

## SALZBURG FORUM MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE

23-24 October 2024

Sofia, Bulgaria

### JOINT DECLARATION

The Ministers of Interior of the Salzburg Forum Member States met on 23 and 24 October 2024 in Sofia, Bulgaria, on the occasion of the Ministerial Conference under the Bulgarian Salzburg Forum Presidency.

The conference was attended also by the respective Ministers from the Group of the Friends from the Western Balkans and the Republic of Moldova, as well as by representatives of the European Commission, Europol, Frontex, ICMPD and JCP.

Special guests of the conference were delegations from Türkiye and Kosovo\*.

The Ministers agreed on the following with regard to the main topics for discussion:

#### **Enhancing cooperation in countering migrant smuggling**

The Ministers took note of the current migratory situation, underlining that despite the decrease of the migratory pressure towards the EU since the beginning of 2024, there are significant differences between migratory routes and the high demand for and use of smuggling services continues. The specific modus operandi of migrant smuggling in cases of instrumentalised migration requires special attention.

They shared the view that this requires a response in the form of a more comprehensive approach, using the full toolbox available, including operationalisation of innovative solutions, as well as the support provided by the EU agencies, in particular Frontex and Europol, and engaging neighbouring third countries in the EU and regional cooperation initiatives.

In this context, it is crucial to finalise swiftly the adoption of the proposed *Regulation on enhancing police cooperation in relation to the prevention, detection and investigation of migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, and on enhancing Europol's support to preventing and combating such crimes*, which will improve practical means and work on other relevant legislation and initiatives to provide for a comprehensive framework against migrant smuggling for the years to come.

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

The Ministers also highlighted that common situational awareness is of utmost importance and that the role of the EU agencies to provide support to Member States in this regard should further be strengthened. It is important that the situational picture captures both the migratory routes and security challenges

The added value of the Regional whole-of-route Schengen cooperation initiative (EL, BG, RO, HU, SK, AT) was underlined, stressing that it provides an opportunity to address common challenges in a more coordinated way and to have real-time exchange of information, serves as an early warning mechanism and helps Member States to ensure a timely and well-coordinated reaction to emerging threats.

### **Addressing the most pressing challenges in the field of organised crime**

The Ministers underlined the importance of follow-the-money approach as an essential principle in tackling serious and organised crime, stressing that effective dismantling of criminal groups requires depriving them of their resources and effective preventing of their infiltration in legal economy.

The Ministers agreed that effective results could be achieved only by enhancing cooperation and synergies between law enforcement authorities, Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs), Asset Recovery offices (AROs), customs and tax authorities in conducting financial investigations. To this end, all existing cross-border cooperation platforms and tools, such as the European Multidisciplinary Platform against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), Joint Action Days, Joint Investigation Teams, the European Financial and Economic Crime Centre, Europol's Financial Intelligence Public Private Partnership, and Camden Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network, must be used to the maximum extent and in the most appropriate manner.

The Salzburg Forum Member States will strive to harmonise their approach in this area as much as possible, taking into account the specifics of national systems and sharing best practices, including successful and effective solutions taken so far.

The Ministers discussed the main challenges in addressing the digital dimension of organised crime, stressing the evolving knowledge and level of exploitation of modern technologies by organised crime groups. The discussion focused on new global trends requiring an adequate response, such as cryptocurrencies, tracing of digital assets, huge financial markets and investments behind them. The Ministers stressed the necessity to provide law enforcement authorities with appropriate tools, including access to digital data as an increasingly relevant aspect of criminal investigations. The Ministers also outlined the need to enhance the technical and analytical support to Member States investigations and to organise basic and advanced trainings for the practitioners, thus providing law enforcement authorities with the necessary tools for an effective response to current challenges.

Furthermore, the Ministers exchanged views on strengthening Europol's role in addressing the latest trends and developments related to the abovementioned challenges in the field of organised crime. There is a shared understanding that Europol should be provided with additional resources, in order to improve its capabilities for operational support to Member States operations and investigations.

In this context, it is important to recall the letter of the Salzburg Forum Ministers of 25 January 2024, addressed to the EU Commission and European Parliament stressing that the political ambition to fight organised crime should be matched with an adequate increase in human and financial resources for Europol and the Member States.

### **Applying whole-of-route approach in countering migrant smuggling**

Giving a comprehensive response to the pressing challenge of migrant smuggling was discussed also in extended format with the Ministers from the Group of the Friends of the Salzburg Forum from the Western Balkans and Moldova, and the special guests from Türkiye and Kosovo\*.

The Ministers agreed that a coordinated and multi-layered approach is of vital importance, encompassing bilateral and regional cooperation, return related initiatives, as well as coordination among border and law enforcement authorities across the EU, its Member States and the Western Balkans.

In this context, the Ministers stressed the need to streamline the joint activities, coordinated by Europol and Frontex, and the different initiatives on bilateral and regional level, in order to capture both new trends along migratory routes and emerging security challenges, as well as to plan and implement efficient joint measures. It is equally important to have tools, which can link the perspectives and the available information obtained from different channels, in order to have the most comprehensive approach.

The Ministers appreciated platforms and projects, such as the actions under EMPACT priority Migrant Smuggling, Brdo Process, JOO, JCP, WBRM, and highlighted that it is crucial to ensure synergies between the various initiatives, to avoid overlapping and optimise the use of resources, in order to better anticipate and address emerging threats.

### **Overview of the Bulgarian Salzburg Forum Presidency**

The Ministers took note of the upcoming events to be held by the Bulgarian Presidency of the Salzburg Forum - meeting of the Border Police chiefs on 6-8 November 2024 and meeting of the heads of anti-smuggling units on 27-28 November 2024. Both meetings will be organised in extended format and will elaborate in detail on further steps for enhancing cooperation in countering migrant smuggling, based on the current discussion of the Ministers.

### **Upcoming Croatian Salzburg Forum Presidency**

The Ministers welcomed the priorities of the upcoming Croatian Presidency and expressed their will to continue the fruitful cooperation on issues of mutual interest in the framework of the Salzburg Forum.

*Sofia, 23 October 2024*