



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Ursula von der Leyen
The President

Brussels, 16.12.2024

Dear colleagues,

Events of recent weeks in the Middle East have opened new opportunities for peace and stability in the region, but also brought new uncertainties about the way ahead. The EU must play its part in supporting the development of a new Syria that puts the interests and rights of its own people first, that can rebuild its institutions and economy, and respects its territorial integrity and national unity. Working with international partners, particularly the United Nations, we will support a peaceful transition process that leads to credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian governance that ensures respect for the rule of law, universal human rights, including women's rights, the protection of all Syrians, including religious and ethnic minorities, transparency, and accountability.

*With the end of the Assad regime, new ways of working with Syria will become possible. We may need to proceed with caution considering that the situation remains volatile, but we should consider under what conditions we can participate in efforts to **support Syria's reconstruction** from decades of authoritarianism, regional interference, and civil war. Beginning with the restoration of the most basic services, we could expand the activities we already fund in Syria, including access to health, schooling, basic job opportunities, and energy and water installations. As it becomes clearer how the country will be governed, we will strengthen our presence on the ground, as well as our socio-economic support and possibly, reconstruction projects. In 2024, EU humanitarian aid to those inside Syria has reached over EUR 163 million, including an extra EUR 5.5 million in October to respond to arrivals from Lebanon, and non-humanitarian aid inside Syria has reached EUR 36 million. So, there is already work we can build on.*

*The fall of the Assad regime will impact all **Syria's neighbours** in different ways and their role will be key in shaping the region's future. They are immediately impacted by the movements of Syrian refugees, and some have already been crossing the border, eager to return home. We will need to help Lebanon, Jordan and Türkiye prepare for different eventualities, including contingency planning for unpredictable movements of people and new security challenges. This needs to be done by the Commission in close collaboration with Member States, in a Team Europe spirit. It is important to ensure that prolonged uncertainty does not trigger new refugee flows. We are in any case stepping up our partnership activities with **Lebanon**, with the EUR 1 billion package for 2024-2027 that I announced this spring already being rolled out, with the flexibility to support actions for people on the move including inside Syria. An additional EUR 45 million for*

*the increasing humanitarian needs will bring the total emergency response to over EUR 120 million in 2024. A new EU partnership with **Jordan** is in preparation, building on our strong and deep-rooted relationship and acknowledging Jordan's vital role in the region. We should aim to sign a Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership early next year, based on areas of mutual interest and strengthening Jordan's resilience and modernisation to fulfil the economic potential of an EU partnership. Today I visited Amman to discuss this and the developments in Syria with the King of Jordan Abdullah II.*

*Our engagement with **Türkiye** will continue to actively implement the April European Council Conclusions, and we should aim to work together closely on the evolving situation in Syria. Tomorrow, I will be visiting Ankara where I will be talking to President Erdogan about the effects of developments in Syria on the region and the support that can be brought by EU. The EU has put in place a EUR 1 billion package, with the largest share going to continued refugee assistance and migration and border management, including EUR 95 million to support preparations for voluntary returns of Syrians and EUR 60 million for protection. Full and effective implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement and the EU-Turkey readmission agreement towards all EU Member States remains essential, while we will continue to encourage cooperation between Turkish authorities and Frontex. Our goal is to schedule the next EU-Türkiye High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Security next year to strengthen our cooperation in these areas.*

*The figures for irregular border crossings into the EU for the first eleven months of this year are down 40% compared to 2023. Sustained engagement with our partners on migration continues to bear fruit. According to Frontex, the number of detections of irregular border crossings on the **Western Balkans** route continued to fall significantly in the first eleven months of the year (-79%). This is partly the result of the EU's comprehensive support to the region, which combines increased presence of Frontex, enhanced cooperation with Europol and the EU Asylum Agency, and funding (EUR 350 million for 2021-2024) supporting key priorities including anti-smuggling operations. Concerted efforts to bring Western Balkan partners in line with EU visa policy also continue to bring results, which directly impacts the reduction of irregular arrivals in the EU. I welcome the most recent decision by Serbia to further align their visa policy with that of the EU in relation to four more countries. The Commission is using all possible leverage in this area including through the Reform Agendas of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. Agreement on the reinforcement of the Visa Suspension Mechanism would be another important step.*

*There are also encouraging trends on the **Central Mediterranean** route this year so far (-59%). Constant engagement is necessary to achieve results and we continue to deepen the comprehensive and strategic relations that we are building with key countries of origin and transit, including migration in the spectrum of key interests covered by these agreements. In **Tunisia** we continue to implement all pillars of the partnership signed in July 2023, with over EUR 100 million already contracted for a range of migration related activities, including protection, returns, border management and anti-smuggling.*

*Border management equipment has been delivered and a EUR 30 million contract signed for coastal surveillance. Arrivals from Tunisia to Italy are down by around 80% compared to last year. In **Egypt** we continue work on all the pillars of the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership signed in March, including programming EUR 200 million for migration, and intensified cooperation with EU agencies. This builds on the EUR 82 million border management project with a particular focus on the Egypt/Libya land border.*

*Since increased engagement with **Libya** this year and EU participation in the Trans-Mediterranean Migration Forum hosted by Libya in July 2024, Libya has taken a number of important steps. It has removed the cost of exit visas for voluntary humanitarian returns, expanded UN agencies' access to detention centres and disembarkation points, and progressed in the operationalisation of the EU-funded Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre. Our growing relationship with partners brings visible results: to take just one example, EU support to **voluntary returns** from North to Sub-Saharan Africa had reached just over 26 400 by end-November, **doubling 2023 numbers and quadrupling those of 2021**. Returns from Libya account for more than a half of these movements.*

*The Commission has devoted particular attention to the **Western Mediterranean and Atlantic route**, given the continuing increase in irregular arrivals. With **Senegal**, we underlined migration cooperation as a key EU interest, with EUR 30 million funding programmes supporting border and migration management and anti-smuggling. Significant progress is being made with **Mauritania**, where all the components of the package I announced in February have been contracted and a first payment under the EUR 100 million budget support programme has been made. With **Morocco** we have a strong cooperation on migration, supported by a EUR 152 million budget support programme to be completed early next year.*

*Morocco was the first country with which we developed an Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership, a model being replicated with other partners (Tunisia and the Western Balkans). **Anti-smuggling and anti-trafficking** cooperation is ongoing in Egypt, Mauritania, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea, Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan. A second international conference on the **Global Alliance** will be held in 2025, to ensure continued political engagement of international partners, focused on concerted and targeted action at global level. The EU Internet Forum discussed the online dimension of migrant smuggling on 12 December. It remains essential to advance on the legislative proposals on the table to strengthen EU legislation to prevent and fight **migrant smuggling**. In addition, the proposal on measures against transport operators that facilitate or engage in these activities would address another key angle, and the incoming Polish Presidency's intention to step up the momentum on all these proposals is very welcome.*

*The Draghi report highlights that although **legal migration** already helps to reduce labour shortages, Member States still struggle to attract and retain talent. An orderly and well-managed labour migration is key for our competitiveness and part of the response we need to tackle the skills and labour gaps in Europe. We need a step change in ambition and action. In our comprehensive approach to working with partners, action to combat illegal migration should go hand in hand with legal pathways serving EU labour market needs and reducing the attractiveness of smuggling networks. This is an approach that we should reflect in the new Pact for the Mediterranean. **Talent partnerships** are advancing with Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the Commission looks forward to the European Parliament's position to start trilogues on the EU **Talent Pool** as soon as possible. The Commission will step up support to Member States and employers to attract talent, by exploring how **multiple-purpose legal gateway offices** in partner countries can underpin Talent Partnerships and the future EU Talent Pool.*

*In the meantime, preparations for the final entry into application of the **Pact on Migration and Asylum** in mid-2026 continue at full speed, in line with the Common Implementation Plan. Many Member States communicated their National Implementation Plans by 12 December. I urge those who have not yet done so, to communicate their Plans as soon as possible. We are actively accompanying Member States' preparations for the Pact's entry into application with **guidance and funding**. An important step will be to amend national programmes under Home Affairs Funds early next year, to make the most of the additional allocations available from the mid-term review of the home affairs programmes and the MFF revision to support the implementation of the Pact and the hosting of Ukrainian refugees, which continues to constitute a major challenge for some Member States. The Commission will regularly update the Council and the Parliament on the implementation of the Pact.*

*In parallel, we are also working **to accelerate implementation of the Pact**, where possible. We have set out three areas where we can speed up work within the current acquis: improving the management of external borders; improving the efficiency and fairness of the Dublin system; a more efficient management of reception systems and more efficient returns. Maintaining the balance between responsibility and solidarity is essential. Changes to administrative procedures on a voluntary basis can bring real results, and I am pleased that the Commission's initiative has been well received by a number of Member States. We are working closely with those Member States who have expressed interest to launch pilot projects. Other Member States have already started projects frontloading efforts, notably in the areas of border procedures, the Dublin system and reception.*

*As announced in my letter to you on 14 October, a stronger legislative framework in the area of **returns** will be one of the first major proposals of the new College, and a proposal for a new common approach on return will be presented before the March European Council. Commissioner Brunner, responsible for Internal Affairs and Migration, has already started consultations with Member States, the European Parliament and other stakeholders to ensure the proposal fully responds to the needs on*

*the ground, and to underpin the proposal with a strong evidence base. The aim is to make the process of returns simpler, swifter and more efficient — to bring it up to the new standard of the streamlined asylum process under the Pact. The new legislation will also cover both the rights and obligations of returnees, incentivising returnees' cooperation while also making clear the consequences of non-cooperation, thereby effectively addressing the gap between issued return decisions and actual returns. To support the new common approach on returns, a legal proposal on **digitalisation** of return case management will follow later in 2025, covering the complex issues of interoperability, data sharing and data protection. Given the urgency, we have already accelerated the work of a dedicated study, which maps the current landscape, and which will feed into the design of the new system.*

*In the meantime, we must seize all the opportunities already available under existing legislation, exploring operational solutions that fall within the current legislation to improve our return performance. The Commission is presenting today the results of a **Schengen thematic evaluation** identifying gaps within and between national systems. National processes, legal frameworks, and operational procedures vary widely across Member States, weakening the EU's potential in this key area. We have identified a number of recommendations which could already be used to bridge these gaps. Strengthened European cooperation is key to maximise national efforts, including better use of the Schengen Information System and of Frontex support, alongside strong capabilities and solid contingency planning.*

*To tackle the specific challenge of **third country nationals who present a security threat**, in a working document issued today, Commission services, and the EU Return Coordinator, have drawn lessons from current practices, based on exchanges with Member States' experts. **Incentives to encourage compliance** with return decisions are useful tools, when used coherently. Practice varies substantially in Member States, and the EU Return Coordinator has made available an overview of Member States' best practice to help shape future action. This is being complemented by support of EUR 25 million for six Member States' new and innovative models for incentivising assisted voluntary returns. We will also further reflect on the role **Frontex** could play, to facilitate onward returns including from third countries and ensure proper safeguards, with a view to possible changes to its current mandate.*

*As set out in the October conclusions, we have been deepening our analysis of **innovative ways to counter illegal migration**, following up on priorities signalled by Member States. Discussions are being held with Member States, including at the Justice and Home Affairs Council last week, on developing the concept of **return hubs** in third countries. We are considering how best to introduce in the legal framework the possibility of establishing these hubs. We need to look at legal, operational, and practical aspects, as well as financial implications of such hubs, whilst respecting fundamental rights and the principle of non-refoulement. As well as work with international organisations like UNHCR and IOM, cooperation with third countries will be key to our success, including as part of the work to develop deeper partnerships.*

*The Pact itself already introduces innovative elements, including the alignment of the **safe third country concept** in the Asylum Procedure Regulation with international standards, while introducing greater flexibility for its application compared to the current *acquis*. We are accelerating the review of this concept, setting up consultations with Member States, the European Parliament, the UNCHR and IOM, and targeted NGOs, to assess whether amendments to the Regulation are required. While the Regulation will apply from June 2026, we are exploring how we can advance the application of these concepts. We have already asked the EU Agency for Asylum to accelerate its analysis of the specific third countries that could potentially be designated as safe countries of origin and safe third countries, with a view to drawing up EU lists.*

*The **Schengen area of freedom, security and justice** – nearing its fortieth anniversary – is a huge asset for all of us, and the decision at the latest Justice and Home Affairs Council lifting internal border controls at land borders with Bulgaria and Romania is very welcome. It completes a long journey to strengthen the Schengen area with the full participation of these two Member States. Upholding the highest standards in our Schengen cooperation is essential, and the Commission continues to support Member States' efforts through the Schengen Scoreboard. Eight Member States have reintroduced internal border controls. When circumstances require, this is a temporary necessity, but such actions must respect the requirements of the renewed Schengen Borders Code. The Schengen Coordinator is working with Member States through regular dialogues to tackle current challenges and make sure that the impact of these controls on travelling citizens remains limited and that alternative measures, such as joint police patrols, are given priority over reintroducing internal border controls. The Commission will continue to offer support to help ensure coherent application and compliance with the legal framework.*

*The new **Entry/Exit System** will be a major tool for guaranteeing the well-functioning of Schengen, underpinning our efforts to tackle overstayers and increase security. Putting the new system in place has proved challenging both to eu-LISA and to some Member States. Swift approval of the new proposal to phase in the system is the best way to ensure it is quickly up and running.*

*Finally, the **weaponisation of migration** along the EU's Eastern border is a form of hybrid attack increasingly employed by both the Russian Federation and Belarus, seeking to undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Member States, the security of the Union and threaten fundamental freedoms in the EU – as well as of those persons exploited in such attacks. The Commission has recently set out how Member States can respond to this or other similar threats to our collective security, if duly justified by the particular circumstances.*

While our actions in the face of instrumentalisation of migration have contained these attacks, we must protect ourselves against those who now use this new hybrid tactics as part of broader efforts to destabilise the EU. In view of the serious nature of the threat, as well as its persistence, to the security of the Union and territorial integrity of the Member States, Member States may invoke Treaty provisions to exceptionally and under

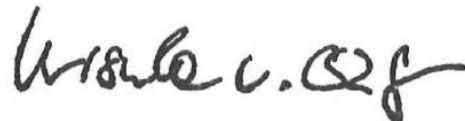
stringent conditions go further than what is currently provided for by EU secondary legislation, under the control of the Court of Justice. Any such measures must be proportionate, limited to what is strictly necessary, temporary and respect fundamental rights. In the interests of our collective strength, it is important that Member States consult the Commission and cooperate closely with the other Member States when such decisions are taken. Coordination among neighbouring Member States is essential to ensure consistency and effectiveness of actions.

In the meantime, the Commission continues to support the Member States facing these serious challenges. Six Member States have responded to a call for expression of interest for an indicative amount of EUR 170 million, to enhance border surveillance capabilities on our borders with Russia and Belarus and could benefit from the call.

As you can see, we have kept advancing well on our common work on migration. We have taken forward several activities under the points of actions I had set out in my letter of 14 October, and we will continue to work on our operational and legislative agenda. For more details, I invite you to consult the annex to this letter.

Looking forward to our discussions later this week.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ursula v. d. L.', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ursula von der Leyen