

EU ACTION PLAN FOR THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN

In 2022 irregular arrivals to the European Union have increased across all routes confirming once more the need to find sustainable and structural European solutions to our common challenges based on the comprehensive approach set out in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, including renewed action on the external dimension of migration.

Adopting the Pact in all its aspects remains the main priority. In the framework of the gradual approach adopted earlier this year under the French Presidency, the Czech Presidency is advancing the discussions on solidarity balanced along with responsibility, ahead of the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 8 December 2022.

The October Justice and Home Affairs Council had addressed the recent evolutions in the Western Balkans migratory route, which has also recently seen a large increase in migratory movements. The discussion focused, in particular, on the visa policy of the Western Balkan region and the key areas for cooperation with the Western Balkan partners, identifying common initiatives to be deployed to step up European action.

Latest events have put a spotlight on the **Central Mediterranean route** where over 90 000 migrants and refugees arrived in 2022 departing mainly from Libya and Tunisia, and originating primarily from Egypt, Tunisia, and Bangladesh an increase of over 50% in comparison to 2021. Most of these arrivals reached the European Union after hazardous journeys, and search and rescue operations at sea.

The European Union has been addressing this issue over the past years, including through targeted outreach towards third countries (i.e., Tunisia, Egypt, and Bangladesh) to strengthen cooperation on the fight against smuggling and targeted actions along the routes (i.e., Niger) through the reinforcement of border and coast guard capacities, enhanced cooperation on return and legal migration and addressing root causes. In addition, since June this year, the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism has been in operation to provide targeted solidarity.

In view of the **Extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council** of 25 November 2022, the Commission is presenting this EU Action Plan to the Council, containing **20 actions** designed to address the immediate and ongoing challenges along the Central Mediterranean route.

I. Strengthened cooperation with partner countries and international organisations

*The EU continues to strengthen the strategic, policy-driven programming and implementation of its external funding to address migratory challenges, prevent irregular departures and save lives along all migratory routes. At least **EUR 580 million** for **2021-2023 under NDICI-Global Europe** and other instruments are currently foreseen to be deployed through regional multi-country programming for migration related support to partners in North Africa, alongside bilateral EU programmes with individual countries. This support is strengthened further through a Team Europe approach on migration and mobility*

and through the opportunities to foster economic growth, jobs and prosperity in the region under the Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbourhood.

Based on a balanced, comprehensive, and tailor-made approach laid down in the Pact, it is necessary to step up work to:

1. **Launch - before the end of the year - the Team Europe Initiative on the Central Mediterranean route** to combine Member States' activities with cooperation and coordination at EU level, through a whole-of-route approach, creating new opportunities for coordination with partner countries, as well as with relevant UN Agencies.
2. **Enhance operational coordination of the external action on migration**, notably through MOCADDEM and the EMWP, to ensure coherence of EU and national support to key third countries with EU migration objectives across various policy areas, as indicated in the Pact, such as development cooperation, security, visa, trade, agriculture, investment and employment, energy, environment and climate change, and education.
3. **Strengthen capacities of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya**, in particular, to develop jointly targeted actions to prevent irregular departures, support more effective border and migration management, and reinforce search and rescue capacities, in full respect of fundamental rights and international obligations.
4. **Develop and implement a new regional programme to fight against the smuggling of migrants and the trafficking of human beings** in North Africa. This will be implemented in close cooperation with Member States and relevant EU Agencies, and it will be coordinated with the continued roll-out of bilateral Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnerships.
5. **Reinforce the EU/AU/UN trilateral task force for Libya** by rapidly concluding the ongoing work on the terms of reference and setting clear and ambitious targets for 2023 concerning: (a) enhanced use of humanitarian corridors from Libya to the EU, including through an enhanced use of Emergency Transit Mechanisms, and (b) stepped up Voluntary Humanitarian Returns from Libya to countries of origin or safe destinations, with the support of relevant UN Agencies. The EU will also support international organisations and NGOs providing support to those in Libya.
6. **Negotiate and swiftly conclude the working arrangement between Frontex and the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM)** to support the promotion of European integrated border management standards, situational awareness, and risk analysis.
7. **Intensify cooperation by Frontex with EUCAP Sahel Niger** to speed up the full implementation of the working arrangement. EUBAM Libya and EUCAP Sahel Niger will also reinforce cooperation with JHA actors through the participation in EMPACT priorities to tackle migrant smuggling and trafficking of human beings.

8. **Consolidate cooperation with Niger** through the swift implementation of the Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership, the support of the EUAA through the Niger pilot Roadmap and the implementation of the Emergency Transit Mechanism
9. **Step up the implementation of the EUAA-Egypt Roadmap on support in relation to international protection** in the course of 2023.
10. **Coordinate joint diplomatic demarches vis-à-vis third countries** to which irregular migrants are to be returned, in particular with the objective of achieving better practical cooperation on readmission including through readmission agreements or arrangements.
11. **Set up quickly targeted return operations**, supported by Frontex (travel document issuance, coordination of return flights, etc.), as well as actions aimed at reintegration support through development programming and implementation activities at national and local level in partner countries of origin in cooperation with international organisations. These efforts will need to be mirrored by enhanced cooperation on returns, addressing the bottlenecks in the national return procedures, under with the support of the EU Return Coordinator and within the framework of the High-level network on Returns.
12. **Prioritise the implementation of the Regional Development and Protection Programme in North Africa and Niger** to strengthen the protection capacity of national institutions for registration, refugee status determination and referral mechanisms, reception, durable solutions as well as norms, strategies, and operating procedures.
13. **Accelerate the activation of the Talent Partnerships** with Tunisia, Egypt, and Bangladesh to promote international mobility and circular migration based on better matching of labour market needs and skills.

II. A more coordinated approach on search and rescue

Providing assistance to any persons found in distress at sea until the point of safe disembarkation, irrespective of the circumstances that lead people to be in such a situation, is a legal obligation for EU Member States, as established in international customary and conventional law as well as Union law. As part of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, in addition to a strong solidarity mechanism, the Commission set out a path for a common response to search and rescue as an integral part of European Integrated Border Management. Sincere cooperation and solidarity among Member States, as well as coordination between all relevant actors and stakeholders, is essential to prevent fatalities at sea, maintain safety of navigation and find sustainable solutions to current challenges. To ensure such a coordinated approach:

14. **Enhance cooperation between Member States** notably by: (a) gathering knowledge and exchanging information on rules and practices applied by Member States as regards search and rescue and (b) promoting closer cooperation, best practices, and improved modalities for the exchange of information and coordination notably among coastal and flag states, including with a view to facilitating better cooperation between Member States and vessels owned or operated by private entities.

15. **Frontex - together with concerned Member States** - will carry out a targeted assessment of the situation in the Central Mediterranean to identify needs for reinforced support through joint operations, aerial and maritime surveillance, capacity building, and situational awareness for Member States at the external borders.
16. **Promote in close cooperation with UNHCR and IOM** dialogue between Mediterranean coastal states on regional approaches to search and rescue, based on solidarity, international cooperation, and partnership.
17. **Promote discussions in the International Maritime Organization** on the need for a specific framework and guidelines for vessels having a particular focus on search and rescue activities, particularly in view of developments in the European context.

The Commission, with the participation and support of Member States, will relaunch the **European Contact Group on Search and Rescue**, inviting as appropriate partner countries, international organisations, and stakeholders.

III. Reinforced implementation of the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism and the Joint Roadmap

The Solidarity Declaration agreed on 22 June 2022 provides a voluntary and temporary solidarity mechanism for one year offering an opportunity for lessons learned and bridging towards the future permanent system under the Pact. Member States need to accelerate the implementation of the mechanism addressing the bottlenecks that have been identified so far, enhancing flexibility, streamlining processes, and implementing the financing of alternative measures. To this end:

18. The Solidarity Platform will revise the **Standard Operating Procedures for relocation** to achieve more efficient and quicker procedures, including to provide swift support to Member States receiving arrivals by sea.
19. The Solidarity Platform will **match proposed projects and financial contributions to start implementing the alternative measures of solidarity** through projects coherent with the activities and needs identified. The links between the voluntary solidarity mechanism and actions envisaged in the external dimension of migration will also be strengthened.
20. The **EUAA will prioritise support to Member States** in the swift implementation of the voluntary solidarity mechanism through its tools and operating plans.

The **Solidarity Platform** will continue coordinating the implementation of the mechanism, identify ways of improving it and consider additional pledges as needed.

In line with the **Joint Roadmap agreed between the European Parliament and the Council**, the co-legislators, with the support of the Commission, will enable the adoption of all the proposals under the Pact on Migration and Asylum before the end of this legislative term to ensure that a sustainable solution is put in place balancing solidarity and responsibility.

The EU and the Member States will need to work jointly to achieve the goals set in this Action Plan and to ensure its effective implementation. Reporting and monitoring through the existing Commission and Council mechanisms will be essential.

The EU needs to remain vigilant about the developments of the other key migratory routes to Europe including along the Türkiye/Eastern Mediterranean route, the Western Mediterranean/Atlantic route, as well as along the Western Balkans migratory route. This Action Plan may act as a model to develop similar plans addressing the specificities of other migratory routes.