



IMPACTING THE WESTERN BALKANS IN THE EUROPEAN MIGRATION AND ASYLUM POLICY

The EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans in Brief

The European Pact on Immigration and Asylum of September 2008 was essentially aimed at controlling irregular immigration, promoting a voluntary return to immigrants' countries of origin or transit, and building a partnership with non-EU countries to support the synergy between migration and development. The ensuing period, and in particular the 2015 migration "crisis," has significantly changed the EU's vision of migration and shifted its priorities about irregular migration. The position of the Western Balkans region has also changed, as the Balkan migration route is one of the busiest corridors for transit to the European Union.

The EU Migration and Asylum Pact of September 2020 was largely a result of increased migration and political concerns in the Union. Five years after the height of the 2015 migration crisis, it was heralded by the European Commission as a fresh start and a tool to cut the Gordian knot on asylum and irregular migration. Among other things, it aims to develop mutually beneficial partnerships between the EU and migrants' third countries of origin and transit. In this sense, the Western Balkans requires a tailored approach, both because of its geographical location and the transit of irregular migrants, and because of its future in the EU.

In November 2022, EU Commissioner Ylva Johansson said that the migration route via the Western Balkans was a growing concern for EU member states, as authorities saw a surge in the number of people entering the EU. Just one day before the EU-Western Balkans Summit scheduled for December 6 and the Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting on December 8, the European Union Commission presented an EU Action Plan for the Western Balkans to address common challenges. It aims to strengthen cooperation on migration and border management with partners in the Western Balkans, given their unique status with EU accession prospects and their continuous efforts to align with EU rules. It envisages 20 actions based on 5 pillars:

- 1. Strengthening border management along the routes**
- 2. Expeditious asylum procedures and support for reception capacities**
- 3. Combating migrant smuggling**
- 4. Improving cooperation on readmission and repatriation**
- 5. Alignment of visa policies**



1. Strengthening border management along the routes

Strengthening border management along the routes in the form of support for border guards and equipment is provided through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), based on needs identified by the authorities of the Western Balkan countries. The EU has also concluded status agreements with Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia that allow Frontex to deploy the European Border and Coast Guard Permanent Corps for joint operations in the region. A similar status agreement was signed with Northern Macedonia in October 2022, with operations expected to begin in early 2023. Further action is envisaged through an enhanced role of Frontex joint operations and the effective implementation of the recently adopted IPA program to strengthen border management capacities in the Western Balkans.

2. Expedient asylum procedures and support for reception capacities

Expedient asylum procedures and supporting reception capacities will also be funded through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) in the Western Balkans region. Further actions are planned in terms of continued support to the Western Balkans aimed at further strengthening and accelerating asylum and registration procedures, and better-managing reception capacities to support the accommodation and basic care of migrants and refugees. There are plans to continue joint work between the EU and the Western Balkans to develop contingency planning.

3. Combating migrant smuggling

Combating the smuggling of migrants is to be done through the Commission's November 2022 Operational Partnership on Combating Smuggling of Migrants. Further action is planned about the full use of EUROPOL's operational task force to combat the smuggling of migrants at the border between Serbia and Hungary and to explore the expansion of similar task forces at other borders. Another focus is the fight against criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling. Finally, measures are planned to ensure rapid and effective implementation of the regional IPA programme to combat human smuggling.

4. Improving cooperation on readmission and repatriation

Improving readmission cooperation and return requires the full commitment of the Western Balkans region to its implementation. Frontex has recruited repatriation experts to assist in the repatriation process, including advice, training and assistance in obtaining travel documents. Further measures are planned to strengthen the program capacity of the Western Balkans region to carry out returns, including by supporting the development of appropriate return facilities. In addition, regional cooperation will be supported through the deployment of return specialists, sharing knowledge and expertise on the return process, conducting training and facilitating cooperation with countries of origin, and obtaining travel documents.

5. Alignment of visa policies

Alignment of visa policies is considered crucial for the functioning of the visa-free regime between the Western Balkans and the EU and is to be significantly improved. Further measures are needed to align visa policy with the EU by reintroducing and effectively implementing the visa requirement for third countries in line with EU visa policy.

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