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2.4. External dimension of the EU’s asylum policy

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Section 2.5 External dimension

In addition to legislation, policies and practices that focus on internal processes and structures, a modern and well-functioning migration and asylum system requires cooperation with external partners, including countries of origin and transit. In the JHA Council of September 2023, Ministers reiterated this premise and supported the need to strengthen the external dimension of the EU’s migration policy to manage migratory challenges that the EU shares with other continents and countries. An effective system requires a coordinated combination of development assistance to address the root causes of migration, action against migrant smuggling, the strengthening of existing and development of further legal pathways as an alternative to illegal migration, and a sustainable return and readmission policy.132

Addressing root causes of irregular migration

Addressing root causes of irregular migration

Effectively preventing irregular migration and forced displacement requires addressing its root causes. To this end, the EU provides development aid and promotes fundamental rights around the world. Multi-annual indicative plans (MIPs) define the policy area and objectives and outline the overall basis of cooperation with different countries and regions. Such programmes may have geographic foci by country or a thematic, horizontal scope: focusing on human rights and democracy; strengthening civil society as an independent actor of good governance and development; promoting peace and stability and preventing conflict; and addressing global challenges, including climate change, with a view to sustainable development.133

Examples of such actions are the Team Europe Initiatives on Migration in Africa, namely the Team Europe Initiative on the Atlantic/Western Mediterranean route (AWMed TEI) and the Team Europe Initiative on the Central Mediterranean route (Central Med TEI). These initiatives aim to strengthen coordination, coherence and complementarities of actions funded by the EU and Member States on migration and forced displacement along these migration routes.134

Developing legal pathways to protection in Europe

Section 2.5 Developing legal pathways to protection in Europe

Providing safe and legal pathways to protection to those in need, thus enabling the most vulnerable refugees to access Europe without resorting to perilous journeys or falling victims to smuggling networks, is a key priority for the EU. It is also a way to show solidarity with non-EU countries which host large numbers of refugees.

Since 2015, more than 119,000 people have found protection in the EU through resettlement schemes, in addition to the approximately 40,000 Syrian refugees who were resettled from Türkiye. In addition, since 2021 Member States have reported almost 47,000 humanitarian admission arrivals.135Putting resettlement high on the asylum agenda, Commissioner Johansson in 2021, 2022 and 2023 organised respectively three high-level resettlement fora with the participation of Member States, international partners, civil society organisations, UNHCR and the IOM to encourage Member States to contribute to this effort.136In 2023, the European Commission provided EUR 246 million to Member States to support people admitted through resettlement and humanitarian admissions in 2022-2023.137

While attending the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023, Commissioner Johansson announced the EU's resettlement pledges for 2024-2025.138The collective pledge from Member States reached a total of 61,000 places for resettlement and humanitarian admissions for people in need of protection.139The announcement was also complemented by an expressed commitment to promote complementary pathways to the EU and community sponsorship schemes.

In July 2023, UNHCR offered its recommendations to the EU on resettlement needs, complementary pathways and key priorities for 2024:

- Maintain ambitious resettlement targets with the participation of more Member States;
- Preserve the right to family unity and enhance access to family reunification process;
- Expand access to skills-based complementary pathways by making use of and creating awareness about already-existing structures and processes;
- Carry on humanitarian admissions, in addition to and not in the place of resettlement;
- Step up community sponsorship programmes; and
- Help address barriers refugees may face in obtaining travel documents.140

EU support for protection worldwide

Section 2.5. EU support for protection worldwide

A key component of the external dimension of the EU's asylum and migration policy centres on providing protection solutions across the world, with the EU being a leading international donor in situations of forced displacement. In 2023, the European Commission allocated most of its humanitarian budget of EUR 1.7 billion to projects addressing the needs of forcibly displaced persons and their host communities.141The projects aim to help displaced populations access

shelter, protection, food and basic services, including healthcare, nutritional assistance, safe water, sanitation and education. EU assistance is reaching, among others, Syrian refugees in Türkiye, Lebanon and Jordan; Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan; Somali refugees in Kenya; Congolese refugees in the Great Lakes region; Venezuelan refugees and migrants in South America; Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh; and unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups of refugees, internally displaced persons, migrants and asylum seekers in North Africa. EU humanitarian aid also targets internally displaced persons in Ethiopia, Iraq, Nigeria, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen.142

In the design and delivery of protection solutions, the EU cooperates with various stakeholders, including civil society organisations, international and intergovernmental bodies, and governments. It is a key contributor to the Global Compact on Refugees, as reflected in the multiplicity of EU pledges announced at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum.143The EU actively participates and contributes to a number regional platforms, such as the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS) for Central America; the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Africa; and the Support Platform of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees. Between July 2022 to December 2023, the EU also held the Presidency of the Platform on Disaster Displacement, a state-led initiative working towards better protection for people displaced in the context of disasters and climate change.144

A hotspot which the EU is continuously monitoring is Palestine, being the largest international donor of humanitarian assistance (EUR 1.1 billion) since 2000 to help meet the needs of Palestinian people. Between 2014 and 2020, over EUR 2.2 billion was allocated to development support, while another EUR 1.18 billion was allocated under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)–Global Europe for 2021–2024.145Hamas' terrorist attacks against Israel in October 2023 and the subsequent intense Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip by air, land and sea resulted in extreme civilian casualties, displacement and destruction.146In light of these developments, the EU quadrupled humanitarian assistance to over EUR 100 million in 2023 and allocated another EUR 125 million to support humanitarian organisations in both Gaza and the West Bank in 2024. The EU has launched the Humanitarian Air Bridge operation in aid to the people affected by the crisis by facilitating the delivery of humanitarian cargo supplied by partners.147To support the Palestinian population across the region, in March 2024 the European Commission decided to allocate an additional EUR 68 million to be implemented through international partners like the Red Cross and the Red Crescent.148

Combating smuggling networks

Combating smuggling networks

Systematic cooperation with partner countries to combat smuggling networks continued in 2023, as part of the action plan against migrant smuggling 2021-2025149 and in the frames of ongoing operational anti-smuggling partnerships with third countries.150 Coordinated action against migrant smuggling is essential to save lives, prevent migrants from becoming victims of

violence and exploitation, and protect their fundamental rights.

As presented earlier in this section, in 2023 the European Commission introduced a package of initiatives against migrant smuggling, including a proposed directive to prevent and counter smuggling, a proposed regulation to reinforce Europol's role to this end, the launching of the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling, and a toolbox to address the use of commercial transport to facilitate irregular migration.[151]Tackling migrant smuggling and safeguarding the fundamental rights of migrants can only be a collaborative effort with international partners, countries of transit and origin. Accordingly, reference is made to this collaboration in the different components of the package.
Both criminal justice responses and preventive mechanisms, including research, education programmes and measures to raise public awareness, may be implemented in cooperation with third countries. The new European Centre Against Migrant Smuggling, coordinated by Europol, will be able to identify cases of migrant smuggling that may require cooperation with non-EU countries, including by exchanging personal data on a case-by-case basis.[152]

Working with partner countries toward migration and border management

Section 2.5 border management

Addressing mixed migratory movements and performing effective border management require joint work with partner countries through bilateral agreements and arrangements. To achieve this end, status agreements between Frontex and third countries enable the agency to deploy personnel and provide operational support to manage migratory flows, counter illegal immigration and fight cross-border crime under the command of the host country. In line with the European Border and Coast Guard Regulation, these agreements include provisions for compliance monitoring and the protection of fundamental rights, including access to the asylum procedure and respect for human dignity, as well as paying particular attention to vulnerable groups.[153]

In 2023, the EU concluded a status agreement with North Macedonia,[154]which was added to the already-existing agreements with Albania, Moldova, Montenegro and Serbia.[155]Negotiations have also ensued for a status agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, following the launch of the EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans, upgraded status agreements were signed in 2023 with Montenegro and Albania.[156]With the new agreements, Frontex is able to support Albania and Montenegro through the deployment of personnel to their respective borders with their neighbouring Western Balkan partners, in addition to the countries' borders with the EU.

The new and updated agreements were well-received at the annual EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Forum on Justice and Home Affairs, which took place in Skopje in October 2023. Ministers from the EU and Western Balkan countries acknowledged the progress made on the implementation of the EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans, especially on aligning policies in the Western Balkans with the EU visa policy. They also highlighted that migratory pressure in

the Western Balkan route was lower compared to 2022 as a result of the coordinated action.157

With Tunisia being a key country of departure for migrants crossing the central Mediterranean route, the EU placed an emphasis in intensifying bilateral cooperation with Tunisia in a number of areas, including migration. Following a joint expression of willingness for broader cooperation in April 2023,158and a joint declaration in June 2023,159in July 2023 the EU signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia to enhance relations by strengthening their economic and trade partnership and increasing cooperation in combating and reducing irregular migration and saving human lives.160In September 2023, in line with the 10-point plan for Lampedusa, the European Commission announced EUR 60 million in financial support for Tunisia and an operational assistance package on migration of around EUR 67 million. Priority actions in the field of migration include fighting smuggling networks, building the capacity of the Tunisian law enforcement authorities, enhancing the protection of migrants in Tunisia in cooperation with UNHCR, and supporting voluntary returns and the reintegration of migrants in their countries of origin in cooperation with the IOM.161Some concerns were raised, including by members of the European Parliament, expressing uncertainty about the legal basis of the memorandum. They argued that broader consultations could have taken place prior to its conclusion and that a stronger commitment to promote human rights in Tunisia could have been expressed.162These questions were addressed in writing by the European Commission.163

The EU's cooperation with Türkiye has been a key collaborative effort, the basic parameters of which were set in the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016. Nevertheless, EU assistance to enhance the protection of refugees in Türkiye preceded the agreement. Since 2011, the EU has mobilised around EUR 10 billion to assist Türkiye in its significant efforts in hosting and addressing the needs of more than 4 million refugees, as well as their host communities.164The main focus areas are humanitarian assistance, education, health, municipal infrastructure and socio-economic support. The Facility for Refugees in Turkey is the mechanism to coordinate the mobilisation of resources made available under both the EU budget and additional contributions made by Member States; the EUR 6 billion budget of the facility was fully committed and contracted by 2023.165By June 2023, over 2 million refugees had received support from the facility for their basic needs, close to 770,000 refugee children had been enrolled in school and over 2.7 million individuals had benefited from facility-funded protection services.166

This collaboration has contributed to the overall decrease of irregular arrivals from Türkiye to the EU compared to 2016. Nevertheless, in 2023 irregular arrivals from Türkiye increased significantly and the pace of returns remained slow, with the number being much lower than the number of resettlements of Syrian refugees from Türkiye to the EU. Since the 2016 agreement, approximately 40,000 Syrian refugees have been resettled from Türkiye, while only 2,140 irregular migrants and asylum seekers, whose applications were declared inadmissible crossing from Türkiye to the Greek islands, have been returned.167

The devastating earthquakes of February 2023 amplified protection needs in the country. The EU and its Member States provided swift support. This included the activation of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and the deployment of search and rescue teams from 21 Member States, as well as the organisation of a donor's conference in March 2023 which raised a total of EUR 7

billion in pledges in support of people in affected areas, included 1.7 million refugees.168

Streams of cooperation with Türkiye in a number of migration-related areas, such as the fight against migrant smuggling, will also continue under the European Commission's Action Plan for the Eastern Mediterranean route. For example, a new common operational partnership project (SCOPE II) aims to support operational law enforcement and judicial cooperation with Turkish authorities, while other sets of actions will support the implementation of Türkiye's Integrated Border Management Strategy.169

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