia (6%), unchanged from 2022. While Syrians have lodged the most applications since 2016, for Turks, Venezuelans and Colombians the numbers in 2023 were the highest on record. Applications by Afghans have decreased since 2022 (-12%), whereas those by Turks almost doubled, surpassing the number of applications lodged by Afghans in the last four months of 2023. [EUAA]
- An unprecedented number of asylum applications were lodged by Moroccans (+ 41%), Egyptians (+72%), Peruvians (+81%), Guineans (+87%), Ivorians (+116%), Palestinians (+ 60%) and Sudanese (+ 87%). [EUAA]
- Germany, Spain, France, Italy and Greece jointly received around three quarters of all applications lodged in the EU+ (up from two thirds in 2022). Unchanged from the previous year, the top receiving countries per capita were Cyprus, Austria and Greece. However, Austria recorded the largest absolute decrease with the total number of applications down by almost half from 2022. Hungary, Slovakia and Czechia received the least applications per capita. [EUAA]
- EU+ recognition rate at first instance<sup>17</sup>: 43%, at a stable highest rate in over three years. Syrians (94%), Ukrainians (92%), Palestinians (87%), Yemenites (84%), Eritreans (83%) and Belarusians (81%) had the highest recognition rates. The recognition rates for many nationalities reached unprecedented levels, including Malians

<sup>17</sup> The recognition rate includes both international protection and humanitarian status.

(72%), Burkinabe (67%) Sudanese (67%), Somalis (63%), Chinese (63%) and Nicaraguans (53%). However, recognition rates were below 10% for a third of the citizenships which were issued most decisions in 2023.[EUAA]

- Around 677 000 decisions issued at first instance in 2023, the most in six years. The pending caseload reached 883 000, the highest in eight years. The gap between incoming and exiting cases widened. [EUAA]
- As of 30 January 2024, there were 4,3 million active registrations for temporary protection in the Schengen area, on a stable rising trend. [Eurostat, Blueprint]

#### Origins of asylum applications

The total number of asylum applications in the EU (1,1 million) was almost triple the number of irregular border crossings (380 000). While around 250 000 applications were lodged by visa-free nationals entering the Schengen area legally,

## 2.5. Return of third-country nationals with no right to stay

Return decisions and effective returns



PUBLIC

Frontex Return Escort and Support Officers (FRESO)	Return Specialists	Joint Reintegration Assistance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supported return of over 15 000 third-country nationals</li> <li>Most deployments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport</li> <li>Frankfurt International Airport</li> <li>Rome Fiumicino Airport</li> </ul> </li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>25 MS participating</li> <li>6 000 returnees benefitting</li> <li>Most common countries of return: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Iraq</li> <li>Gambia</li> <li>Türkiye</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

- **EBCG evaluation:** Stakeholders appreciate Frontex's operational and technical support in return activities:
  - Most Member States reported positive collaboration with Frontex in the return process, emphasising benefits notably in organising charter flights. Challenges, including last-minute cancellations of joint return operations, arose from cooperation issues between Member States and third countries.
  - Member States highly valued pre-return assistance, including the deployment of Forced Return Escort and Support Offices (FRESOs) and the effective support from European Return Liaison Officers (EURLOs) in obtaining travel documents and streamlining return operations.

- Frontex' roll-out of EU post-arrival support and reintegration has been highly appreciated by Member States. Being a new player in this area, Frontex faced some practical challenges in expanding the geographical reach and selection of partners to provide reintegration support.

#### Operational and policy response

- Continue the establishment of a common EU system for returns through the implementation of the Recommendation on mutual recognition of return decisions and expediting returns, adopted in March 2023.
- Implementation of the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Strategy
- Implementation of the Return Coordinator's Roadmap on targeted return actions:

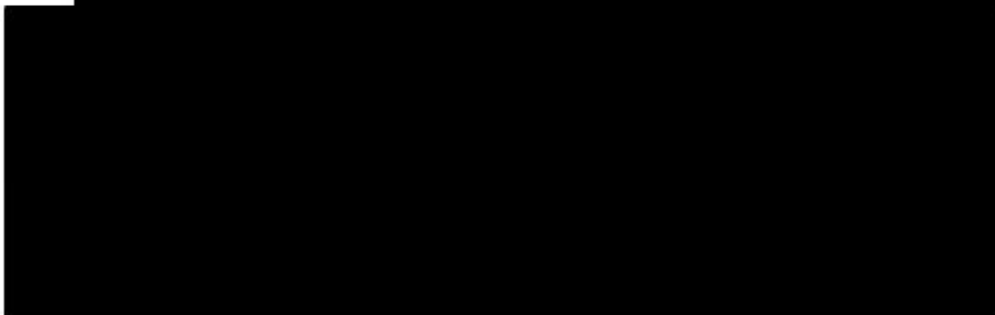


- Return Coordinator shared a practical guideline on return of illegally staying third-country nationals posing a security threat with the High-Level Network for Returns in February 2024, urging to establish national frameworks to guarantee a minimal systematic security assessment when issuing a return decision through the checks of the relevant databases and inclusion of security markings in the Schengen Information System. Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands will start joint work on this in March 2024 in the framework of Benelux cooperation.

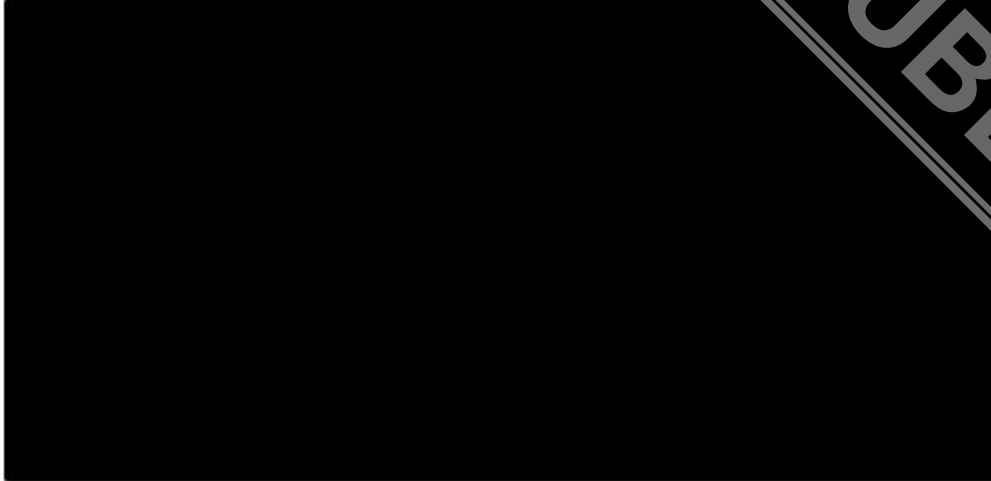
#### The Schengen Information System and return

- Ongoing work on making full use of the Schengen Information System to increase efficiency of return, including to facilitate identification, mutual recognition, assessment of risk of absconding and identification and follow up on persons posing a security threat.

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### 3. INTERNAL SECURITY OF THE SCHENGEN AREA

Key messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A regional initiative between Member States in the Western Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean routes, involving Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Austria has been established to step up joint measures to combat cross-border challenges.</li><li>• The formal consultations conducted by the Schengen Coordinator in 2023 demonstrate that cross-border challenges that led to internal border controls can best be addressed through increased regional cooperation initiatives across all Schengen dimensions.</li><li>• The use of online platforms by criminal networks active in migrant smuggling, for recruitment of both low-level facilitators and migrants, allows them to participate remotely in smuggling operations, remaining undetected.</li><li>• The October 2023 EU Roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime is already bringing concrete results with the launch of the European Ports Alliance and the conclusion of the thematic Schengen evaluation on drug trafficking.</li><li>• While judicial cooperation on drug trafficking is picking up inside the Schengen area and with partners, challenges linked to parallel investigations and concrete investigative measures remain.</li></ul>



### 3.1. Cross-border cooperation

- Over the last year, and in line with the Commission's recommendation of November 2023, Member States have stepped up their bi- and multilateral cross-border police cooperation:
  - Ongoing negotiations between France and Spain on a framework for joint patrols.
  - Austria and Hungary stepped up cooperation, including joint patrols under Operation Fox.
  - Progress is also made within the framework of the *Visegrad+* group (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Czechia, together with Germany, Austria and Slovenia).
  - A recent initiative under the coordination of the Schengen coordinator seeks to solidify regional cooperation, which in line with the 'whole-of-route' approach, includes Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia.
  - Joint patrols between Croatia and Slovenia increased remarkably in 2023, [REDACTED]
- Since December 2023, the discussions of the Schengen Coordinator with Member States carrying out internal border controls and Member States affected by them has continued. During this period, Slovakia decided to lift controls at its internal borders with Hungary on 22 January 2024, the Czech Republic lifted controls at their border with Slovakia on 2 February 2024.
- While several Member States are stepping up joint alternative measures to swiftly phase out internal border controls, they remain in place at several border sections, including in Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Sweden.
- Implementation of the Council Recommendation on operational law enforcement cooperation is ongoing.

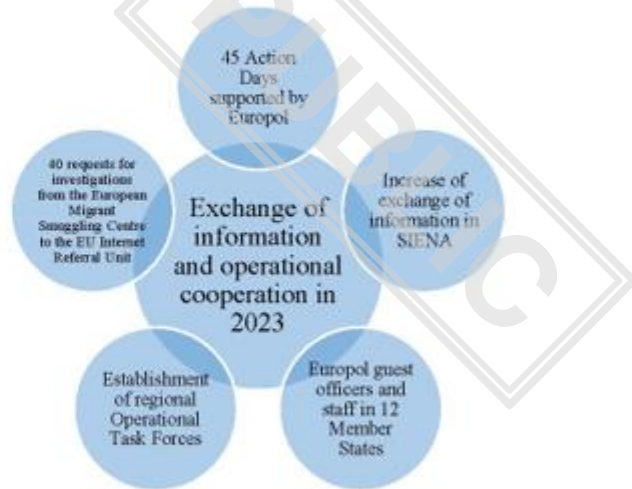
### 3.2. EU response to common threats

#### *Migrant smuggling*

- During the International Conference on a Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling of 28 November 2023, the Commission opened a new era of cooperation between countries of origin, transit and destination. It will promote and ensure enhanced practical cooperation at global level of law enforcement and judicial authorities. The Commission also proposed a legislative package in November 2023 to strengthen the EU response to migrant smuggling.
- The level of facilitated irregular migration<sup>20</sup> remains higher than in the years during and prior to the pandemic, with detections at land and sea borders increasing. The highest increases of apprehended facilitators in 2023 were noted at the land borders with Belarus and in the Eastern Aegean Sea. [Frontex]
- Most facilitators run their businesses from the last countries of departure of migrants, often participating remotely in smuggling operations through the use of online platforms. The online recruitment of low-level facilitators allows high-level facilitators to remain undetected. [Frontex]
- The facilitation of secondary movements remains a multidirectional phenomenon, organised both overland and by air and often combined with the provision of fraudulent documents. The Western Balkans stand out as key transit route. [Frontex, Europol, EUAA]

<sup>20</sup> The decrease of reported smugglers in 2023 is mostly on account of a decrease of inland detections. This decrease could have a range of explanations, for instance that people smugglers facilitating secondary movements were better able to evade detection (this would be supported by operational findings that indicate the use of technology and increasingly sophisticated *modi operandi*).

- The recruitment of drivers professionalised in 2023, expanding the geographic scope beyond local hubs for migrant smuggling, often using online campaigns. [Europol, Frontex, EUAA]
- Criminal networks quickly shift between *modi operandi* and smuggling routes,



- In response to the surge of irregular border crossings at the Russian-Finnish border, criminal networks promptly started to promote this route into the EU on social media platforms. The short reopening of the border-crossings points after a period of closure led to the rekindling of smuggling activities, before the new closure. [Europol]
- A number of detections indicates the potential emergence of a **reverse smuggling route from the UK into the EU** and onwards secondary movements. Although such incidents were limited, British and French authorities detected several smuggling events whereby smugglers concealed irregular migrants inside lorries travelling towards France. [Europol]

#### *Drug trafficking*

- The scale of drug trafficking into Europe increased further in 2023 with **record cocaine seizures** in the port of Antwerp (116 tonnes) and the Netherlands (60 tonnes). The seizures reported to Frontex in 2023 confirm the persistent growing trend of drug supply to Europe, significantly exceeding the demand in the European drug market. [Frontex]
- Criminal networks involved in drug trafficking have been resourceful in 2023 in **adapting their *modi operandi*** to law enforcement operations, by changing and fragmenting routes, putting in place multiple transshipments or temporary storage points or using several means of transportation and multiple companies for each operation. [Europol]
- **Cocaine laboratories** in Europe have professionalised in the last year with innovative methods to incorporate cocaine in various carrier materials, making detection more difficult. [Europol]
- **West Africa was a key transit point** for cocaine trafficking from Latin America to the EU in 2023, with several large consignments detected at-sea, off the coast of West Africa and at entry points in Europe. [Europol]
- The EU remains a key producer of **synthetic drugs**, distributed to both the European markets and globally. The production, trafficking and distribution of synthetic drugs has remained a highly dynamic crime area, which is subject to rapid change and innovation in terms of methods, chemicals and (pre)precursors used. [Europol]
- The EU heroin market has largely remained stable over the last years but it is becoming more complex. Heroin trafficking to the EU increasingly relies on maritime routes and global container

traffic, allowing larger quantities of heroin to be smuggled in single shipments. Synthetic opioids may emerge as alternatives to heroin, due to cheaper prices, their higher potency and potential shortages in the supply of heroin from Afghanistan. [Europol]

- 68 tonnes of drugs were seized in Frontex-coordinated joint operations in 2023.
- Europol's support to Member States in tackling drug trafficking reached new heights in 2023. It supported law enforcement operations of Member State authorities and Action Days.
- The Schengen-wide exchange of information on drug trafficking improved in 2023, reflected in the increase of contributions in SIENA.
- Law enforcement cooperation with Latin American authorities in 2023 has resulted in the seizure of tens of tonnes of cocaine<sup>21</sup>.
- EU Roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime (October 2023) aimed to increase the resilience of ports, organise more coordinated investigations (including improved judicial cooperation), exchange best practices and concrete solutions to protect people and to establish more advanced cooperation with international partners.

#### 24 January 2024: Launch of European Ports Alliance Public Private Partnership

##### Aims:

1. Mobilising the customs community against drug trafficking
2. Strengthening law enforcement operations in ports
3. Setting up a Public Private Partnership helping against drug smuggling

#### 2023 Schengen evaluation on drug trafficking into the EU

##### Outcomes and findings of the evaluation report

More than 30 best practices have been identified and structured around four main building blocks, which have been considered as cornerstones in a joint European fight against drug trafficking:



Providing strategic means to the Schengen area to fight against drug trafficking



Mapping illicit drug flows



Disrupting criminal networks upstream and downstream



Creating barriers and increasing the resilience of logistical hubs

#### Judicial cooperation on drug trafficking

RESULTS OF JUDICIAL COOPERATION IN 2023	CHALLENGES FOR JUDICIAL COOPERATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Eurojust supported more than 2400 drug trafficking cases, the highest case load on record and a doubling of both ongoing and new cases since 2020.</li> <li>▪ Criminal investigations into drug trafficking increasingly involve <b>third countries</b>. Judicial cooperation with authorities outside the EU on the rise. Liaison Prosecutors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The lack of a legal or operational framework for <b>cross-border controlled deliveries</b> makes them difficult to organise.</li> <li>▪ Common <b>parallel investigations</b> by different Member States poses frequent challenges. Eurojust can provide</li> </ul>

<sup>21</sup> Europol [press release](#), March 2023, 15 arrested in Brazil over 17 tonnes of cocaine worth billions..



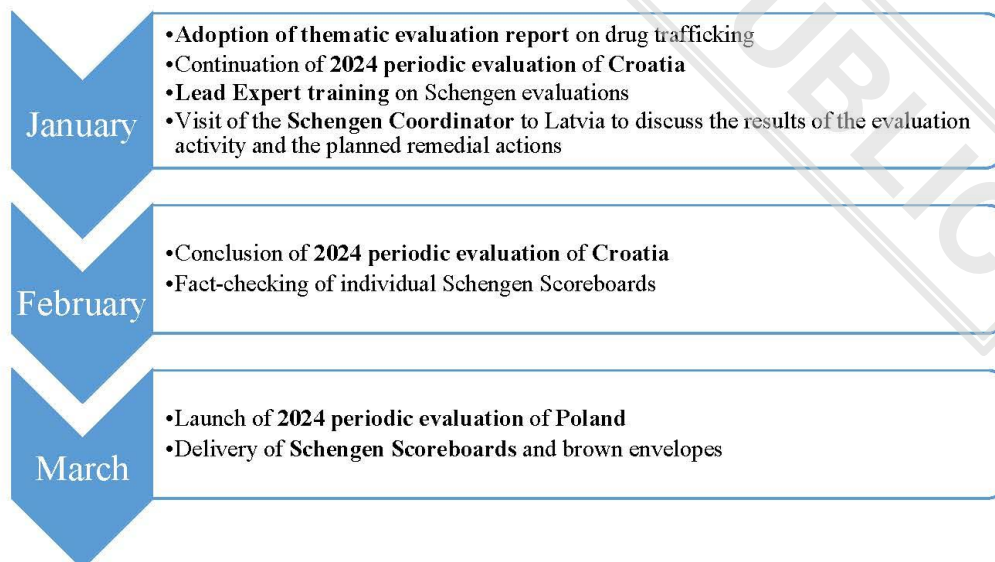
<p>play an important role.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Joint Investigation Teams (JITs)</b> have become an increasingly important and appreciated tool in judicial cooperation between EU Member States and with third countries, especially in drug trafficking cases. JITs have been set up with Latin American partners like Ecuador, Brazil and Argentina and more will follow in 2024.</li> </ul>	<p>coordination and legal expertise in these cases.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Developments in judicial cooperation cannot keep up with the <b>fast pace of technological developments</b> used by organised crime networks for the purpose of drug trafficking.</li> </ul>
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#### *EU support to internal security*

- Europol's European Serious and Organised Crime Centre (ESOCC) supported law enforcements operations in 2023. Europol also supported over Action Days across the Schengen area.
- The exchange of information between Member States and Europol via SIENA has seen a gradual increase over the years, with a record high of almost accepted contributions in 2023. [Europol]
- There were million searches of the Europol Information System (EIS), Europol's central information and intelligence database, in 2023. This is an increase of almost searches compared to 2022. The EIS contains information on more than objects or people of interest possibly linked with serious or organised crime. It can be directly accessed by the competent authorities in the Member States. [Europol]

Security outlook for 2024
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In light of the polarisation of European societies over the Israel-Gaza war, the drive to carry out terrorist attacks could be heightened. Attempts to enter the EU by people linked to terrorism will continue to be mainly aligned with broader migratory routes and their smuggling opportunities, timing, nationalities, and resources. Major sports events in 2024 may be at risk. Ensuring the systematic performance of border checks based on biometrics and consistent vigilant border controls remains paramount in interdicting the movement of high-risk individuals and mitigating the associated risks for EU internal security. [Frontex]</li> <li>• The war in Ukraine will continue to impose security challenges, including the risk of the entry of high-risk individuals into the EU, mixed among war refugees, but also exits of violent extremists to Ukraine, which could post a risk to the internal security of their home countries on the medium term. Systematic checks of all persons crossing the external borders against relevant databases and based on biometric data can limit these risks. [Frontex]</li> <li>• The situation in Gaza, the regional response thereto and the reduced Russian engagement in the Middle East may provide militant groups linked to Al-Qaeda and ISIS with more space for manoeuvre, further strengthening avenues of cooperation with criminal networks operation in the area which raises concerns on the possibilities of malicious exploitation of the migratory flow towards the EU. [Frontex]</li> <li>• New sources of drugs or an increased supply of synthetic drugs may emerge in the search of evermore lucrative operations and in light of gaps in supply chains. [Europol]</li> </ul>

#### 4. SCHENGEN EVALUATIONS AND SCHENGEN CYCLE DEVELOPMENTS



Thematic Schengen evaluation 2024

Bridging national gaps: Towards an effective EU return system through common solutions and innovative practices

- Priority second Schengen Cycle
- Identifying key common obstacles hampering effectiveness
- Highlighting good and innovative practices and common EU solutions
- Scope
  - National governance framework and capabilities, including coordination and coherence of actors at national and EU level
  - Information management and situational awareness through risk analysis
  - Cooperation tools for a more efficient return process (SIS return alert management; mutual recognition; assessment of threats to society; assisted voluntary return and reintegration)

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Drafting of questionnaire			Analysis of information from past evaluations				Selected on-site visits				
							Analysis of replies to questionnaire				
									Drafting of evaluation report		