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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE
REGIONS**

State of Schengen report 2023

**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE
AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS
STATE OF SCHENGEN REPORT 2023**

The 2023 State of Schengen report marks continued delivery on the Commission's initiative to reinforce the governance of the Schengen area without controls at internal borders ("Schengen area") and ensure structured, coordinated and common European responses to challenges affecting the common area. It kicks off the second annual Schengen cycle, informing political decision-making as well as the technical follow-up at both the European and national levels. Drawing, among others, from Schengen evaluations carried out in 2022, the report presents the state of Schengen, monitoring progress made at the end of the yearly governance cycle and highlighting priority areas that require further attention.

In the past year, important priorities identified in the 2022 State of Schengen report have been successfully implemented and key milestones have been achieved. Notable achievements include the accession of Croatia to the Schengen area, the adoption of a new legal framework for Schengen evaluations, the first multiannual strategic policy for European integrated border management, the adoption of the Council Recommendation for operational law enforcement cooperation and the launch of the new Schengen Information System. Looking ahead, the 2023 State of Schengen seeks to build on these priorities and overarching goals, in order to guarantee a seamless and effective implementation of the Schengen architecture, taking into account new challenges and priority areas.

This Communication¹ serves as input for the Schengen Council due to take place on 8 June 2023, which brings together the Ministers of the Schengen area to ensure strategic coordination of home affairs policies, to promote the conditions for a well-functioning area of freedom, security and justice and to give operational steer.

1. Reinforcing Schengen governance for a sustained high level of implementation

Guaranteeing an area of freedom, security and justice without internal frontiers requires commonly agreed measures be implemented to the highest possible standards by all, along with structured, coordinated and common responses to threats. To meet the need for this common governance framework, the **first annual Schengen cycle** was established by the Commission in 2022. It has been an important step forward in fostering mutual trust among the Schengen Member States, increasing awareness of common challenges, nurturing a stronger sense of collective responsibility and paving the way for coordinated and decisive action.

A common and stable framework for policy coordination

¹ The 2023 State of Schengen report also addresses Commission's legal obligation to provide reporting pursuant to Article 25 of Council Regulation 922/2022 and to Article 33 of the Schengen Borders Code.

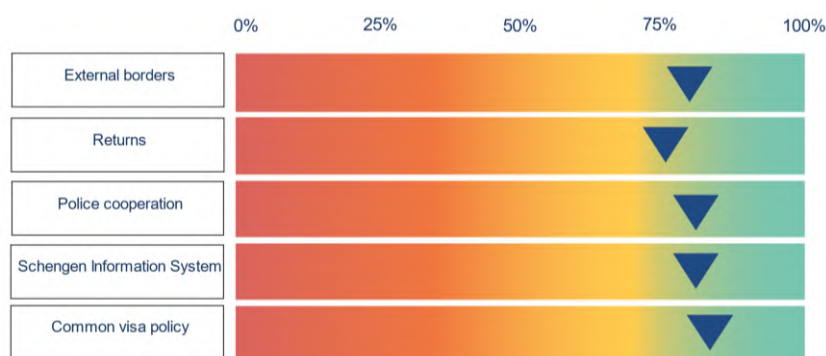
Since March 2022, the Schengen Council brings together Home Affairs Ministers on a regular basis, to discuss matters related to their countries' common responsibilities related to Schengen. The first State of Schengen report² provided the shared framework by identifying the key policy priorities to address the challenges faced by the Schengen area. To steer the political discussions in each Schengen Council, the Commission presented a **Schengen Barometer**. The Barometer provided a comprehensive situational picture of the key drivers having an impact on the stability of the Schengen area, and covering the situation at external and internal borders, migratory routes into and within the EU, the threats and joint responses to internal security as well as visa policy challenges. The strengthened Schengen Barometer+ presented in March 2023 addressed the need for improved EU situational awareness, preparedness and facts-based policy making, as proposed by President von der Leyen to EU Leaders at February's extraordinary European Council.

Increasing transparency and engagement

Following the calls for stronger political commitment and transparency, the Commission is developing a **Schengen Scoreboard** in close cooperation with the Member States. This tool will further promote transparency related to the functioning of the Schengen area, mutual trust between Member States and will allow effective prioritisation of outstanding remedial actions. An analysis of the implementation of Schengen recommendations over the past years in key areas such as external border management, return, the Schengen Information System and visa policy shows that, cumulatively, the effective national implementation rate is well above 75%.

The Commission has continued its outreach at national level in the Member States. Meetings at both political and technical level were held to discuss key reforms as a follow up to the 2022 report, including discussions between the **Schengen Coordinator** – appointed in June 2022 – and his national counterparts. The exchanges underscored the importance of forging closer links between the EU institutions and Member States and cultivating shared ownership of the governance of the Schengen area. They also revealed that, while there is a very high level of effective implementation of the Schengen *acquis*, there are still important challenges in the Schengen area which need to be tackled.

² Communication of the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of 24 May 2022, on the “State of Schengen Report 2022”, COM(2022) 301 final.

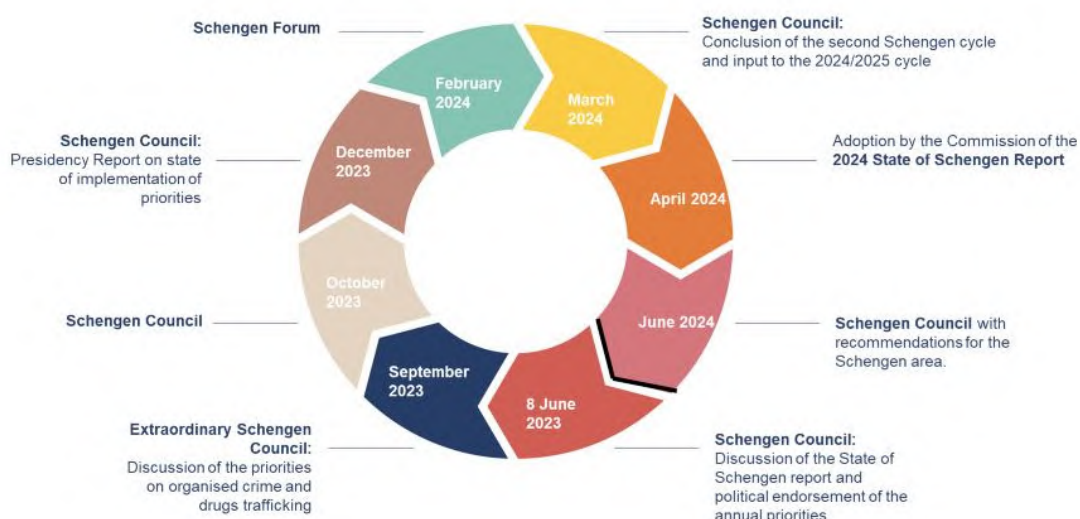


Overview of the implementation rate of Schengen evaluations recommendations by policy area³

Second Schengen cycle: consolidation of the existing framework to better detect and address identified challenges

In this second **Schengen Cycle**, the Schengen Council should further step up efforts in coordinating the implementation of common policies and in giving operational steer based on a shared understanding of risks and vulnerabilities. To build on the progress made in implementing the first Schengen cycle's priority actions, it remains important to further consolidate the governance framework, accelerate operational measures on migration and border management, fully operationalise the Police Cooperation Recommendation, lift all long-lasting internal border controls and continue to enlarge the Schengen area.

Schengen governance: THE SCHENGEN CYCLE 2023/2024



³ Implementation rates per policy area: external borders 78%, return 75%, police cooperation 79%, Schengen Information System 79%; and common visa policy 82%. Implementation rates take into account the nature of the deficiencies (non-compliant or improvement necessary) and the level of implementation of the remedial actions to address Schengen evaluation recommendations.

The effective functioning of this framework is the collective responsibility of all Schengen States, EU institutions and agencies, requiring a high degree of coordination and trust. While the Schengen evaluations ensure that Member States efficiently implement recommendations, a common Schengen approach has to become a primary consideration to prevent potential negative effects for the Schengen area. Individual action by Schengen States should, therefore, be complemented by common action through the Schengen Council addressing priorities of both individual States and the Schengen area as a whole. The **new Schengen evaluation** framework adopted in 2022⁴ will lead to more streamlined and comprehensive country recommendations, allowing for the development of strategic orientations and the adoption of recommendations for the whole Schengen area, which will further strengthen the governance framework and the role of the Schengen Council. It initiates a third generation of Schengen evaluations⁵, moving away from fragmented, policy area-based compliance evaluations and paving the way towards comprehensive assessments of Member States' overall performance. Furthermore, it reinforces the possibilities for the Commission and Member States to conduct thematic evaluations to assess issues and practices across policy areas of Member States facing similar challenges. The enhanced **monitoring activities**⁶ will improve the implementation of these common priorities and feed into the Schengen Scoreboard, building on the ongoing efforts to ensure that this tool is a reliable instrument based on a common, rigorous and transparent approach accurately reflecting the situation on the ground. The main developments, the state of play and next steps related to the Schengen evaluation and monitoring mechanism are presented in **Annex 1**.

Reinforcing the role of the Schengen Council with a stronger action-oriented approach requires a more effective use of the Schengen Barometer, Schengen evaluations and other tools, to better identify areas where action is needed, leading to concrete and tangible results. Improving common ownership and responsibility with a greater medium-term focus, combined with stronger, more coordinated and effective implementation are therefore priorities for this second cycle. **The Commission calls upon the incumbent and incoming Presidencies of the Council to further consolidate the Schengen governance framework, building upon the solid foundations of the first Schengen cycle, to ensure a seamless, continuous and permanent governance of the Schengen area.**

⁴ Council Regulation (EU) 2022/922 on the establishment and operation of an evaluation and monitoring mechanism to verify the application of the Schengen *acquis*, and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1053/2013, OJ L 160, 15.6.2022, p. 1–27.

⁵ While the first generation of Schengen evaluations was coordinated by the Council between 1998 and 2014, the coordination of the second generation (2015-2023) shifted to the Commission under Council Regulation (EU) No 1053/2013 of 7 October, OJ L 295, 6.11.2013, p. 27–37. The new framework will be fully applied for the evaluations of Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in 2023.

⁶ The new Schengen evaluation and monitoring mechanism includes the possibility of having a more strategic use of the available and new monitoring tools, such as revisits (for serious deficiencies), verification visits and thematic evaluations. This will ensure increased and targeted follow-up to Member States' evaluations, which is especially relevant in cases of serious deficiencies. The Commission carried out a first verification visit in February 2023, to monitor the progress made by Belgium to address shortcomings in the management of external borders.

Box 1. Harvesting best practices and sharing knowledge

Schengen evaluations identify innovative practices by Member States that could be applied by others, providing Member States with insights into innovative strategies, tools, and measures to effectively implement the Schengen rules.

The *compendium* of best practices presented in **Annex 2** is intended to give additional tools to Member State authorities when implementing the Schengen rules and to build on proven approaches and techniques when putting forward new proposals and initiatives. It also aims to strengthen the framework, created in the Council Working Party for Schengen Matters, allowing Member States to share their experiences, exchange knowledge and learn from each other, leading to improved implementation of the Schengen architecture.

These best practices should also support the effective implementation of the multiannual strategic policy cycle for European integrated border management. Member States are invited to reflect the relevant best practices in their national strategies on integrated border management.

2. A wider and more prosperous Schengen: a key asset for European growth

Today, around 425 million people enjoy the freedom, security and justice that Schengen offers. Schengen is the largest area of free movement without internal border controls in the world. Following its eighth enlargement with the accession of Croatia on 1 January 2023, the Schengen area comprises 27 European countries that have formally abolished their internal frontiers.

The Schengen area: the most visited destination worldwide in 2022

2022 was characterised by the resumption of **international travel** on a large scale following the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, 585 million out of the 900 million tourists who travelled internationally came to Europe, representing 65% of the world's total, **making Schengen the most attractive and most visited area in the world**⁷.

Beyond facilitating travel within the Union, Schengen is a key driver of competitiveness for European businesses. Schengen substantially contributes to the well-functioning Single Market, accounting for 23 million businesses and 15% of global GDP. Trade in goods and services within the Schengen area has intensified over the last three decades, remaining the main source of trade in goods for the EU (about 60% higher than EU-27 trade in goods with the rest of the world). In 2022, despite the complex and volatile international context, intra-EU trade has experienced a considerable boost when compared to previous years, reflecting the efforts to reduce reliance on external markets and the benefits of operating in a common Schengen area with few barriers. For example, the total trade of transport services within the

⁷ UNWTO: Tourism set to return to pre-pandemic levels in some regions in 2023, published on 17 January 2023, accessible [here](#). Statista: Number of international tourist arrivals worldwide from 2005 to 2022, by region, last accessed 12 May, accessible [here](#).

common area amounted to almost EUR 270 billion in 2022 (up from around EUR 125 billion in 2013). Such services typically involve cross-border movement of people and services, attesting to the well-functioning of the Single Market and the Schengen area. The proposal for an amendment of the Schengen Borders Code complements the proposed Single Market Emergency Instrument aiming to preserve the free movement of goods, services and persons and to ensure the availability of critical products during emergencies.

The increased rise in global mobility resulted in a sharp increase of Schengen visa applications, leading to significant delays in granting appointments and in processing visa applications, as revealed by Schengen evaluations in 2022. In some cases, applicants are paying up to EUR 500 to agencies or individuals just to secure an appointment. In addition, Member States often provide inadequate and inaccurate information to visa applicants regarding the visa application process, which impacts the quality of the assessment of migration and security risks. The consequences of these deficiencies are manifold, ranging from reputational damage for the Member States and the EU as a whole and economic loss, especially in the tourism sector to disruption of family contacts and business relations. Member States should deploy sufficient appropriate staff in consulates to carry out the tasks relating to the examination of applications, in order to ensure the quality of service to the public. Member States can use EU funding under their national programmes under the 2021-2027 Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI) of the Integrated Border Management Fund (IBMF): EUR 88 million are allocated to cover operating support for Common visa policy⁸. The Commission also recalls recent recommendations inviting Member States to streamline inefficient workflows at consulates, to make better use of the knowledge and resources of locally employed staff and to reconsider certain consultations with the central authorities. Issuing more multiple-entry visas with long validity would also lead to efficiency gains.

In April 2022, the Commission proposed to digitalise the visa procedure by creating a common visa application platform and replacing the current visa sticker with a digital visa. The aim is to reduce the administrative burden on Member States to manage the visa applications, helping to overcome existing delays. It will also contribute to reinforcing the security of the Schengen area, making the visa format less prone to fraud or theft. The Parliament and Council began discussing the proposal in June 2022 and substantial progress was made under the Czech and Swedish Presidencies allowing the start of trilogues in May 2023.

Schengen enlargement

Croatia's full accession to the Schengen area in 2023 is an important milestone towards the completion of the Schengen area. It was a key priority area identified in the first State of Schengen report. The positive developments that took place in 2022 were the result of a

⁸ While Member States extensively use EU funds for upgrading premises, software and hardware development, as well as trainings, only few of them use this funding for deploying/recruiting staff dealing with Schengen visa processing.

comprehensive evaluation process that started in 2016. During this time, Croatia made significant efforts to fulfil its commitments to comply with the Schengen *acquis*. Following the positive opinion of the European Parliament⁹, the Council decided on 8 December 2022¹⁰ to lift controls at the common borders between Croatia and other Schengen countries. Croatia also started issuing Schengen visas in 2023, making it easier for tourists to visit the country. Such seamless travel benefits not only Croatia but also its neighbouring countries as well as the entire Schengen area.

In December 2022, the Czech Presidency also led an important debate on a Council decision to lift internal border controls as regards **Bulgaria** and **Romania**¹¹. It has been 12 years since the Commission confirmed that both Bulgaria and Romania are ready to become fully part of the Schengen area without internal border controls. In its Communication *‘Making Schengen stronger with the full participation of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia in the area without internal border controls’*¹² of November 2022, the Commission reaffirmed once again the preparedness of these EU Member States to join the Schengen area. In particular, it took stock of the voluntary fact-finding missions carried out to Bulgaria and Romania in October-November 2022, which not only confirmed the conclusions of the completed evaluation processes from 2011, specifically that Bulgaria and Romania continue to meet the conditions necessary to apply all relevant parts of the Schengen *acquis* in full, but also underlined that the two Member States are duly applying the latest developments of the Schengen *acquis*, therefore being key contributors to the well-functioning of the Schengen area.

It is both a legal expectation and a European promise that Member States acceding to the Union participate fully in the Schengen area once all the agreed conditions are verified and met. Moreover, the failure to lift controls at the internal borders has important negative economic and environmental consequences not only for Bulgarian and Romanian citizens but for the entire EU. Increased waiting times at the borders result in long queues of vehicles and trucks, leading to increased costs, reduced competitiveness for businesses, disruption of supply chains, and decreased revenues for the tourism sector. The uncertainties related to border delays and administrative burdens can discourage foreign investment and undermine economic and social cohesion between Member States. There is even an environmental cost, with estimates suggesting that 46,000 tonnes of CO₂ are emitted per year¹³ due to the non-lifting of internal border controls.

⁹ European Parliament legislative resolution of 10 November 2022 on the draft Council decision on the full application of the provisions of the Schengen *acquis* in the Republic of Croatia (10624/2022 — C9-0222/2022 — 2022/0806(NLE)).

¹⁰ Council Decision (EU) 2022/2451 of 8 December 2022 on the full application of the provisions of the Schengen *acquis* in the Republic of Croatia.

¹¹ Accession to the area without controls at internal borders remains subject to an agreement between the acceding State and all the Contracting Parties, as established in Article 140(1) and (2) of the Convention implementing the Schengen Agreement. In December 2022, Austria and the Netherlands did not support the decision for the full application of the Schengen *acquis* in Bulgaria and Romania.

¹² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council of 16 November 2022 on Making Schengen stronger with the full participation of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia in the area without internal border controls, COM/2022/636 final.

¹³ KPMG Romania, The Unnecessary Burden, March 2023, accessible [here](#).

The Commission is working closely with the Swedish and the incoming Spanish Presidency to prepare for a decision to be taken by the Council to lift internal border controls as soon as possible this year. Romania and Bulgaria have constantly acted as essential actors for the continuous development of the Schengen *acquis*. It is high time the EU honour its commitment to grant the two Member States full membership to the Schengen area, and further strengthen European unity in doing so.

Significant progress has also been made in the ongoing efforts to further consolidate the Schengen area. After intensive preparations by the Cypriot authorities to ensure their readiness to process Schengen Information System data, **Cyprus** will apply the provisions of the Schengen *acquis* pertaining to the Schengen Information System starting from July 2023¹⁴. The connection of Cyprus to the Schengen Information System will strengthen law enforcement cooperation and enhance security in Europe. In October 2023, once the Schengen Information System is operational in Cyprus, the Commission will carry out a Schengen evaluation to verify that the necessary conditions for the application of the Schengen *acquis* in the field of the Schengen Information System have been met in Cyprus. As for **Ireland**, following the successful Schengen evaluations in the field of data protection, the Schengen Information System and police cooperation, Ireland will undergo evaluations for the remaining *acquis* it has requested to take part in (*i.e.* judicial cooperation in criminal matters, drugs cooperation and Article 26 of the Schengen Convention¹⁵) in 2023, in view of a Council decision to be taken for the applications of these parts of the Schengen *acquis*.

3. A strong and united Schengen area

The European border management system implemented by Member States has successfully enabled hundreds of millions of people to travel to the Schengen area in 2022. This achievement highlights the common commitment to make the EU the most attractive destination in the world, facilitating swift and safe border crossings. It is therefore crucial that measures to manage external borders align with the triple objective of facilitating travel, enhancing security and managing migration.

Although almost all nationals from non-EU countries come to the EU using legal channels, irregular migration in 2022 reached its highest level since 2016¹⁶, with 330 000 irregular border crossings reported by Frontex. Irregular border crossings on nearly all established migratory routes saw an increase compared to previous years. Although this represents a 66% increase when compared to 2021, the number is far from the levels of 2015¹⁷. The increased irregular arrivals were largely driven by adverse developments in the European

¹⁴ Council Decision 2023/870 of 25 April 2023 on the application of the provisions of the Schengen *acquis* relating to the Schengen Information System in the Republic of Cyprus.

¹⁵ Article 26 of the Schengen Convention sets out the obligations of carriers transporting third-country nationals that are refused entry.

¹⁶ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of 12 January 2023 on the Report on Migration and Asylum, C(2023) 219 final.

¹⁷ Frontex reported 1 047 210 irregular border crossing in 2015.

neighbourhood and beyond, which also led to a notable rise in secondary irregular migration, particularly along the **Western Balkan route**, which accounted for 43% of all irregular entries in 2022. **The Central Mediterranean route** was the second busiest migratory route in absolute terms and experienced a 56% increase compared to 2021. Increased irregular migration also brought about additional risks, as irregular migrants are vulnerable to exploitation and crossings, both by sea and land, are hazardous.

In February 2023, the European Council took stock of the migratory situation and agreed to strengthen and accelerate the work with an ambitious set of operational measures on migration and border management. Developments and progress in the last months confirmed that, compared to 2015-2016, we are now better prepared to jointly prevent irregular movements thanks to **enhanced controls at the EU external borders**, and to carry out more efficient return and readmission operations. In the last months, efforts have been made to improve capabilities at the border and to support the purchase of electronic surveillance systems at the external border. To this end, the Commission is finalising an open call for expression of interest under the BMVI Thematic Facility to support Member States facing pressure at specific external land border sections and introduce, extend or upgrade existing surveillance systems. In addition, the measures implemented in 2022-2023 in the context of the Western Balkans Action Plan, such as increased visa alignment of the Western Balkan partners with the EU¹⁸, have already yielded good first results with reduced numbers entering the EU irregularly from this region¹⁹. Furthermore, in December 2022 Frontex expanded its joint operation in Serbia to the border with Hungary, complementing the support already being provided at the border with Bulgaria. It also launched joint operations in Moldova (April 2022) and in North Macedonia (April 2023). The Commission is looking forward to the adoption of the status agreements it negotiated with Montenegro and Albania in 2023 as well as the start of negotiations with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on, respectively, renewed and new status agreements. These will help address the challenge of irregular migration more effectively, exploiting the Agency's full potential to work with and in third countries.

Furthermore, the ongoing actions to engage with priority third countries will aim at reducing irregular departures towards the EU and promote returns, as well as legal pathways, in line

¹⁸ Serbia reinstated visa requirements for Burundi (21 October), Tunisia (21 October – implemented since 22 November), India (9 December, implemented since 1 January 2023), Guinea Bissau (1 December - implemented since 6 December), Cuba and Bolivia (27 December - implemented since 13 April and 10 February 2023 respectively). North Macedonia has reinstated visa requirements for Botswana and Cuba (29 November, implemented since 1 January 2023) and Azerbaijan (29 November, implemented since 16 March 2023). On 12 January 2023, Montenegro adopted a decision to reinstate visa requirements for Cuban nationals and UAE residents (implemented since 13 January 2023). Albania did not renew the seasonal visa exemption for Indian, Russian and Egyptian citizens (it was, however, renewed until 31 December 2023 for citizens of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Thailand).

¹⁹ In February 2023, 3 654 irregular border crossings were reported, which represents a 36% drop from January 2023 (5 751), continuing a decreasing trend that began in November (14 105). In March, although a 69% month-on-month increase was recorded (6 181), there is still a 22% decrease in irregular border crossings along this route in 2023 (14 858), compared to the same period last year (19 029).

with the Central Mediterranean Action Plan and the various Team Europe Initiatives. By way of example, the first phase of a new border protection package for Egypt is being implemented, an Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership was launched with Tunisia and another one is planned with Egypt. Building on these positive developments and with the aim of establishing EU-wide measures to maintain the integrity and functionality of the Schengen area, the Commission is also working on preparing Action Plans on the Eastern Mediterranean and on the Atlantic and Western Mediterranean routes.

It is now essential to keep up the *momentum* of action and the Commission calls on the Schengen Council to take stock of the operational measures the EU is collectively implementing, following February's extraordinary European Council. In particular, Frontex should report on the arrangements taken to reinforce its (re)deployments of personnel and equipment to strengthen key external borders sections in 2023 and on what steps will be implemented together with Member States to ensure the availability of the necessary capabilities.

The developments over the past year highlighted once again the urgent need for swift adoption of the legislative proposals accompanying the **Pact on Asylum and Migration**, to manage irregular migration, asylum, enhance border controls and fight migrant smuggling strategically, coherently and effectively. To support a more stable and stronger Schengen area, **the Commission calls on the European Parliament and the Council to swiftly adopt the new Schengen Borders Code, the Screening and Eurodac Regulations in particular.**

Effective governance for border management and returns

In March 2023, the Commission established the first-ever multiannual strategic policy²⁰ on **European integrated border management** to be implemented by the European Border and Coast Guard for the next five years. This decision marks a significant milestone in the efforts to strengthen the Schengen area and ensure effective management of its borders, giving effect to one of the priority actions identified in the 2022 State of Schengen report. The policy cycle is the result of an extensive consultation process between institutions, leading to a shared vision on external border management. It provides a coordinated framework to make sure that all Member States' and Frontex activities – from border surveillance to anti-smuggling to returns – are guided by the same set of common principles and produce tangible results on the ground. This governance framework will be further reinforced by means of a technical and operational strategy to be developed by Frontex by September 2023.

Well-functioning EU border management and returns also require an **effective national governance system** in each Member State. Schengen evaluations carried out in 2022, confirmed that weak governance and a limited strategic approach in some Member States have a negative impact on border control and return activities. Limited cooperation between authorities for border and return activities has also been observed in several Member States,

²⁰ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council establishing the multiannual strategic policy for European integrated border management, COM/2023/146 final.

further hampering an effective operational response. In the area of border management, while some Member States have reinforced their national governance, for example by establishing strategic coordination units, others follow a more decentralised approach, which could give rise to challenges as regards strategic border control coordination.

In the field of **return**, the constant fragmented nature of solutions, *ad hoc* responses and the absence of strategic planning prevent Member States from comprehensively streamlining national procedures, working on priorities and making the best use of the (limited) available resources.

While there is no one single institutional solution or model, each Member State's national system should be effective in closing existing loopholes, streamlining efforts, and coordinating all relevant authorities involved to effectively manage the external borders and carry out returns. The **revision of the national integrated border management strategies by March 2024** offers a unique opportunity to strengthen national governance and further reinforce the strategic planning of **national capabilities** for border control and return as well as to set up **national contingency plans**.

Therefore, to ensure the provision of sufficient and well-trained personnel, equipment and infrastructure to effectively support the national strategies for European integrated border management, both for border and return activities, Member States should put in place the adequate financial and operational arrangements by March 2024, including on the use of EU funds, for the implementation of their existing national capability development plans.

Furthermore, to guarantee the future availability of common capabilities and following the preparation of the overview of the national capability development plans, Frontex needs to adopt a capability roadmap to further guide development of personnel and equipment for the European Border and Coast Guard in the years to come to ensure that both Frontex and Member States' authorities can deliver on their tasks for border management and return.

Towards the most advanced border management in the world

The entry into operation of the renewed Schengen Information System in March 2023 is the foundation for the establishment of the most advanced border management system in the world. The updated system strengthens external border management and provides additional opportunities for cross-border operational cooperation within the Schengen area. This accomplishment fulfils one of the primary objectives identified in the 2022 State of Schengen report. Due to increased functionalities, people travelling under a false identity can be now better detected and arrested.

The new tools can only reach their full potential if fully implemented by all Schengen States. Moreover, Member States must also implement the existing functionalities to ensure a level playing field and full reciprocity within the EU and the Schengen area. In particular, 2022 Schengen evaluations revealed that not all Member States have put in place the necessary tools and procedures to ensure that all relevant information, including fingerprints and

photographs, are inserted in the Schengen Information System when creating alerts or are accessible by the end-users. This prevents police officers and border guards from accurately identifying the person subject to an alert and taking appropriate action. Furthermore, 2022 evaluations highlighted that Member States are increasingly using the Automated Fingerprint Identification System but that there is still room for improvement in some Member States²¹. Non-systematic use of the system risks allowing individuals subject to an alert to avoid being detected by using fraudulent documents.

Together with other large-scale IT-systems, the Schengen Information System will allow easy travel throughout the Schengen area while guaranteeing the highest level of internal security and managing regular and irregular migration. Implementing the Entry-Exit System and the European Travel Information and Authorisation System remains a key priority. The February European Council Conclusions confirmed the need to make these systems operational as soon as possible to ensure full and effective control of the external borders. During the past year, Member States, eu-LISA and the Commission have continued stepping up their efforts to implement this new IT architecture and its interoperability, leading to the world's most technologically advanced border management system. It is of paramount importance that eu-LISA and the other relevant stakeholders take the necessary steps within the scope of their responsibilities to avoid further delays that might cause a domino effect on other systems. To this end, eu-LISA has to deliver as quickly as possible the missing critical central component of the Entry-Exit System in order to enable the Member States to test their national technical developments and progress with their preparation for using the system.

Joint efforts for a more effective EU system for returns

The work in this field has evolved during the last year and the common EU system for returns is taking shape, in line with the priority actions identified in the 2022 State of Schengen report. The implementation of the 2021 EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration²² is progressing well. In 2022, the positive trend of voluntary returns as the preferred option for returning third-country nationals without legal status continued, with voluntary returns accounting for 56% of all returns implemented²³. This trend persisted despite the near disappearance of COVID-19 related restrictions on forced returns. Since April 2022, Frontex is providing Member States with standardised packages to support the reintegration of the persons returning to their countries of origin to further strengthen a coherent European approach. Member States are more actively engaging in the Joint Reintegration Services with

²¹ In 2022, more than 4 million searches in 2022 were carried out in the Schengen Information System with the Automated Fingerprint Identification System, whereas in 2021 there were only 1.3 million searches.

²² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council of 27 April 2021 on the EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration. COM(2021)120 final.

²³ Preliminary data gathered by Frontex as reported by Member States.

the Agency, and Frontex is expanding the geographical coverage²⁴ as well as the scope of these services.

However, the total number of effective returns carried out in 2022 (around 78 000²⁵) remained low taking into account that approximately 420 000 third-country nationals²⁶ were requested to leave the EU and Schengen area in 2022. While cooperation with some third countries on readmission limits the possibilities to carry out returns, Schengen evaluations conducted in 2022 reaffirmed the trend observed in the last years, highlighting the persistent challenges posed by national barriers that hinder the efficiency of return procedures. There are still practical obstacles – limited operational capacity, burdensome national procedures – resulting in Member States not issuing return decisions swiftly to irregular migrants. This significantly hampers the possibilities to initiate the necessary procedures and successfully carry out returns. It also negatively impacts the added value of the updated Schengen Information System since it limits the possibility to introduce return alerts. Furthermore, the effective cooperation among various national actors in the return area²⁷ is still not sufficient, which, when combined with the lack of integrated case management IT systems, creates gaps, poor follow-up and inefficiencies. Return counselling is still not widely available in all Member States.

The complexity of returns clearly calls for structured cooperation, regular exchanges of information, common priorities and a more strategic use of resources. The recently established Operational Strategy for more effective returns²⁸ is intended to address this key gap and reinforce the coherence of Member States' efforts. The Commission calls on all Member States to make full use of the discussions, practical support and cooperation that is being developed through the High-Level Network for Return and the Return Coordinator. Effective provision of return counselling is to remain high on the agenda of the High-Level Network to ensure that all Member States have return counselling as a professional profile and are aware of all available tools and trainings. Furthermore, during this second Schengen cycle, the High-Level Network needs to explore practical solutions for the identified persistent shortcomings, building on the experience and good practices of Member States. The Schengen evaluations to be carried out from 2023 will contribute to this work by supporting the development of a common framework to assess performance in the return domain.

As the operational arm of the EU return policy, Frontex, plays a key role in this regard. The continuous increase in the number of returns coordinated by Frontex is a very positive

²⁴ The number of participating Member States and third countries covered has continued to increase, respectively from 5 Member States in the pilot project to 17 Member States since January 2023, with an increased geographical scope (from 24 active third countries in 2022 to 37 in 2023).

²⁵ Eurostat data for 2022. [Statistics | Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](#)

²⁶ Eurostat data for 2022. [Statistics | Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](#)

²⁷ In more than 10 Member States, there are at least two bodies (many times pertaining to different authorities) responsible for issuing return decisions, and in the majority of Member States, the authority responsible for executing returns is also different.

²⁸ The Commission contributed to the Operational Strategy with the Policy Document 'Towards an operational strategy for more effective returns' of 24 January 2023 (COM(2023) 45 final).

development (31% in 2022 compared with 22% in 2021 and 17% in 2020), even more so because it is linked to an increasing share of voluntary returns (+109% in 2022 compared to 2021). The Frontex-led return operations to Albania, Nigeria and Bangladesh are hallmarks of an effective European system and there is a need to continue reaching out to new third countries. The Agency should also continue to support Member States in the development, implementation and harmonisation of return case-management IT-systems at EU level.

The risk of our response falling short will persist until we have a reinforced and more effective legal framework making the common EU system more robust and resilient. To this end, it is key to advance work on the Pact on Migration and Asylum, including starting the negotiations on the recast Return Directive, as well as on more effective cooperation with third countries.

Box 2. Making returns more effective with the updated Schengen Information System

The entry into operation of the renewed Schengen Information System (SIS) in March 2023 will help to boost the effective return of third-country nationals subject to a return decision and the monitoring of enforcement. Member States are now required to upload return alerts in the Schengen Information System. This will lead to the easier detection of returnees who are absconding during migration and border checks, also helping to discourage secondary movements of returnees. It will also make it easier for Member States to mutually recognise each other's return decisions as they will now be able to see via the Schengen Information System if a return decision has been issued in another Member State.

As another step towards the common EU system for returns, in March 2023 the Commission issued a Recommendation on mutual recognition of return decisions and on expediting returns²⁹ providing guidance to Member States on how to improve the efficiency of return procedures, including through mutual recognition of each other's return decisions. The Commission is spearheading in-depth discussions with Member States on operationalising the Recommendation and the new opportunities arising from the entry into operation of the renewed Schengen Information System. Through discussions on various aspects of the Recommendation in the Contact Group on Return in March, IMEX Council Working Group in April, and SCIFA in May, the Commission and Member States further looked into the sharing of best practices and identifying concrete practical steps forward. As part of the implementation of the Operational Strategy, the High-Level Network for Return, chaired by the Return Coordinator, will further discuss the issue in June.

Enhanced protection of fundamental rights during border and return activities

The area of freedom, security and justice must, above all, be a single area in which fundamental rights and freedoms are protected. The EU and Member States reaffirmed their unwavering commitment to effective and safe management of external borders and return activities while protecting fundamental rights. The multiannual strategic policy for integrated border management emphasised the need for all EU and national actors to effectively uphold fundamental rights during border and return activities, with robust structures to guarantee

²⁹ Commission Recommendation of 16 March 2023 on mutual recognition of return decisions and expediting returns when implementing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council, C(2023) 1763 final.

access to international protection, respect of the principle of *non-refoulement*, as well as to provide adequate conditions in the exceptional cases where detention of third-country nationals becomes necessary in accordance with EU law. Frontex recruited 46 **Fundamental Rights Monitors**³⁰ in 2022. National **fundamental rights monitoring mechanisms**, as proposed under the Screening Regulation, enhance transparency and accountability at EU borders. Croatia took the lead and established the first independent monitoring mechanism in June 2022, which was renewed in November with new elements such as unannounced visits at the green borders. Finally, evaluations in 2022 showed that, while detention conditions still require improvements in some Member States, there are also positive examples of centres reflecting the administrative nature of the detention.

Box 3. Priorities for border management and return

1. Implement and consolidate the strategic governance of the European integrated border management by establishing Frontex' Technical and Operational Strategy by September 2023 and aligning the national strategies of the Member States by March 2024.
2. Strengthen national governance for border management and return and coordinate strategic processes such as the planning of European and national capabilities for border control and return, making full use of the EU support offered, including through the High-Level Network for Return and the Return Coordinator.
3. Increase the quality of border checks and border surveillance by providing a sufficient number of trained staff, efficient procedures, adequate use of information systems and enhanced cooperation with third countries.
4. Enhance European and national situational awareness through the implementation of risk analysis and information exchange within the European border surveillance framework.
5. Systematically issue return decisions to third-country nationals with no right to stay, and provide appropriate follow-up of their implementation, closing existing loopholes between asylum and return and putting in place effective return case-management IT-systems.
6. Make full use of the new functionalities of the Schengen Information System for return to enhance the use of mutual recognition of return decisions and fully maximise the possibilities under the Commission Recommendation on mutual recognition of return decisions and on expediting returns.

Phasing out long-lasting internal border controls

The Schengen area requires a common and coordinated approach to address situations that risk having a significant impact on the security and well-being of EU residents. Although the temporary reintroduction of internal border controls may be implemented under exceptional circumstances, this cannot compromise the very principle that there is to be no internal border control³¹. Exceptions to and derogations from this right are to be interpreted strictly when the need arises to respond to a serious threat to public policy or internal security. Significant steps have been taken towards implementing this key priority outlined in the first State of

³⁰ These recruitments exceed the number of monitors (40) foreseen by the European Border and Coast Guard Regulation.

³¹ Joined cases C- 368/20 and C-369/20, *NW v Landespolizeidirektion Steiermark*, ECLI:EU:C:2022:298, paragraph 64.

Schengen report. Yet there remains substantial work to be done to ensure that internal border controls are only used as a last resort.

Over the past year, Member States have resorted to reintroducing or prolonging internal border controls on 28 occasions, of which 19 are related to prolonging existing long-lasting internal border controls that have been in effect since 2015. Since October 2022, the Schengen Coordinator has been in close dialogue with Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, and Sweden, as well as with the Member States affected by these controls. With a view to developing a roadmap to move away from internal border controls as soon as possible, a series of bilateral, trilateral and multilateral meetings were organised to better appreciate the nature of the threats notified by these six countries, and to identify more targeted and effective alternative measures to tackle them. The subsequent lifting of controls by Austria and Czechia at the border with Slovakia, and by Denmark at the border with Sweden, highlights that such alternative measures are available and demonstrates the value of dialogue and exchange of good practices.

These meetings also brought to light that Member States continue to be confronted with serious threats to their internal security and public policy which require action. Furthermore, the notified internal border controls vary significantly as regards their intensity, and often are complementary to the other measures undertaken to address the identified threats. For instance, some Member States carry out trilateral train patrols, such as on train connections between Austria, Germany and Hungary, as well as between Austria, Italy and Germany, and others have established joint patrols. Austria, Croatia and Slovenia have also established a police cooperation network with Western Balkan partners, thus helping to prevent entry of irregular migrants from this region and, as such, helping to address one of the recurring grounds of the reintroduced border controls. In the case of Denmark, controls are carried out based on a number plate recognition system deployed by the Danish authorities at the land border with Germany allowing for targeted controls of specific, suspicious vehicles, instead of systematic border controls. The enhanced cross-border cooperation put in place between Austria and Czechia resulted in the lifting of their border controls with Slovakia in February 2023. The expansion of these good practices of cross-border police cooperation to all relevant border sections should lead to the replacement of the existing internal border controls by alternative measures, allowing to ensure a high level of security across the entire Schengen territory.

Box 4. Developments on internal border controls

Between April and May 2023, Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, and Sweden notified the Commission of the reintroduction of internal border controls for six months (from end of April/mid-May to end of October/mid-November 2023).

On the one side, these notifications reflect efforts made by these Member States during the last few months to limit the impacts of the controls on the exercise of the freedom of movement.

In particular, some MS lifted their controls on some border sections or are in the process of taking

measures which could lead to controls being lifted soon. For instance, Denmark now has limited its border controls to its borders with Germany, where controls are conducted as spot checks, and has lifted controls at the border with Sweden. Furthermore, the Commission expects that the planned entry into force, in August 2023, of a new Swedish national law allowing for police checks in the border areas, in line with the Council Recommendation 2017/820 of 12 May 2017³², will allow for addressing the identified threats without the need to reintroduce internal border controls.

In addition, as set out above, some Member States in their notifications have also explained the useful alternative measures they have started to implement, and have indicated that they will strive to enhance them further. The Commission stands ready to assist all Member States concerned in developing alternative measures further, in order to help limiting the impact on the cross-border socio-economic ties and facilitate the lifting of controls.

On the other side, further information is required from all Member States to better understand the reasons behind the decisions taken, the impact of the reintroduced border controls on the ground, and which alternative measures could help addressing the specific threats that these Member States currently are facing. This should allow the Commission to assess to what extent the threats put forward by the Member States can be considered as new grounds, compared to those put forward previously, and whether the border controls reintroduced in response to these threats are necessary and proportionate. In this context, the Commission notes that certain information related to the security threats are of a sensitive nature which prevents the Member States concerned from sharing this information with the public.

This is why the Commission will launch a formal consultation process under Article 27 of the Schengen Borders Code with all concerned Member States, building on the constructive dialogue which has taken place so far. In this consultation process, the Commission will take duly into account any opinions expressed by Member States that are affected by the current controls. In particular, the Commission, on 26 April 2023, received an opinion from Slovenia with regard to the reintroduction of controls at the Austrian/Slovenian border which will be made the subject of the consultations with Austria. Where these consultations confirm that Member States prolong controls at internal borders in a manner which is not necessary and proportionate, and which is not based on the existence of a new serious threat affecting public policy or internal security³³, the Commission is prepared to make use of legal means at its disposal.

Finally, the Commission underlines that a fully functioning Schengen area is of utmost importance for the EU citizens and encourages the Member States to constantly monitor the evolution of the identified threats and to reflect these findings in the applied measures.

4. Making full use of Schengen potential for a safe and secure area of free movement

Trafficking in human beings, drugs and firearms, cybercrime and terrorism continue to be the main threats to the internal security of the Schengen area. Organised crime comes at a huge

³² Commission Recommendation (EU) 2017/820 of 12 May 2017 on proportionate police checks and police cooperation in the Schengen area. C/2017/3349, OJ L 122, 13.5.2017, p. 79.

³³ See ruling of the Court of Justice in Joined Cases C-368/20 and C-369/20.

economic and personal cost to society. The economic loss due to organised crime and corruption is estimated to represent between EUR 218 and 282 billion annually³⁴.

Fight against organised crime

There is an unprecedented increase of illicit drugs available in Europe hitting record levels, in particular cocaine from South America. While the vast majority of the trade running through EU ports – critical infrastructure ensuring a smooth functioning of the internal market – is legitimate, ports are also exploited for moving illegal goods into the EU and are vulnerable to infiltration by criminal networks. The sheer volume of containers (over 90 million) handled each year, and the low percentage (between 2 and 10%) that can be physically inspected, makes detection of illicit goods extremely challenging³⁵. Drug trafficking generates an estimated annual revenue of EUR 30 billion in the EU³⁶. Criminals' infiltration in the legal economy and social fabric has far-reaching and destabilising consequences for society, the rule of law and trust in public authorities. The Commission is exploring possible new policy initiatives on dismantling criminal networks and drug trafficking in the framework of the EU Drugs Strategy and the EU Drugs Action Plan 2021 – 2025.

Box 5. Thematic Schengen evaluation on drug trafficking

In accordance with the annual Schengen evaluation programme for 2023³⁷, a **thematic evaluation** is being carried out in 2023 in the field of police cooperation, identifying **best practices** of Member States facing similar challenges in fighting drug trafficking to the EU, in particular **high volume** drug trafficking.

Member States' national capabilities in the area of police cooperation, protection of external borders and management of IT systems will be assessed. The main focus will be on **police cooperation** as identified by the Schengen *acquis*, meaning: information sharing for the purposes of preventing and detecting criminal offences between relevant law enforcement agencies (including customs) at national and European/international level; cooperation and coordination of cross-border operational actions (such as surveillance, controlled deliveries and joint operations); harbour targeting and risk analysis; human resources and training; anti-corruption strategies and criminal maritime intelligence. The results are expected around the end of 2023 and will be presented to the March Schengen Council and to the Schengen Forum in early 2024.

Organised crime groups use extreme violence, corruption and intimidation. The easy and cheap access to firearms in some countries strongly contributes to **illicit firearms trafficking**

³⁴ See European Commission, Protecting Europeans from terrorism and organised crime, last accessed on 12 May, accessible [here](#).

³⁵ See Europol, Criminal networks in EU ports: Risks and challenges for law enforcement. https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Europol_Joint-report_Criminal%20networks%20in%20EU%20ports_Public_version.pdf

³⁶ EU Drugs Market Report 2019, EMCDDA 2019.

³⁷ Commission Implementing Decision C(2023) 56 of 13 January 2023 establishing the annual evaluation programme for 2023 in accordance with Article 13(1) of Council Regulation (EU) 2022/922 of 9 June 2022 on the establishment and operation of an evaluation and monitoring mechanism to verify the application of the Schengen *acquis*.

across the EU. During 2022, the Commission has been assessing national legislation³⁸ to ensure a uniform approach on the control of the acquisition and possession of weapons, as well as adequate exchange of information and traceability of firearms, to reduce the risk of diversion into illegal markets.

Disrupting organised criminals' business models

To fight criminal groups that operate beyond Schengen borders, there is a need to work together, uniting action across countries of origin, transit and destination, pooling resources and coordinating efforts.

The **European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT)** has become the key instrument in the Union's fight against organised crime. Nearly 300 operational actions are implemented every year as part of a collaborative effort to build the criminal intelligence picture, conduct investigations and ensure an effective judicial response. In 2022 alone, these joint actions led to over 10 000 reported arrests and EUR 269 million worth of seizures, highlighting the significant impact of this framework, thanks to increased engagement from Member States and partners. In support of these efforts, Member States were allocated EUR 15.7 million in 2022 through the Internal Security Fund to further support projects and activities within EMPACT.

The enhanced mandate of **Europol**³⁹ has taken the fight against serious and organised crime in Europe to a new level. This reinforced mandate empowers the Agency to propose Member States to enter information from non-EU countries or international organisations on suspects and criminals into the Schengen Information System. Thanks to information provided by external partners, Europol has stepped up the processing of third country lists of foreign terrorist fighters with a view to inserting them into the Schengen Information System. Further efforts are needed to transform Europol from the EU criminal information hub to the default platform for European policing solutions. The review of the Europol Strategy 2020+ provides an opportunity to make full use of Europol's reinforced mandate and resources to respond to the growing needs for active deployment in Member States, and to reinforce Europol's contribution to security in the Schengen area.

Exchange of information

Exchange of data and relevant information between national law enforcement authorities are a precondition for the effective cooperation in the prevention, detection, and investigation of cross-border crime. The Schengen Information System, being the most widely used and

³⁸ The Commission closed 38 non-communication infringement cases against Member States. It referred one Member State to the Court for not transposing the Directive and one Member State for not transposing the implementing act on Marking. The Commission is currently assessing the compliance of national legislation with these legal texts.

³⁹ Regulation (EU) 2022/991 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 8 June 2022 amending Regulation (EU) 2016/794, as regards Europol's cooperation with private parties, the processing of personal data by Europol in support of criminal investigations, and Europol's role in research and innovation, OJ L 169, 27.6.2022, p. 1–42.

largest information-sharing system for security and border management in Europe, provides Member States' authorities with real-time access to critical information, such as alerts on wanted persons, missing persons, stolen vehicles, and lost or stolen documents. Integrated national **Single Points of Contact**, the central authority responsible for international police cooperation, play a key role in this regard. Over the last year, positive developments have been observed with an increased number of Member States implementing a multi-agency approach, where representatives from different law enforcement entities (police, customs, border guards) are assigned to a Single Point of Contact. There is still room for improvement, particularly regarding the effective and efficient flow of information, the direct and user-friendly access to all relevant databases, as well as the integrated and automated case management system.

The new Directive on Information Exchange between law enforcement authorities is expected to be adopted in the next weeks⁴⁰. It provides law enforcement authorities better tools to prevent, detect, and investigate crime, by ensuring an effective and timely flow of information across the EU. The Directive also establishes rules for the national Single Point of Contact's composition, staff training, and provides for the use of the Europol's Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA) by default, reinforcing the role of Europol as the EU law enforcement information hub. The Directive also addresses the shortcomings at national level identified during the Schengen evaluations in the field of police cooperation.

The Council adopted its negotiating mandate on the Prüm II proposal⁴¹ in June 2022, and it is now urgent for the European Parliament to follow to reinforce information exchange between the Member States⁴². In line with the commitment undertaken in the 2022 State of Schengen report, the Commission adopted the Advance Passenger Information proposals⁴³ in December 2022, providing for the collection of data on selected intra-EU flights for law-enforcement purposes, as well as enabling the joint processing of data to effectively counter serious crime and terrorism. In response to operational needs expressed by Member States for the processing of passenger data from other modes of transport, the Commission will launch two

⁴⁰ Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on information exchange between law enforcement authorities of Member States, repealing Council Framework Decision 2006/960/JHA, COM/2021/782 final.

⁴¹ Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on automated data exchange for police cooperation ("Prüm II"), amending Council Decisions 2008/615/JHA and 2008/616/JHA and Regulations (EU) 2018/1726, 2019/817 and 2019/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council, COM(2021) 784 final.

⁴² In addition to the measures related to the Schengen *acquis* – a robust legal framework of measures supporting operational cooperation and information exchange between police and judicial authorities in criminal matters as well as measures in the fields of visa and return policy –, Member States must also cooperate in the fields of security, police and judicial cooperation, as well as migration and asylum.

⁴³ Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the collection and transfer of advance passenger information (API) for enhancing and facilitating external border controls, amending Regulation (EU) 2019/817 and Regulation (EU) 2018/1726, and repealing Council Directive 2004/82/EC, COM(2022) 729 final and Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the collection and transfer of advance passenger information for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime, and amending Regulation (EU) 2019/818, COM(2022) 731 final.

studies on maritime data and on the law enforcement needs on rail and road transport to assess the necessity, proportionality and technical feasibility of such data processing. To strengthen the capability of the Schengen Associated Countries to process Passenger Name Record data and as such counter shared security threats, the Commission will propose the opening of negotiations on international agreements enabling the transfer of such data from the EU.

In the digital age, almost every criminal investigation involves technology and tools that are also abused for criminal purposes, making it challenging to maintain effective law enforcement. There is a risk of criminals ‘going dark’ and creating online safe havens of impunity. To address this, the Commission will set up a High-Level Expert Group on access to data for effective law enforcement, in collaboration with the Presidency of the Council. The group will explore problems faced by law enforcement practitioners and propose solutions to ensure access to data and enhance security in the digital age.

Maximising cross-border operational cooperation

Cross-border law enforcement cooperation is essential to jointly address security threats and ensure the smooth functioning of the Schengen area. This increased level of cooperation serves as the cornerstone of Member States’ actions and has successfully enabled the vast majority of them to avoid resorting to internal border controls.

Since the first State of Schengen report, Member States are taking joint action to turn the **June 2022 Council Recommendation on operational law enforcement cooperation**⁴⁴, one of the main priority actions identified in the 2022 State of Schengen report, into an operational reality. Building on the exchanges of good practices on joint patrols at the December 2022 workshop organised by the Czech Council Presidency and the Commission, a number of Member States are working towards increasing joint patrols with their neighbours. Further such workshops will foster cooperation among law enforcement practitioners. Progress has also been made to address legal and practical obstacles that hinder Member States from fully leveraging the potential of the Council Recommendation. EU-funded projects have helped Member States to set up joint police stations, joint training on the different operational procedures of neighbouring Member States in joint patrols or other types of joint operations and the preparation of joint regional crime-risk analysis that enable to better target joint patrols and operations. The Commission will provide additional funding in 2023 to step up this cooperation. Reflecting this commitment, Schengen evaluations conducted in 2022 showed a notable increase in the awareness and use of EU instruments for operational police cooperation. In several intra-EU border areas, there are regular joint planning meetings, common trainings, and joint patrols carried out based on regional common risk analyses.

⁴⁴ Council Recommendation (EU) 2022/915 of 9 June 2022 on operational law enforcement cooperation, OJ L 158, 13.6.2022, p. 53–64.

Yet, there is considerable scope to further enhance the cross-border cooperation among law enforcement authorities in the Schengen area, as reflected in Schengen evaluations. In particular, there is a need to initiate a process to review the **bilateral and multilateral agreements** between Member States on police cooperation so that these meet the current operational needs.

There is a **wealth of good practices** in some Member States on operational police cooperation that can be taken up by others. The Commission intends to set up an expert group to exchange expertise and coordinate among Member States to improve police cooperation, with significant dedicated funding available in 2024 and 2025 to step up the deployment of good practices in other Member States. The work of the expert group would also feed into the Commission's assessment of the implementation of the above-mentioned Council Recommendation that is due by 2024.

Addressing the necessity for increased exchange of personal data whilst ensuring respect for the protection of personal data

Respecting data protection is crucial in order to ensure that travel within the Schengen area is accompanied by the necessary protection of personal data. Those who manage and utilise information systems such as the Schengen Information System, Visa Information System and in the near future also the Entry-Exit-System and ETIAS, must ensure that data protection requirements are respected in practice and that compliance is regularly monitored. Schengen evaluations conducted in 2022 confirmed that this is not always the case. Furthermore, the data protection authorities are often not provided with sufficient human and financial resources to enable them to advise those entities and to supervise comprehensively the lawfulness of processing of personal data in the information systems. Finally, evaluations also revealed that some Member States still have to provide data protection authorities with effective corrective powers towards law enforcement authorities.

Box 6. Priorities for a safe and more secure Schengen area

1. Full operationalisation of the Council Recommendation on operational police cooperation, through the support and coordination of an expert group leading to the uptake of good practices in other Member States.
2. Full transposition and effective implementation of the Directive on information exchange to ensure the seamless, effective and timely flow of information between law enforcement authorities across the EU.
3. Set up and/or upgrade all national Single Points of Contact equipped with efficient case management systems for exchanging information.
4. Strengthen national governance to fully exploit the support provided at EU level, including through Europol, by setting clear national priorities in line with national and European threat assessments and by putting in place the necessary coordination structures.
5. Increase monitoring of drugs trafficking across external borders, by improving intelligence sharing, common risk analysis, profiling and effective cooperation between law enforcement, customs and border control agencies in Member States and relevant partner countries, as well as with EU agencies. Monitor the implementation of the recommended

best practices that will be identified through the ongoing Schengen thematic evaluation of Member States' capabilities to fight drug trafficking into the EU.

6. Efficient implementation of the Schengen Information System tools and functionalities, adhering to harmonised procedures, ensuring sufficient resources, including for the data protection authorities.
7. Full transposition and effective implementation of the EU Firearms Directive to increase traceability of firearms and better exchange of information between law enforcement authorities.

5. Key actions on the external dimension to address irregular migration and security risks: Strategic approach to EU visa policy

The common EU visa policy is an integral part of Schengen and one of the most important tools to **address security risks and irregular migration challenges for the Schengen area**.

Nevertheless, the regular monitoring of the visa-free regimes that the EU has with third countries, in particular countries in the EU neighbourhood⁴⁵, has shown that important challenges remain in this regard. These relate in particular to irregular migration flows triggered by the **non-alignment** of these countries' **visa policy** with that of the EU, the increase in **unfounded asylum applications from nationals of visa-free countries**, as well as the operation of potentially risky **investor citizenship schemes**, which enable visa-free access to the EU for third-country nationals who would otherwise need visas.

The EU needs to be equipped with appropriate tools to address these challenges and prevent these risks. The existing rules⁴⁶ requiring the Commission to monitor the functioning of visa-free regimes with third countries and suspend visa exemptions in cases of increased irregular migration or security risks could be improved in light of the above-mentioned challenges.

In the first months of 2023, at the initiative of the Swedish Presidency, the Council discussed a possible revision of these rules, and in particular of the **visa suspension mechanism**, for which Member States expressed broad support. In her letter to the European Council of 20 March 2023, President von der Leyen took account of this discussion and stated that '*the Commission will strengthen its monitoring of the visa policy alignment and will present a comprehensive report paving the way for a legislative proposal amending the visa suspension mechanism*'.

Against this backdrop, the Commission will present a **Communication on the monitoring of the EU's visa free regimes** ahead of the 9 June Schengen Council. With this Communication, the Commission intends to consult the European Parliament and the Council

⁴⁵ Article 8(4) of Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 requires the Commission to ensure an appropriate monitoring of the continuous fulfilment of the visa exemption requirements by those countries whose nationals obtained visa-free access to the EU following the successful completion of a visa liberalisation dialogue. To this end, since 2017 the Commission has adopted five reports under the Visa Suspension Mechanism, covering the visa-free countries in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) and in the Eastern Partnership (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine).

⁴⁶ Article 8 of Regulation (EU) 2018/1806.

on the assessment of the main challenges in the areas of irregular migration and security linked to the functioning of visa-free regimes, on the main shortcomings of the current visa suspension mechanism, and on the possible ways to address them, thus paving the way for an upcoming proposal to revise the mechanism, to be adopted in September 2023. These challenges should also be followed up through Schengen evaluations to provide further support for monitoring the functioning of visa-free regimes with third countries.

6. Next steps

The 2023 State of Schengen report launches the second ever Schengen cycle by identifying the main challenges for the Schengen area and priority actions that are to be addressed at both national and European levels. It should be the basis for increased political dialogue, monitoring, and enforcement of the Schengen *acquis*. This report shows that despite specific challenges, we have a robust and well-functioning Schengen area. To further strengthen the area without internal border controls, certain key priority areas should be addressed during this second cycle. The Commission, based on a close dialogue with the Swedish, Spanish and Belgian incoming Presidencies is therefore proposing a set of priority actions for the 2023/2024 Schengen cycle:

Box 7. Second Schengen Cycle – Summary overview of priorities for 2023/2024

1. Consolidate and further strengthen the Schengen governance cycle

- Reinforce the existing tools, including the Schengen Barometer and Schengen Scoreboard;
- Provide the Schengen Council with the necessary framework to follow-up on the priorities and recommendations resulting from the comprehensive analysis of Member States' performance and the overall state of the Schengen area, allowing for the development of strategic orientations and the adoption of recommendations for the whole Schengen area.

2. Further strengthen the EU external borders to address current pressure and to establish an effective integrated border management. In particular:

- Reinforce key border sections, including through available financial support, and provide for adequate financial and operational arrangements to ensure the successful implementation of their already existing national capability development plans in line with key priorities at external land/sea borders;
- Establish Frontex' Technical and Operational Strategy by September 2023 and align the Member States' national strategies by March 2024;
- Increase the quality of border checks and border surveillance by providing sufficient numbers of trained staff, efficient procedures, adequate use of information systems and enhanced cooperation with third countries;
- Enhance European and national situational awareness through the implementation of risk analysis and information exchange within the European border surveillance framework;
- eu-LISA to deliver as quickly as possible the missing critical central component of the Entry-Exit System.

3. Enhance the effectiveness of the return system

- The High-Level Network needs to explore practical solutions on the identified persistent shortcomings building on the experience and good practices of Member States;

- Make full use of the new functionalities of the Schengen Information System for return to enhance the use of mutual recognition of return decisions and fully maximise the possibilities under the Commission Recommendation on mutual recognition of return decisions and on expediting returns;
 - Systematically issue return decisions to third-country nationals with no right to stay and provide appropriate follow-up of their implementation, close existing loopholes between asylum and return and put in place effective return case management IT systems;
 - Schengen evaluations to support the development of a common framework to assess the performance in the return domain.
4. **Enhance internal security of the Schengen area to fight against organised crime and drugs trafficking**
- Full operationalisation of the Council Recommendation on operational police cooperation;
 - Upgrade of all national Single Points of Contact;
 - Fully exploit the support provided at EU level to combat transnational threats;
 - Efficient implementation of the Schengen Information System tools;
 - Full transposition and effective implementation of the EU Firearms Directive.
5. **Completion of the Schengen area** with a Council decision taken before the end of 2023 on the full application of the Schengen *acquis* to Bulgaria and Romania.
6. **Implement alternative measures, phasing out the long-lasting internal border controls.**
7. **Better use of existing tools under the EU visa policy:**
- The Commission will draw up a comprehensive report on the EU's visa-free regimes and its challenges for the Schengen area to improve the visa suspension mechanism of the Visa Regulation;
 - Deploy appropriate staff in sufficient numbers in consulates and mobilise all necessary resources including from EU funds to cover operating support for common visa policy;
 - Increased local Schengen cooperation.