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Section 2.4.1. Central Mediterranean

At the end of 2022, the European Commission presented two action plans with a series of operational measures to address immediate and ongoing challenges along the Central Mediterranean and the Western Balkan routes. The Action Plan for the Central Mediterranean includes 20 measures designed to reduce irregular and unsafe migration, provide solutions to emerging challenges in the area of search and rescue, and foster solidarity balanced against responsibility among Member States.

Work in the frames of the action plan would centre around three pillars:

- Working with partner countries and international organisations to enhance capacities in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, ensure better border and migration management, reinforce the fight against smuggling, enhance diplomatic cooperation on returns and increase legal pathways to the EU.
- A more coordinated approach on search and rescue activities through the re-launch of the European Contact Group on Search and Rescue.
- Reinforcing the implementation of the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism agreed in the Council in June 2022 to provide swift support to Member States receiving arrivals by sea, enhancing flexibility, streamlining processes and financing alternative measures of solidarity.165

The Action Plan for the Western Balkans also comprises 20 operational measures structured along five pillars. The aim is to strengthen cooperation on migration and border management between the EU and Western Balkan countries, which have a unique status as countries in the EU accession process.166 The pillars of work include:

- Strengthening border management along the route, including through the deployment of Frontex personnel, joint operations in the region and new status agreements.
- Ensuring a swift asylum procedure and supporting reception capacity, including through the development of contingency planning. Within the EU, it would be of importance to implement the roadmap for Dublin transfers and Eurodac registrations to address

secondary movements.

- Fighting migrant smuggling through the establishment of a Europol operational task force and, pending advances in the proposal to sanction transport operators involved in migrant smuggling, through the creation of an operational toolbox with measures for transport operators.
- Enhancing cooperation on readmission and returns, strengthening operational capacities and convening joint readmission committees.
- Achieving alignment in visa policies, which is essential for the proper functioning of the visa-free regime of the Western Balkans with the EU.[167]

The effective management of external borders is also meant to allow for effective access to the territory and the asylum procedure for those in need of protection. Still, throughout 2022, EU institutions and agencies, UNHCR, and international and civil society organisations often scrutinised policies and practices in European countries in this area, expressed concern and called both national governments and the European Commission to ensure respect for fundamental rights and adherence to the principle of non-refoulement.[168],[169],[170],[171],[172]

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