

Salzburg Forum Ministerial Conference

25-26 June 2024

Laxenburg, Austria

JOINT DECLARATION

of the Ministers of the Salzburg Forum

Upon invitation of the Austrian Salzburg Forum Chairmanship, the Salzburg Forum Ministerial Conference took place in Laxenburg, Austria, on 25 and 26 June 2024.

The Ministers of the Interior and representatives of the Salzburg Forum Member States (hereinafter the Ministers) hereby adopt this Joint Declaration, in the presence of observing participants, which builds on previous Salzburg Forum declarations and the European Council conclusions of March 2024, February 2023 and June 2018.

The Ministers participated in the presence of the European Commission, Europol, the European Border and Coast Guard (Frontex) and the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) in a joint Working Session to discuss current challenges and define priorities for the new legislative cycle. In this context, the Ministers highlighted their fundamental objectives of ensuring the safety and freedom of movement of their citizens, upholding social cohesion, and maintaining citizens' trust in institutions.

The Ministers agreed that their respective states and the entire Area of Freedom, Security and Justice are facing challenges due to security threats resulting from inter alia Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, an instable security environment in the EU's neighbourhood, mixed migration flows as well as terrorism and organised crime.

In response to these continuous security threats, the Ministers commit to strengthening the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice and to insisting on the necessity to significantly reduce migratory pressure on the EU and an increase in European border security as part of the EU Strategic Agenda and the programme of the new European Commission.

The Ministers recognize the importance of the regional cooperation initiatives to address cross-border challenges such as migrant smuggling, human trafficking and border protection. More regional initiatives in line with the „whole-of-route“ approach between the Member States authorities are welcomed to guarantee the security in the Schengen area.

Migration – moving forward and doing better with new approaches

The previous legislative period has seen important developments in the internal and external dimension of the EU migration architecture. The **Pact on Migration and Asylum** (hereinafter the Pact) will determine the future actions of the European Union. The Ministers call on the European Commission to make available the necessary funding to support Member States to be able to cover their respective costs related to migration. The Ministers are committed to maintain the momentum at European level in this regard as well as to further develop measures to combat illegal migration, people smuggling as well as the

instrumentalization of migration. Further, the Ministers see the need to pursue **new approaches and innovative solutions**, including the implementation of pilot projects as well as comprehensive cooperation with third countries along the migration routes, while avoiding generating push and pull factors. To this end, the evaluation of the connection criterion by the European Commission is eagerly awaited, as an important aspect of effective partnerships with third countries.

In the area of **return** the Ministers commit to the objective of conducting returns in an effective manner. This requires progress both on the internal and external dimensions focusing on existing obstacles such as providing for effective solutions to prevent absconding, as well as ensuring the compliance and enhanced international cooperation in return and readmission. Moreover, a new, more efficient and strategic handling of return policy is needed while making best use of all policies and other possibilities to ensure effective returns, including taking the work forward on the recast Return Directive and continue exploring the mutual recognition of return decisions. On this occasion, the Ministers recall the need for continuous support by the European Commission, in particular the EU Return Coordinator, and the EU agencies to implement Member States' policies. At the same time, the Ministers call for ensuring adequate support for Frontex return capacities. The Ministers see the need for the EUAA to continue following closely the situation in Syria and to review its country guidance on Syria accordingly.

Challenges in national asylum and reception systems remain an area of concern. Some states face challenges regarding the uneven number of asylum seekers as well as persons granted temporary and international protection on their states' territory, which could be addressed with a residency requirement linked to receiving allowances and benefits.

The Ministers emphasize the necessity for further measures in reaction to the volatile situation at the Eastern border, particularly with a view to protecting the external border from **hybrid attacks** such as the **instrumentalization** of migration. EU Member States commit to further develop their means of responding to hybrid threats and call on the European Commission to support Member States in these efforts, in particular through sufficient financial support. Furthermore, the Ministers recall the need to be prepared to the ever-present potential of a further escalation of the war in Ukraine, leading to an influx of displaced Ukrainians.

The Ministers also recognize the constant high migratory pressures along all **migration routes** towards the EU, while taking note of the significant importance of developments along the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan route. The Ministers recall the importance of **cooperation with Türkiye** on migration issues, including the EU-Türkiye Statement and call on its revitalized and full implementation, also focusing on the transfer arrangements. The Ministers welcome the conclusion of new arrangements on EU-level with other third countries, such as the EU-Tunisia MoU or the Joint Declarations of the EU and Egypt and Mauritania, and call for similar partnerships to be developed also with other relevant partner countries. As a complementary measure, the Ministers highlight the usefulness of targeted information and awareness raising campaigns on illegal migration along the routes. Furthermore, the Ministers highlight the importance of providing protection in the region, aiming to ensure and enhance protection as well as along the migration routes, in accordance with legally binding international instruments.

The Ministers commit to take targeted action along the Western Balkans route in line with the **EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans** of December 2022. The Ministers request the European Commission to align enlargement funding more closely to migration- and security-related objectives, in order to achieve structural reforms, within the enlargement process, including envisaged proper funding. Priorities should include the strengthening of appropriate activities in the area of migration, enhancing institutional

capacities in the areas of border management, fight against migrant smuggling, asylum, reception, registration, and return, as well as the alignment of visa policies and practices.

The Ministers also express their concern regarding the continuing use of constantly-changing (air) routes for illegal migration to the EU. In addition to the continuation of alignment of divergences with the EU **visa** acquis, based on risk analysis, the Ministers therefore call for the implementation of appropriate safeguards along the (air) routes, from third countries, such as advanced information exchange, preboarding, documents experts and second line checks to prevent unauthorized entries, which then lead to illegal onward migration.

In this context, the importance to swiftly advance on the revision of the **Visa Suspension Mechanism** must be highlighted. In the same vein, the Ministers welcome the EU debates on the future of visa policy that must become a truly strategic instrument that takes fully into account interests of home affairs community.

The Ministers underline the importance of the **Joint Coordination Platform**, which is implementing tailored individual activities with its partners and, together with EU partners and other stakeholders, regional projects including the Western Balkans Return Mechanism.

The Ministers recall the importance of the full implementation of the Regulation on the European Border and Coast Guard and ensure an effective **European Integrated Border Management**. In this regard, they also call on the European Commission to explore possibilities for **Frontex** to ensure adequate operational support in the Western Balkans region in organizing return operations to other third countries and urge swift progress in concluding and implementing the new-generation Frontex status agreements with all Western Balkans countries. In this regard, they call on the European Commission to also explore possibilities for Frontex to provide operational support to other third countries in organizing return operations and in concluding status agreements with other key countries of origin and transit.

Combatting criminal networks – challenges and future approaches

Criminal networks pose an increasing risk to the stability and security in Europe. It is therefore important to recognize their different shapes and forms and to take action against them. The Ministers acknowledge the important work of EUROPOL in continuously identifying the most threatening criminal networks.

The Ministers highlight the role of **EMPACT** as the main EU platform for joint efforts against serious and organized crime. Its added value for the operational police cooperation has been proved and EMPACT should be further used in the most effective manner. Therefore, the Ministers invite the Commission to further explore the possibilities to provide additional financing for operational actions within EMPACT, taking into account that the discussion on this topic has already started within the independent evaluation study of the EMPACT cycle 2022-2025.

The Ministers agree that the police cooperation package offers a major upgrade of the tools available to improve cross-border operations, thus boosting the prevention, detection and investigation of criminal offences in the EU. Therefore they confirm their commitment to fully implement the **cross-border police cooperation tools** provided by the Council Recommendation 2022/915 on operational law enforcement cooperation, the Directive 2023/977 on information exchange and the Regulation (EU) 2024/982 (Prüm II Regulation).

In the area of migrant smuggling, the Ministers acknowledge the **results of the Expert Meeting on Migrant Smuggling** on the necessity to strengthen the role of EUROPOL. The Ministers recognize the importance

of Operational Task Forces, such as the OTFs ZeBRa and Iter, implemented in a flexible way, and call for the broadening of operational participation of Member States and Western Balkans countries in these efforts. In order to enable EUROPOL to provide effective tools to support EU Member States in the fight against migrant smuggling, it is crucial to strengthen the agency's financial, personnel and operative capacities. This was also emphasized in the joint letter of all the Ministers of the Interior of the Salzburg Forum Member States sent to the European Commission and the European Parliament in January 2024. Furthermore, **information exchange** relating to criminal offences on migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings should be improved between EU Member States and EU agencies. The EUROPOL GLOBE KEEPER application constitutes an important step in this direction and should be used to the maximum extent as well as further developed. The Ministers underline the importance of further strengthening the 24/7 network of the operational anti-migrant smuggling units, the Rapid Response Mechanism for real time information exchange as well as the coordination of resources for on the spot investigations including in third countries. The supportive role of the Joint Operational Office (JOO) in Vienna in this regard is acknowledged.

Not only human, but also **arms smuggling** is one of the main challenges in combatting criminal networks. These networks are very likely to be armed (in particular migrant smuggling networks) resulting in significant violence against the police as well as society as a whole. The Ministers therefore call on the European Commission to monitor this topic and keep it on its agenda, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine.

A major challenge at the EU's external borders is **checking security seals on trucks**. Criminal networks systematically seal "incorrectly". As inspections of these sealings are in the competence of customs, police authorities are often not aware of criminal acts behind these false sealings and if so, then only by chance. Focusing on this area should be one of the main future approaches to tackle criminal networks in the context of migrant smuggling. In this regard, the Ministers highlight the importance of intensive exchanges between customs and law enforcement authorities of the EU Member States, about existing trends in this area, through existing channels (e.g. SIENA, CRMS) in order to spread information about the type of risk more quickly.

Combating drug trafficking remains one of the most challenging tasks. EU Member States and countries along the Danube are also affected. The immense number of daily shipments by water, the relevant legal framework, especially the free movement of goods and transit regulations, as well as corruption are factors posing major challenges for authorities in performing risk assessments and control measures. In order to respond to these challenges, the Ministers support the continuation and expansion of the **European Port Alliance**.

"Lessons learned" from **public-private partnerships** are also applicable to other potential transport areas used for smuggling (e.g. railroad or goods transportation). **Land transportation routes** as well as **postal and courier services** demand attention as an increasing number of drug and precursor shipments are flowing via these routes. Therefore, the Ministers highlight the importance of intensive exchanges between customs and law enforcement authorities of the EU Member States and EU agencies, and where relevant, between customs and law enforcement authorities of the EU member states and relevant third

countries. Additionally, the Ministers call upon the European Commission to promote networking with and awareness raising within shipping companies and postal courier services¹.

In the area of **juvenile delinquency** Ministers recognize worrying developments and see combating juvenile delinquency as a priority in the Salzburg Forum Member States. Vulnerable minors and young individuals are often coerced and abused by some of the most threatening criminal networks. This phenomenon must be tackled head-on and minors protected with preventative measures. The European Commission is asked to recognize juvenile delinquency as a priority.

In the fight against criminal networks regional focus should be placed on Western Balkan partners. While important progress has already been achieved, further intensified efforts are required. The European Commission is invited to develop a European Action Plan as part of which **gaps in the mandates of the EU agencies** hindering cooperation with Western Balkan partners should be identified. Reacting to security challenges in a swift manner is of crucial importance and therefore the European Commission, EU agencies and other relevant institutions are asked for their support in providing Situation Maps. Predominantly, intensified cooperation and continued dialogue between the EU agencies Frontex, EUAA and Europol is essential for the fight against criminal networks in general and in the Western Balkan region.

Through coordinated and sustained efforts of the Salzburg Forum Member States and their Group of Friends from the Western Balkans, supported by relevant EU partners, institutions and agencies, cooperation in combating criminal networks could become a best practice model for joint efforts in the fight against current challenges.

Countering Radicalization and Extremism

It remains paramount that individuals, groups, movements and their supporters that are hostile to **democracy and fundamental rights** do not have any place in the EU and its Member States. Combatting radicalization, terrorism, violent extremism and anti-democratic tendencies preventively and sustainably online and offline, and to provide EU Member States with sufficient means in this regard is of utmost importance. EU Member States should foster exchange of information and best practices in order to be able to act effectively and transnationally against these movements. The Ministers therefore invite the European Commission to keep this topic high on the political and technical agenda.

In this context, the Ministers underline the importance of tackling foreign information manipulation and interference, and of the fight against disinformation and hate speech. In particular, the rise in anti-Semitic sentiments and attacks must be effectively and swiftly countered and the security of Jewish life in Europe guaranteed.

The “No place for hate: a Europe united against hatred” initiative adopted by the European Commission and the High Representative on 6 December 2023 is supported by the Ministers and further steps have to be taken accordingly.

¹ Containers are temporarily stored and therefore not cleared through customs (only at the port of destination). Police do not intervene during temporary storage, only port authorities and customs do so, if necessary. The police may intervene at the port of destination, but not in every case.

Identification of future possibilities to maintain security and stability – Digitalization and new Technologies

Law enforcement authorities are constantly facing **new operational challenges in the digital environment** for example the lack of surveillance options for messenger services, which require an even stronger focus to be placed by the European Union. The Ministers acknowledge the need to ensure the ability of law enforcement authorities to exercise their lawful powers, both online and offline, to protect our societies and citizens. Competent authorities should be able to **access data in a lawful manner**, in full respect of fundamental rights and the relevant data protection laws, while upholding cybersecurity. The work of the High-Level Group on Access to Data for Effective Law Enforcement and the recommendations it has prepared are an important starting point to tackle the challenges of access to data by Law Enforcement Authorities. The Ministers welcomed and supported unanimously the process leading to the 42 expert recommendations on the High-level Group on access to data for effective Law Enforcement with a view to strengthen law enforcement's ability to operate effectively in this new era. The Ministers therefore ask the European Commission to take into consideration the aforementioned recommendations in its work in this area.

The Ministers are committed to continue working towards an agreement on the proposal for a Regulation laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse online. Considering that the topic is of high importance and in order to address the increasing threats of this type of crime, it is necessary to find a long-term working solution, allowing for better protection of children in the virtual space, while at the same time guaranteeing high levels of data and privacy protection.

New technologies, for example the impact of **quantum technologies** on national security², are challenges to be aware of. These developments might be both – opportunities and risks for national security. A EUROPOL report³ emphasizes the importance of law enforcement agencies preparing for the transition to post-quantum cryptography. The Ministers agree that all available research and development opportunities should be used, and further discussion with all relevant actors should be intensified.

Overview of the Austrian Chairmanship of the Salzburg Forum

The Ministers took note of the results of the expert level meetings and the Heads of Border Police Meeting held over the past six months.

As a follow-up of the Salzburg Forum Ministerial Conference under the Slovenian Chairmanship in December 2023 and in the premise of the current Ministerial Conference, an Expert Meeting on Migrant Smuggling took place in Vienna from 3 to 4 June 2024. During this expert meeting, the important role of EUROPOL in effectively combatting migrant smuggling was emphasized, and further measures were discussed in order to submit concrete proposals, as mentioned above.

The Heads of Border Police Meeting took place from 3 to 4 April 2024 in Parndorf, Austria with a focus on the challenges the EU faces in the areas of migration, security, and cooperation in the fight against migrant smuggling. In the course of these fruitful discussions, the participants concluded that a valid exchange of

² COSI: Quantum technology: secure databases are copied by criminal networks. Quantum computers can decode.

³ Europol (2023), The Second Quantum Revolution – The impact of quantum computing and quantum technologies on law enforcement, Europol Innovation Lab observatory report, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

information and data was necessary for targeted operational measures. FRONTEX in particular, is called upon to support this initiative.

The Ministers of the Interior of the Republic of Austria, Hungary and the Republic of Serbia have decided to set up the "International Border Security Task Force" at the Migration Conference in July 2023 in Vienna. The further development of this Task Force was mentioned in the Heads of Border Police Meeting as an additional possibility for rapid and unbureaucratic cooperation.

The International Border Security Task Force serves to support border authorities of states along the Western Balkan route that are affected by illegal migration and cross-border crime. The aim is to respond quickly to migration flows, their relocation and to provide personnel, technical and institutional support to the border police in the respective states. Support for a state concerned by a high rate of migration or cross-border crime can be provided by several states and should be seen as an addition to FRONTEX operations.

The incoming Bulgarian Chairmanship of the Salzburg Forum

The Ministers welcomed the priorities of the incoming Bulgarian Chairmanship and expressed their commitment to continue working together effectively on issues of common interest in the framework of the Salzburg Forum.