

The European Border and Coast Guard and the Western Balkans



FRONT**X**



EUROPEAN BORDER AND
COAST GUARD AGENCY



Foreword

“Dear friends (...) there is practically no field in the Frontex mandate, in which we are not working together with you.”

OPENING SPEECH BY FABRICE LEGGERI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF FRONTEX
DURING THE HIGH-LEVEL MEETING BETWEEN THE FRONTEX MANAGEMENT BOARD
AND THE WESTERN BALKAN PARTNERS, NOVEMBER 2021

The Western Balkan region is the closest strategic partner for Frontex outside the EU. Thus, naturally, the cooperation between the European Border and Coast Guard and our Western Balkan partners is of strategic importance. Undeniably there are many challenges we face in our daily tasks, but we believe that through joining forces, bringing together our expertise, capacities and experience, we are able to progress and achieve more.

The cooperation with all six partners: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, is based on a robust cooperation framework, including working arrangements, Frontex Liaison Officers, as well as cooperation through the Western Balkans Risk Analysis Network.

The entry into force of Status Agreements between the European Union and the first three Western Balkan countries brought cooperation to a whole new level, with the possibility for Frontex to implement joint operations with executive powers at land and sea borders. We have already launched **fully-fledged joint operations in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia** and they are yielding impressive results in fight against irregular migration and cross-border crime.

In the area of capacity building, Frontex will implement two technical assistance projects under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III). Building on the ongoing

technical assistance work on protection-sensitive migration management, **the first project** focuses on setting up Eurodac-compatible registration systems of mixed migration flows in the Western Balkans, building return capacities and providing advice and expertise on contingency planning. **The second project** is dedicated to border security, including training activities to support border checks and surveillance, assistance in establishing Coordination Centres compatible with the Eurosur standards, and setting up two regional networks for Integrated Border Management experts and for Women in Border Police.

In June 2019 and in November 2021, the Heads of Border Management authorities from the Western Balkans attended the **high-level meetings between the Frontex Management Board and Western Balkan partners**. These meetings allowed to take stock of the ongoing cooperation and to plan future activities. Recognising thus the added value of the discussions, these high-level meetings will be organised regularly by Frontex in order to bring partners from across the European continent closer together within the border and coast guard community.

As can be seen from this long list of joint activities, all of us rely on and benefit from the highest level of cooperation and hopefully our relations will further flourish in a spirit of trust, collegiality and professionalism.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244(1999) and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Frontex cooperation with the Western Balkan partners

2009

Signature of the Working Arrangements between Frontex and Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia

2016

JANUARY

Launch of the IPA II Project Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management in the Western Balkans and Turkey

MAY

Signature of the Working Arrangement between Frontex and Kosovo

2017

JO Focal Points Air

APRIL

Deployment of the first Frontex Liaison Officer to the Western Balkans

2018

JO Coordination Points Air

OCTOBER

Signature of the EU-Albania Status Agreement

2021

JO Coordination Points Air, Land and Sea

JANUARY

Deployment of the second Frontex Liaison Officer to the Western Balkans

MARCH

Renewed Working Arrangement with Albania signed

MARCH

Launch of the maritime joint operation in Albania

JUNE

Launch of the land joint operation in Serbia

2020

JO Coordination Points Air

JULY

Launch of the land joint operation in Montenegro

OCTOBER

Launch of the maritime joint operation in Montenegro

2019

JO Coordination Points Air

MAY

Launch of the land joint operation in Albania

JUNE

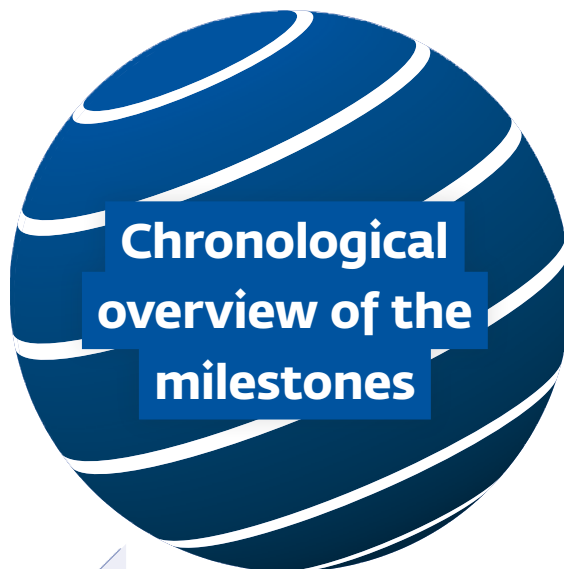
1st high-level meeting between Frontex Management Board and Western Balkan partners

JULY

Launch of Phase II of the IPA II Project Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management in the Western Balkans and Turkey

NOVEMBER

Signature of the EU-Serbia Status Agreement



Chronological
overview of the
milestones

“Migration management is a joint challenge, which the EU and the Western Balkans need to address together, in close partnership.”

BRDO DECLARATION, OCTOBER 2021

The migratory pressure in the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan regions develops further east in various countries of origin and transit from Central, South Asia or the Middle East. This encouraged Frontex and the EU MSs to enhance border-control cooperation with the Western Balkan partners to tackle irregular migratory movements across the region.

The migratory pressure on the Western Balkan route was also exerted by the migrants already present in the region. Those who managed to enter the region across its southern borders, join other migrants already en route to the region's northern common borders, with Hungary, Croatia and Romania.

Over the past years, these borders experienced significant pressure by migrants trying to reach the EU with available reporting by neighbouring EU Member States indicating some 130 000 illegal border-crossing/attempts in 2016, followed by roughly 12 000 (in 2017), 6 000 (in 2018), 15 000 (in 2019), 27 000 (in 2020) and almost 30 000 between January and August 2021.

The data gathered from the start of the joint operations in 2021 until late autumn, reflects the achievements of Joint Operations under Status Agreements at the borders of three countries – Albania, Montenegro and Serbia.

Until 2021, Frontex coordinated activities implemented in Albania (land and sea). From the beginning of the JO in Albania in 2021 in total 15 999 illegal migrant apprehensions were reported at the land borders and 152 at the sea borders. In addition, 26 people smugglers were arrested by the Albanian authorities at land and 8 at the sea borders.

Frontex coordinated operational activities in Montenegro resulted in 44 migrant apprehensions and the arrest of 3 people smugglers at the land borders and 11 migrant apprehensions at the sea borders.

During the implementation of operational activities in Serbia, starting from June 2021, in total 723 apprehensions of illegal border crossings and the arrest of 13 people smugglers were reported by the Serbian authorities.

ALBANIA 2021

| | LAND | SEA |
|--|---------------|------------|
| Number of irregular migrants | 15 999 | 152 |
| Number of facilitators captured | 26 | 8 |

MONTENEGRO 2021

| | LAND | SEA |
|--|-------------|------------|
| Number of irregular migrants | 44 | 11 |
| Number of facilitators captured | 3 | 0 |

SERBIA 2021

| | LAND |
|--|-------------|
| Number of irregular migrants | 723 |
| Number of facilitators captured | 13 |

Success stories under Joint Action Days (JADs)

The Western Balkan partners often participate in Joint Action Days. JADs are short, time-limited operations, which seek to ensure an inter-agency approach and to establish links between information collection, detection, apprehension and further investigations, both inland and at the borders. Each JAD focuses on specific areas of crime, modus operandi, selected areas and routes, border crossing points and border sections.

There were in total 21 JADs in years 2016–2021. Out of all these the Western Balkan partners participated in 13. The four success stories are the best exemplified of the joint achievements.

JAD Morpheus in 2019 was organised by Frontex at the European airports. This JAD aimed at targeting Organised Crime Groups involved in drug trafficking by air couriers to and within the EU and seeking to smuggle migrants into the EU through major EU airports by using forged and counterfeit EU national identity documents. Thanks to the active participation of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia in this JAD, in total 14 falsified/forged documents, 160 genuine documents held by impostors, identified 19 facilitators, and arrested 6 persons were detected.

JAD Mobile 2 in 2019 was focused on stolen vehicles, illegal immigration and document fraud. A Coordination Centre was established at Frontex HQ and was attended by representatives from thirteen Member States, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro.

When participating in this JAD the Western Balkan partners achieved significant results, namely detection of 14 stolen cars, arrest of 19 suspected people smugglers, drugs smugglers and those for the possession of smuggled excise goods and weapons; identification of 49 fraudulent documents; seizure of 11.9 million cigarettes and 20 tonnes of raw tobacco; 1 firearm and 30 pieces of ammunition.

During **JAD Danube 4 in 2019**, targeting criminal activities in the Southeast Europe, Serbia alone seized over 400 thousand EUR in undeclared cash suspected being linked to criminal activities. This represents the largest seizure of cash ever recorded during Frontex coordinated activities under EMPACT.

During **JAD Danube 6 in 2021**, of 144 people smugglers arrested in the course of the activity, Albania alone arrested 44 suspects during the 2 week period of action. This is particularly remarkable as there were 50 arrests of people smugglers overall in 2020.

Return related trainings

In total 99 return-related trainings were provided by Frontex to Western Balkan partners in years 2016-2021. These included all types of personnel involved in return operations:

- ♦ escort officers;
- ♦ escort leaders;
- ♦ trainers of escort officers;
- ♦ forced return monitors.

99 return-related trainings

Activities under IPA II Project

Between years 2016-2021, **nearly 1000 Western Balkans participants** took part in no less than **59 Frontex-coordinated activities** of the IPA II Project "Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management in the Western Balkans and Turkey".

59 activities

986 participants

Number of officers deployed by Frontex in the joint operations under the Status Agreements

| | Total number of participating EU Member States | | | | Total number of deployed officers from the Member States / Standing Corps | | |
|---------------|--|------|------|------|---|--------|--------|
| | | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
| JO Albania | Land | 16 | 19 | 18 | 265 | 345/25 | 299/68 |
| | Sea | | | 4 | | | 61/7 |
| JO Montenegro | Land | | 6 | 3 | | 13/5 | 1/10 |
| | Sea | | 4 | 5 | | 15/2 | 217/13 |
| JO Serbia | Land | | | 15 | | | 130/10 |

The Coordination Points allow Frontex to deploy EU experts as observers at given border crossing points and airports in a number of partner countries without executive powers. The Coordination Points are instrumental for the exchange of information and are aimed at facilitating the early detection of irregular migration trends and cross-border crime towards the EU external borders. Before 2018 the deployments of Western Balkans experts were taking place under JO Focal Points Air.

| Joint Operation Coordination Points | Total number of Coordination Points activated in 2016-2021 | Number of EU Experts deployed in 2016-2021 |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Air | 6 | 334 |
| Sea | 1 | 5 |

The numbers and statistics form only a prelude to the real picture of how advanced the cooperation between the European Board and Coast and the Western Balkan partners is.

They all participate in many region-wide initiatives like Western Balkans Risk Analysis Network (WB-RAN), coordination points or capacity-building activities under EU-funded IPA II Project “Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management in the Western Balkans and Turkey”. Under Phase I of the project, Frontex conducted in 2019 a Feasibility Study entitled “Assessment of the IT and communication infrastructure to support the Identification and Registration process of mixed migration flows in the IPA II Western Balkan Beneficiaries”. The Feasibility Study has identified the existing gaps and development needs in terms of IT infrastructure, procedures and legal basis needed for future integration of the relevant national databases with the existing EU information Systems (EURODAC, VIS, SIS II) in six Western Balkan partners.

Although in some cases the region is looked at collectively, individual relations between Frontex and each of the six partners have been developed throughout the time and the cooperation highlights with partners ordered alphabetically are provided below.

“In line with mutual strategic interests of the European Border and Coast Guard and the Western Balkan Partners towards one another, we pledge to strengthen our cooperation through intensified dialogue and joint initiatives (...)”

JOINT CONCLUSIONS FROM THE HIGH-LEVEL MEETING
BETWEEN THE FRONTEX MANAGEMENT BOARD AND
THE WESTERN BALKAN PARTNERS, 16 NOVEMBER 2021

ALBANIA

Frontex and the authorities of Albania cooperate in all areas of our Agency's mandate, from risk analysis to joint operations. On 1 May 2019, the Status Agreement between the EU and Albania entered into force, leading to the launch of the first fully-fledged Frontex Joint Operation on the territory of a non-EU country – the JO Flexible Operational Activities Western Balkans (JO FOA WB) in Albania. The joint operation in Albania has been successful in delivering enhanced cooperation among all stakeholders. The challenges in this new operational area were successfully overcome and the joint operation is firmly established today. Frontex received the full support of the Albanian authorities in setting up the coordination structure and creating good working conditions. Following the successful implementation of operational activities at the land borders of Albania, on 24 March 2021 Frontex also launched the first fully-fledged joint operation at Albanian maritime borders.

In response to intensity and variety of activities between the Agency and the Western Balkan partners, after receiving approval from its Management Board Frontex deployed in 2021 a second Liaison Officer to the region. While located in Tirana and the FLO facilitates cooperation with Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia.



Launch of the first Joint Operation in the Western Balkans in Tirana, Albania

The Security Academy in Tirana became the first Western Balkan associate partner of Frontex Partnership Academies Network in January 2018. Being a member of the Partnership Academies network familiarises the Albanian authorities with the working practice of other partnership academies, paving the way for the development of cooperation in the field of border and coast guard training; it also allows Albania to fully benefit from the targeted training offer. Following the entry into force of the EU Status Agreement, in May 2019, Albania is the first Western Balkan country to participate in the training courses for Border Surveillance Officers for land operations and Frontex



A people smuggling ring was dismantled thanks to cooperation between Albanian authorities and Frontex

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Similarly to other partners of the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a working arrangement in 2009 with Frontex, which enabled both to gradually explore new ways of engagement.

At the request of the European Commission in 2018, Frontex has assessed the “financial resources for the implementation of the Emergency Measures Action Plan to Combat Illegal Migration”, put forward by the Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities in the context of the increased migratory pressure at Bosnia and Herzegovina borders. The Emergency Action Plan was developed and included a set of proposed measures to be urgently adopted to strengthen irregular migration management and border control. As an immediate action to increase the registration capacity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in the locations identified as most critical from the perspective of the migratory pressure and existing infrastructure, Frontex assessed that it can directly support Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Ministry of Security through purchase and



Maritime operation in Montenegro

delivery of 10 LiveScan mobile fingerprinting devices and corresponding SPID licences by means of EU-funded IPA II Project “Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management in the Western Balkans and Turkey”, Phase II. The official handover of registration devices took place on the margins of the International Border Police Conference, organised by Frontex in 2019.

KOSOVO

The cooperation with Kosovo has been formalised in 2016, when the working arrangement was signed. While initial cooperation was mainly in the field of risk analysis, the signing of the working arrangement allowed Frontex and the Kosovo authorities to cooperate more intensively in other areas, including training or research and innovation.

Kosovo is an active participant of EU-funded IPA II Project “Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management in the Western Balkans and Turkey”. Throughout the implementation period of the project, Kosovo participated in nearly 30 training sessions with 130 officers attending.

MONTENEGRO

The cooperation with Montenegro has been developing since the signature of the Working Arrangement in 2009. More recently, Montenegro and Frontex have tightened their relations particularly in joint operations, interoperability of the systems and information exchange.

With the entry into force of the Status Agreement between the European Union and Montenegro Frontex launched in July 2020 a Joint Operation with executive powers, namely JO Montenegro 2020 - Focal Point Debeli Brijeg. Overall, the JO was implemented under the unprecedented circumstances generated by the pandemic outbreak. This was possible,



JO Montenegro 2020 - Focal Point Debeli Brijeg

nonetheless, thanks to the high level of commitment and cooperation reached between the Agency, Montenegro and the participating Member States in overcoming any operational and logistical challenges and reaching the operational objectives. Following the success of the operation at the land border, in October 2020 Frontex launched activities at sea in Montenegro. The main focus of this operation is on smuggling of drugs, weapons, illicit or excise goods and stolen boats from the Western Balkan region toward the EU.

Based on results of a Feasibility Study conducted in 2019, a more in-depth assessment (so-called national Masterplan) for Montenegro was developed. Once operationalised, the Masterplan will enable Montenegro to upgrade its IT systems for identification and registration of mixed migration flows and connect them to EURODAC at the moment of EU accession.

In 2018, Frontex joined forces with the Romanian Border Police to support Montenegro with the establishment of a Coordination Centre. To ensure sustainability of the action, Frontex has asked for further involvement of Romania to share and showcase their own example and potentially also benefit from EU funds allocated to the development of EUROSUR.

NORTH MACEDONIA

The Working Arrangement between Frontex and the North Macedonia entered into force in 2009, marking a milestone in mutual trust building and further cooperation.

Apart from regular participation in activities related to WB-RAN, capacity building and operational cooperation, North Macedonia is one of the front-runners in development of the Masterplans. The document proposes detailed actions to be implemented in order to upgrade the country's identification and registration capabilities, while ensuring interconnectivity and interoperability of national systems with EU Information Systems with main focus on EURODAC, in line with Chapter 24 of the EU *acquis*.

SERBIA

Serbia has been a recognised partner for Frontex, particularly since signature of the Working Arrangement in 2009.

Serbia is the third country in the Western Balkans to host a fully-fledged Frontex operation with officers from European Border and Coast Guard helping to detect criminal activities such as people smuggling, trafficking in human beings, document fraud and smuggling of stolen vehicles, illegal drugs, weapons and excise goods, as well as potential terrorist threats. Joint Operation Serbia – Land is taking place at Serbia's border with Bulgaria.

As part of the Agency's strategy to further strengthen the cooperation with countries outside the EU and following Frontex Management Board approval, Serbia was a destination to deploy the first Frontex liaison officer in the Western Balkans, who took up her duties in 2017. She is based in Belgrade and covers three countries of the region, i.e. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia.



Officers deployed to the Joint Operation Serbia – Land

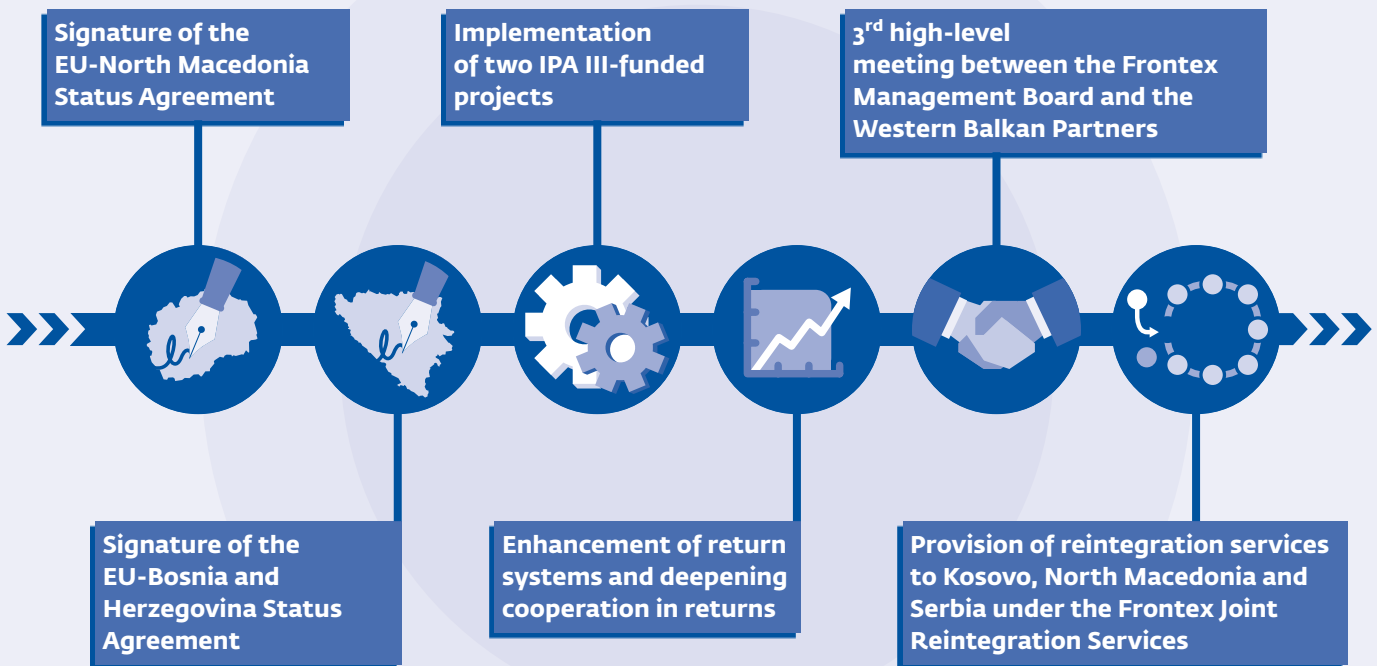


Outlook into the future

"An investment in the future of the Western Balkans is an investment in the future of the EU."

URSULA VON DER LEYEN,

PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2021 STATE OF THE UNION







European Border
and Coast Guard Agency
Plac Europejski 6, 00-124
Warsaw, Poland

T +48 22 205 95 00
F +48 22 205 95 01
frontex@frontex.europa.eu
www.frontex.europa.eu

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