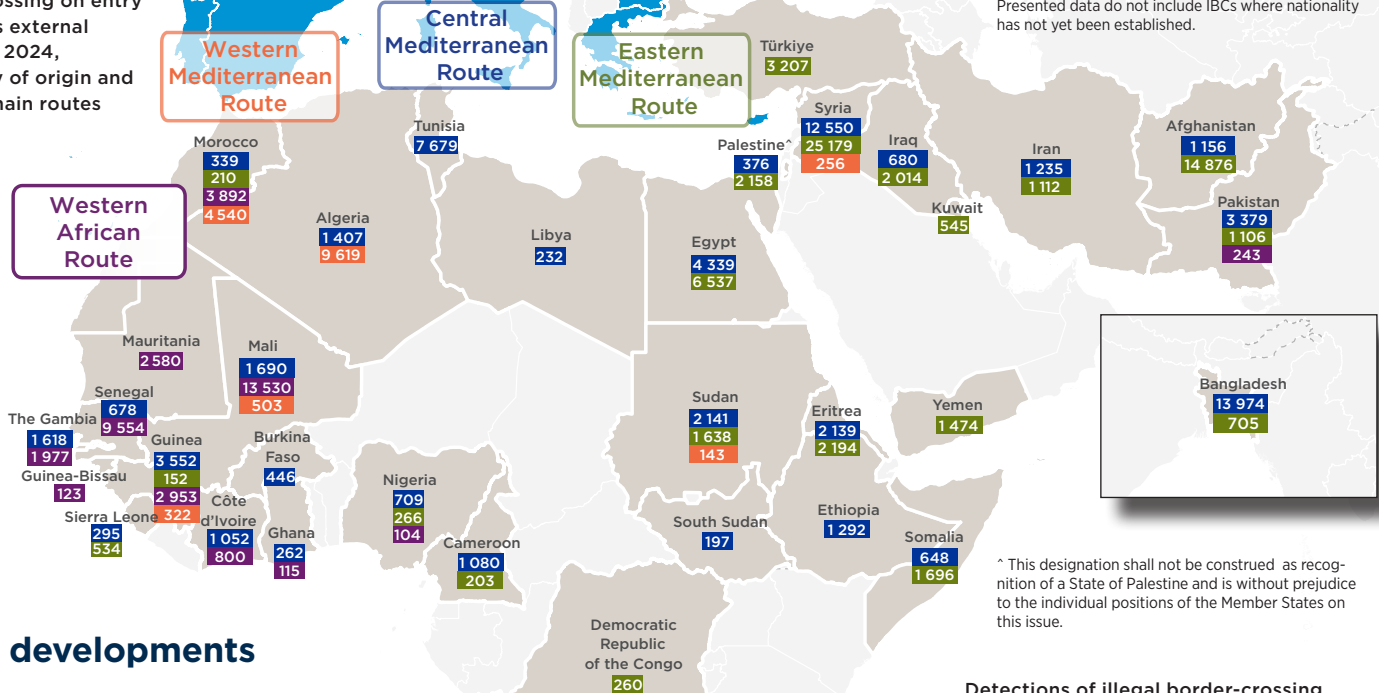


Detections of illegal border-crossing on entry at the EU's external borders in 2024, by country of origin and selected main routes



Key developments

2024¹ saw a significant decrease of reported illegal border-crossings² (IBCs) on entry at the blue and green borders. It is important to note, however, that behind the statistics lie the complex and often disheartening reality of irregular migration: 2 300 people drowned in 2024 trying to reach Europe. Decreased IBCs do not reduce the importance of ever vigilant European Integrated Border Management. EU and bilateral cooperation with some key countries of transit and origin – foremost among them Tunisia – resulted in these countries making significantly enhanced efforts to counter migrant smuggling. Hence, while there is little to suggest that fewer migrants wanted to come to Europe in 2024, pressure on the EU's external borders was much lower. Other key indicators, such as clandestine entry attempts and refusals of entry, were stable. As a result, the 2024 total of just over 239 000 IBCs on entry was 38% lower than the 2023 total. However, the trend was not uniform. Although the Central Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes saw significantly lower figures, there were increases on the Eastern Mediterranean and Eastern Borders routes.

On entry, the gender distribution of irregular migrants was largely unchanged on 2023. The share of women remained at just over one in ten; however, arrivals of women were much higher on the Eastern Mediterranean route. In 2024, 62% of all reported women took the Eastern Mediterranean route, of which over 70% were Afghan and Syrian. This increased

share is the result of many fewer women using the Central Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes, which likely is linked to these routes becoming more perilous. While in the Western Balkans, people smugglers increasingly used violence against migrants, in the Central Mediterranean IOM figures suggest the route became more unsafe in 2024 relative to the number of crossings (1 717 missing migrants were recorded in Central Mediterranean in 2024 as compared to 2 526 in 2023 – a 32% decrease compared to a 59% decrease in IBCs).

In 2024 more border controls were temporarily reintroduced in the Schengen area, continuing to jeopardise the area of free movement. The main rationale for introducing them was 'serious threats to public policy or internal security'. Relatedly, secondary movements in January–November 2024 as reported to Frontex fell by 46% compared to the same period of 2023 to a total of 220 136 counts of the indicator illegal stay on the move. The decrease to some extent mirrors the reduced number of entries at the external borders.

Further progress was made in 2024 as regards the return of people without the right to stay. From January to November 2024, almost 112 000 effective returns were reported by Member States, a 12% increase on the first eleven months of 2023.³ Returns to almost all regions of origin grew. Despite this, the gap between return decisions and effective returns

Detections of illegal border-crossing on entry at the EU's external borders

	2022	2023	2024	% change over 2023
Comoros 237				
Central Mediterranean route	105 561	162 714	66 766	-59%
Eastern Mediterranean route	38 690	61 092	69 436	14%
Western African route	15 463	39 673	46 877	18%
Western Balkan route	144 197	99 041	21 520	-78%
Eastern Borders route	6 373	5 824	17 001	192%
Western Mediterranean route	15 134	16 877	17 026*	1%
Other routes	919	697	533*	-24%
Total EU – Detections	326 337	385 918	239 159*	-38%

* including estimates

remains large. In the first eleven months of 2024, 111 510 reported effective returns stood against 389 680 return decisions issued. However, the number of return decisions issued in January–November 2024 did see a fall (by 11% compared with the same period of 2023).

The outlook for the EU's external borders for 2025 is one of uncertainty resulting from the unpredictability of global geopolitical actors and a foreseeable further weakening of the rules-based international order (including the rules governing migration) and the institutions upholding it. As actors who are not committed to the rules-based order continue to export instability to the EU's neighbourhood, European border management will have to be ready to deal with threats and challenges from the east, south-east and south or, in short, from any possible direction.

¹ Illegal border-crossings (IBCs) include all available data on irregular migrant detections on the external borders of the European Union and Schengen Associated Countries in the period January–November 2024 and are compared with the same period in previous years. Joint Operation data, Eurosur data and estimates were used for December 2024. It should be noted that the same person may be detected for IBC several times at different locations or on different borders.

² The term 'illegal border-crossing' refers to crossings of the external borders of the EU considered unauthorised at the time of the crossing under the Schengen Borders Code. This number might include persons intending to apply for asylum. The term refers to statistical data of events occurring at the border and does not presume the final legal status of the detected persons.

³ Data were retrieved on 7 January 2025 with ten Member States (CY, ES, IE, LI, LT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SI) not having submitted their data for November 2024 or even earlier months (NL, PL, NO).

Irregular migration routes

On the **Central Mediterranean route**, IBCs dropped significantly (-59%) in 2024, reflecting fewer departures, especially from Tunisia but also from Libya. Still, the migratory flow on this route (~70 000) was the second largest of all routes on entry. Bangladeshis, Syrians and Tunisians were the top nationalities, representing around half of all detections.

On the **Eastern Mediterranean route**, IBCs rose by 14%. Syrians, Afghans and Egyptians accounted for over two-thirds of all detected migrants. A new corridor was established departing from eastern Libya and targeting the Eastern Mediterranean. Over 3 500 migrants arrived on this corridor, mainly Egyptians, Pakistanis, Syrians and Bangladeshis. Although some analysts expected the conflicts in the Middle East to cause an increase in arrivals of migrants of Middle Eastern origin, such arrivals did not materialise in 2024, validating Frontex's predictions. The number of Palestinians¹ reported on this route in fact fell by around 70% year-on-year.

On the **Western Balkan route**, IBCs fell significantly (-78%) despite the rise on the Eastern Mediterranean route. Countries in the region effectively mitigated the flows through reinforced controls, and heightened violence amid territorial disputes between smuggling

groups also discouraged migrants from taking this route. Notably, a partial rerouting through the region took place, with migrants attempting to exit the region via Bosnia and Herzegovina to a greater extent than previously. The top three nationalities (Syrian, Turkish and Afghan) accounted for over two-thirds of all detections.

On the **Western African route**, the Canary Islands saw an increase in IBCs (+18%), reflecting the continuing impact of the crises in the Sahel. Departures from Mauritania, which more than tripled, offset reduced departures from all other main countries of departure. Malians (largely moving via neighbouring Mauritania), unknown and Senegalese were the top nationalities, accounting for roughly 70% of the total.

The **Western Mediterranean route** saw an almost unchanged level of IBC on entry, owing to an increase in departures from Algeria offsetting lower numbers from Morocco. Nationals of Algeria, Morocco and unknown accounted for the vast majority (over 90%) of all detections.

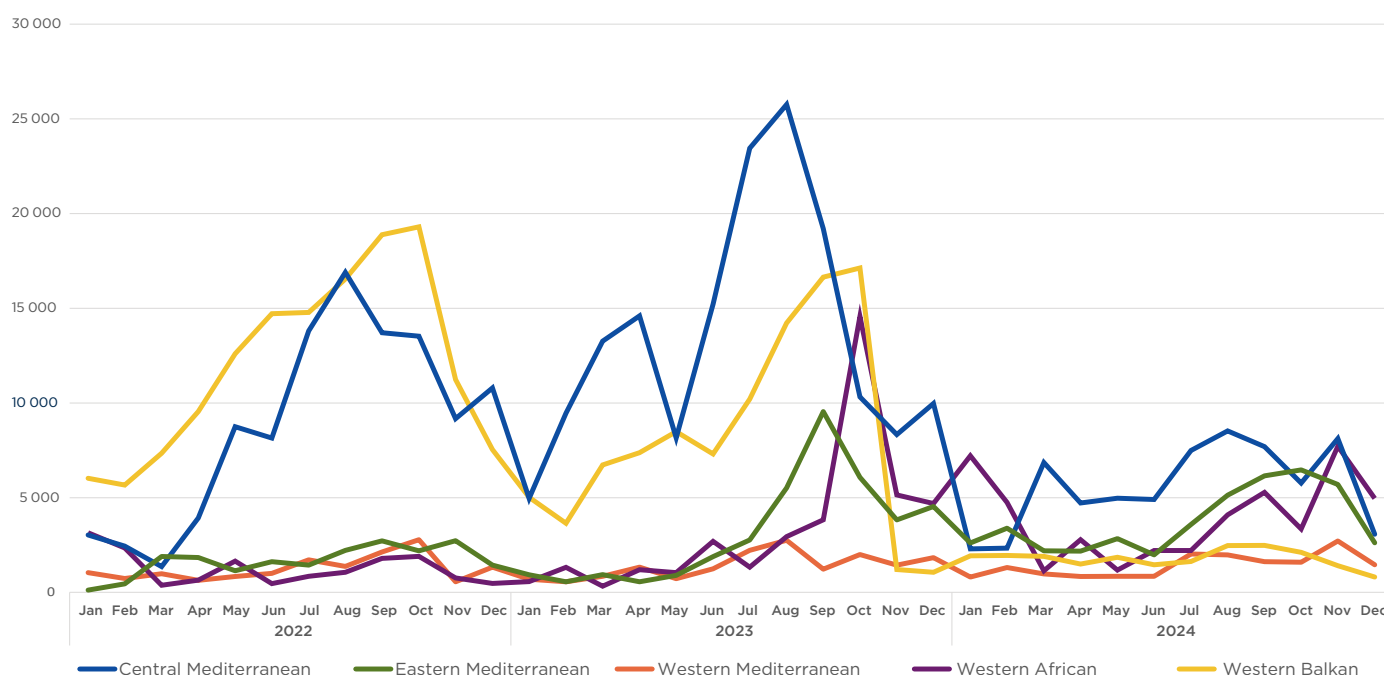
The **Eastern Borders of the EU** saw almost a threefold increase in IBCs. While the hybrid aggression on the Belarusian and Russian borders continued, including instrumentalised migration on the borders of Belarus, the majority of reported IBCs continue to be on the borders

with Ukraine. Finnish-Russian border-control points remained closed throughout the year.

In the **English Channel**, IBCs on exit saw a slight rise (+9%), largely reflecting an unchanged dynamic on this route as the envisaged deportations to Rwanda in 2024 did not come to fruition. The *modus operandi* used by people smugglers (simultaneous departures, combined with overcrowded and unseaworthy boats) resulted in a sharp increase in fatalities to an all-time high (78 deaths in 2024 according to the IOM). Investigative successes in 2024 showed that the majority of rubber boats used by smugglers were manufactured in the Middle and Far East and stored in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and France. Violence, perpetrated by people smugglers against migrants as well as by migrants against police patrols, remained a pressing concern.

¹ This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue.

Monthly detections of illegal border-crossing on entry at the EU's external borders 2020-2024 by main routes



Source: Frontex data

Composition of migrant flows

A few nationalities continue to play an outsized role at the EU's external borders. The top three nationalities (Syrian, Afghan and Malian) accounted for roughly a third of IBC detections in 2024 across all routes on entry.

For the fifth year in a row, in 2024 Syrians were by far the most reported nationality, with over 44 000 IBCs on entry from January to November 2024. Syrians had the largest share (56%) of any nationality on the Eastern Mediterranean route and their number increased (+20% compared with the same period of 2023) roughly in proportion to the flow on the route. Remarkably, the number of Syrians on the Central Mediterranean route rose (+28% to over 12 000) despite the overall decrease in the flow on this route. The increase was linked to flight routes from Damascus and elsewhere in the region to Benghazi in eastern Libya. On the Western Balkan route the number of reported IBCs by Syrians fell drastically (-91%) compared to the same period of 2023.

This then is the reason for the plunge (-57%) of reported detections of Syrians overall.

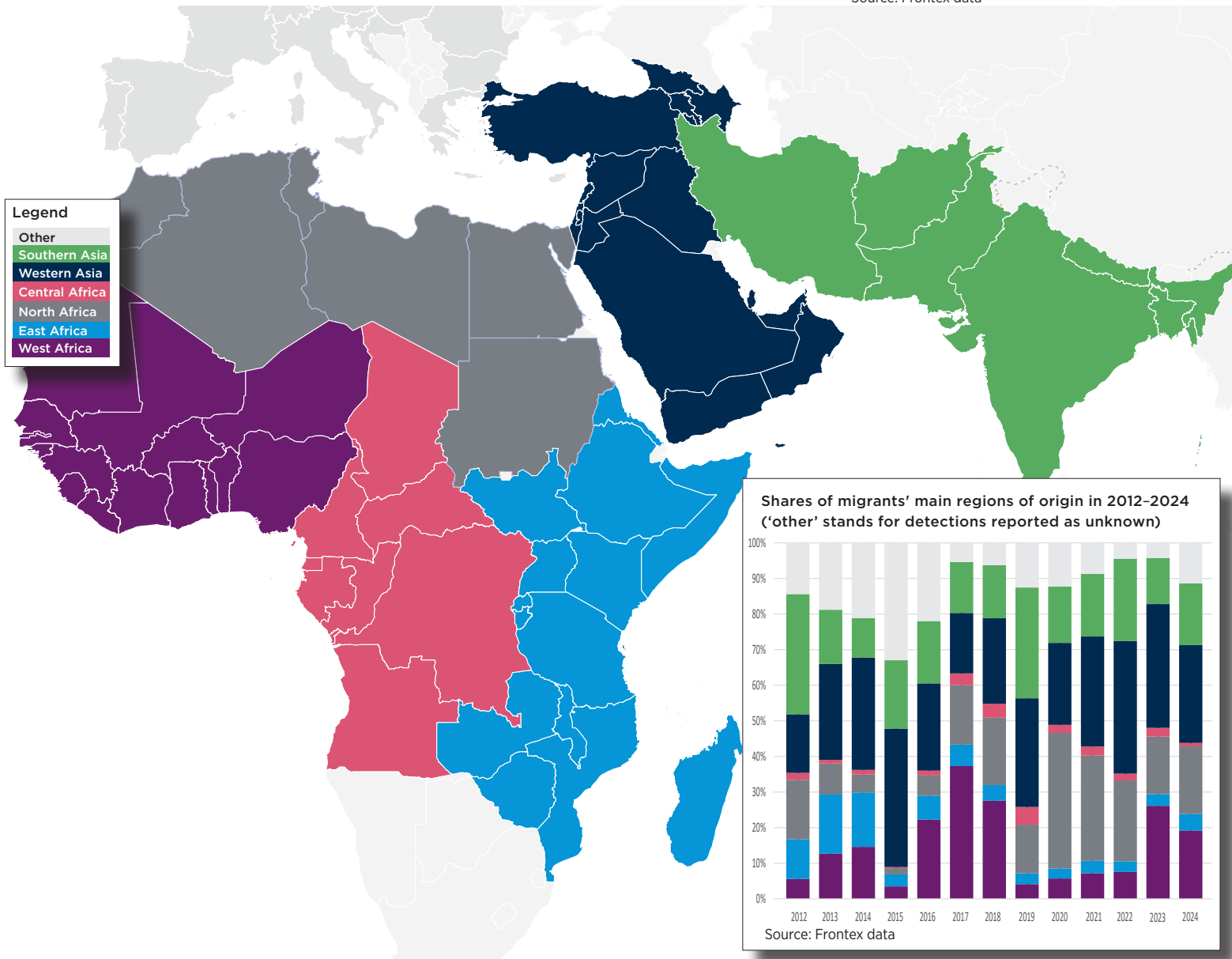
Of the main nationalities, Malians and Ukrainians recorded their highest figures in recent years. Malian migrants fleeing the security and economic crises in their country have for many years been recorded on the Central Mediterranean and Western Mediterranean routes. But only since 2023 have Malians been using the Western African route at scale. IBCs by Ukrainians are almost exclusively associated with military-aged men who evade the draft.

As regards the regional composition of migration flows, a few regions bucked the overall decreasing trend as the nationalities of these regions decreased less in relative terms. North African (-25%), Southern Asian (-13%) and East African (-14%) nationalities therefore increased their overall shares.

Nationalities with more than 3 000 illegal border-crossings on entry at the EU's external borders in January–November 2024

Nationalities	2024	Share of total
Syria	44 237	20%
Afghanistan	16 249	7%
Mali	15 125	7%
Bangladesh	14 291	6%
Ukraine	13 862	6%
Egypt	10 915	5%
Algeria	10 687	5%
Senegal	10 011	4%
Morocco	9 113	4%
Türkiye	8 956	4%
Unknown	8 819	4%
Tunisia	7 723	3%
Guinea	6 705	3%
Pakistan	4 942	2%
Eritrea	4 736	2%
Sudan	4 012	2%
Gambia	3 569	2%
Iraq	3 307	1%
Somalia	3 046	1%

Source: Frontex data



Outlook for 2025

European Integrated Border Management (EIBM) is entering a period of profound uncertainty. This uncertainty is a reflection of the highly unpredictable geopolitical environment Europe finds itself in as the new US administration takes office, and as key security developments around Europe as well as globally continue to unfold in an often-unpredictable manner.

In the Middle East, 2024 saw hugely significant changes, such as the toppling of the Assad regime in Syria. 2025 may well see further ripple effects of the Israel-Gaza war and wider geopolitics. EU border management has two immediate concerns as regards Syria. The first is that IS/Daesh fighters (including European foreign fighters) and their family members imprisoned in the north-east do not again pose a threat. The second is whether the new government will be able to stabilise the country while being inclusive enough for minorities to feel sufficiently secure to remain. In the longer run, a Syria that meets these conditions could see the return of Syrians (both from neighbouring countries and from Europe) who left the country due to their opposition to the Assad regime. Countries in the region under economic strain may be tempted to speed up the process of returning Syrians, which could become a concern for European border management if Syrian refugee populations feel under pressure and attempt to migrate to Europe instead.

In Ukraine, efforts to bring all parties to the negotiating table could lead to a range of scenarios consequential for EIBM. Some scenarios will entail legal/regular immigration (via BCPs) of Ukrainians to the EU especially if peace negotiations fail or result in a situation that Ukrainians are not satisfied with. Before any agreement is reached, further mobilisation and increased conflict intensity could lead to higher numbers of IBCs by military-aged men on the EU's green borders. If Russia believes that raising the stakes would improve its negotiating position, it could expand its use of hybrid warfare tactics on the eastern borders or escalate in other ways. In fact, owing to its inherent adversarial logic, Moscow can be expected to escalate in the hybrid domain regardless of any eventual settlement of the conflict.

To Europe's south, the continuing instability in the Sahel and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa

as well as the increased Russian influence in large parts of the continent is another concern. Russia's Mediterranean pivot from Syria to eastern Libya could tilt the balance of power in favour of the Libyan National Army and be a precursor to renewed conflict there. More influence in eastern Libya and beyond could also mean that Russia will be able to shape/direct migratory flows into and out of North Africa.

Unless these scenarios or other major deteriorations in the EU neighbourhood materialise, irregular migration to Europe via the green and blue borders could potentially further decrease in 2025 given the current, fruitful efforts to expand and deepen migration partnerships with key countries of origin and transit. In this context, the humane treatment of migrants in line with international law remains paramount for building a sustainable migration management system that safeguards security and adheres to fundamental values. That said, just like in 2024, efforts to mitigate migratory flows will work better in some regions than in others. One problem area could be the Canary Islands, which may come under greater pressure as people smugglers move departure areas across national jurisdictions (as they have done in the past), and because push factors in the Sahel area could be too great a force to be fully countered. In addition, migration from West Africa currently transiting to Central America to reach the US could reroute to the Canary Islands if crossing the US-Mexico border is no longer feasible.

As a result of intensified cooperation between the EU and third countries, securitisation of land borders and increased surveillance, more migrants could try to enter the EU via BCPs. This may be attempted by hiding in vehicles, using fraudulent documents or fraudulently obtained authentic visas. The latter is a problem that the EU is only beginning to appreciate. In view of these issues and the need to enhance the level of security, at the end of 2024 the European Commission published a proposal for a progressive roll-out of the Entry/Exit System (EES) over a 180-day period. The EES will be introduced in a phased manner, in line with the interoperability roadmap, which includes a roll-out for VIS and ETIAS. It is anticipated that ETIAS, originally planned to launch in mid-2025, will start approximately six months after EES becomes operational (a revised plan will be agreed between the European Commission, MS/SAC and eu-LISA). The operationalisation of these systems carries inherent risks, including a

possible increase in clandestine entry attempts at BCPs.

Cross-border crime threats to the EU's external borders are expected to remain elevated throughout 2025. Migrant smuggling and human trafficking will stay at high levels, as sophisticated criminal networks continue to exploit the precarious circumstances of populations in third countries plagued by poverty and conflict. Drug trafficking is expected to remain a challenge for the external borders, particularly on maritime routes. The trade is fuelled by persistently high levels of drug production in countries of origin/production, as well as highly organised and resourceful criminal organisations using well-established trafficking corridors. The Western Balkans region is likely to remain the principal source of illicit firearms trafficked into the EU, though a freezing or an end to the war in Ukraine may precipitate an increase in firearms smuggling from there. The smuggling of excise goods into the EU is anticipated to remain high, driven by price disparities with third countries. Economic downturns within the EU may amplify this trend, as shifts in consumer demand for cheaper alternatives incentivise criminal networks to escalate smuggling activities. Criminal actors are likely to become increasingly sophisticated, continuously adapting to changes in circumstances and seizing opportunities to expand their illicit businesses. The instrumentalisation of migration and other hybrid threats at the external borders, together with new technologies employed by criminal groups and other hostile actors, will continue to play a crucial role in shaping cross-border crime.

The threat of terrorism remains primarily linked to conflict areas. Undetected crossings of people linked to terrorism on the EU's external borders will remain a concern for the internal security of the Union. Robust border protection and security must be ensured, including systematic biometric checks of all travellers against the relevant databases.

To conclude, the European Border and Coast Guard is entering another year in a challenging geopolitical environment. In this situation of elevated uncertainty, it is vital to leverage the entire toolbox of EIBM intelligence, including crucially scenario building. Informed by this foresight, contingency planning is the best response, as is scaling up the rapidly deployable standing corps to complement investments in Member States.