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A Decade of Progress: 10 Years of the EU Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management Systems in the Western Balkans



Over the past decade, the European Union (EU) funded programme "EU Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management Systems in the Western Balkans" has played a pivotal role in strengthening migration and asylum systems across the region. Implemented as a partnership among the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), this initiative has supported authorities in the Western Balkans in enhancing migration and asylum governance, towards aligning them with EU and international standards.

Launched in response to the growing complexities of migration management and asylum in the region, the programme was conceived at a critical moment. Between 2015 and 2016, the Western Balkans witnessed a significant surge in arrivals, with over 1 million people transiting through Serbia and North Macedonia alone. This movement underscored the urgent need for protection-sensitive and sustainable migration and asylum management systems.

Over the past decade, the initiative has played a key role in transitioning from an emergency response to shaping comprehensive legal and policy frameworks, improving border and asylum procedures, and reinforcing protection mechanisms for individuals in vulnerable situations.

On 8 April, a reception event took place in Brussels, marking the ten-year milestone of the programme, organized in cooperation with the Polish Presidency of the Council of the EU, who provided opening remarks. The reception celebrated the efforts towards the effective and rights-based management of migrants and persons in need of international protection in the Western Balkans.

More than 1,180 border guards and other officials and frontline responders have received specialized and protection-sensitive training on integrated border management, focusing on key areas such as fundamental rights, screening, debriefing, detection of falsified documents, countering trafficking in human beings, non-voluntary returns and contingency planning. "*The regional programme allows Frontex to support Western Balkan partners on their EU-accession path and integration in the European border and coast guard community. Equally importantly, the regional programme and other EU support allow to extend the EU fundamental rights standards and integrated border management principles to the region*", noted Pawe? ? liwi?ski, Acting Head of Frontex Pre-accession Cooperation Sector.

The programme has significantly enhanced border cooperation and risk analysis, reinforcing efforts to manage migration effectively while safeguarding access to asylum. In the last two years alone, the programme reached 11,300 individuals with immediate legal counselling, while legal assistance was provided to 1,700 asylum seekers and refugees. Speaking at the event, Alexander de Chalus, Senior Operations Officer for UNHCR, reflected: "*UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is proud of the collective actions undertaken within the regional IPA project, especially those which positively impact and help develop the implementation of asylum systems in the Western Balkans. UNHCR also acknowledges the importance of partnering within the project with local civil society actors, which also fosters the sustainability of the activities.*"

The programme has also facilitated voluntary return and reintegration, supporting thousands of migrants stranded in the region. "*Not only we have supported them with return assistance, but also with tailored reintegration support to help them rebuild their life with dignity and opportunity*", emphasized Donatella Bradi?, IOM Senior Western Balkans Programme Coordinator. "*Since its inception, more than 3,000 migrants have benefited from assisted voluntary return programmes.*"

Regional cooperation has been at the core of the programme, bringing together authorities from the Western Balkans, international partners, and EU member states to develop harmonized policies and share best practices. "*The EUAA's commitment to support our Western Balkans partners in strengthening their asylum and reception systems continues, to bring them closer to the practices of the Common European Asylum System as part of the EU enlargement process. With over 260 capacity development actions delivered across the region, we have moved beyond just enhancing individual technical skills to focus on institutional procedures,*" stressed Eva Wipler, Head of EUAA International Cooperation Sector.

As the region advances on its path towards EU accession, the programme remains committed to fostering sustainable migration and asylum governance. Celebrating its 10-year milestone, it highlights the significant achievements made through a unique joint collaboration. By bringing together two EU agencies, two UN partners, and national authorities of the Western Balkan region, it has not only addressed post emergency response but also continues to strengthen resilient, sustainable, and EU-aligned migration and asylum systems for the future.

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