

Salzburg Forum Ministerial Conference

17-18 June 2025

Zagreb, Croatia

Joint Declaration

The Ministers of the Interior of the Salzburg Forum Member States met on 17 and 18 June 2025 in Zagreb, on the occasion of the Ministerial Conference under the Croatian Salzburg Forum Presidency. The Ministerial Conference was also attended by the respective Ministers from the Group of Friends of the Salzburg Forum from the Western Balkans countries, as well as by the representatives of the European Commission, Europol and Frontex.

In the light of the complex geopolitical situation and the growing challenges posed by irregular migration and cross-border security threats from organised crime groups, the Ministers of the Interior of the Salzburg Forum Member States agreed on the following regarding the discussion topics:

Implementation of measures linked to migration and asylum and the *ProtectEU* Strategy

Recalling the forward-looking vision of the JHA Strategic guidelines for addressing persisting and future challenges, the Ministers recognised the need for a coordinated, decisive and joint approach in response to the shared challenge of migratory pressures on the EU external borders and asylum capacities of the EU Member States. They agreed on the importance of the uncompromising protection of the external EU borders, achieved by combating irregular border crossings and the smuggling networks that facilitate them, ensuring that international protection is granted to those who truly need it, and securing efficient and swift returns to the countries of origin of those who do not have the right to remain in the territory of the EU Member States.

The Ministers exchanged experiences from their respective countries and highlighted that the said objectives require adequate resources, including infrastructure, human and technical resources, and the digitalisation of work processes.

The Ministers agreed that ensuring sufficient financial resources in the future Multiannual Financial Framework is essential in the coming years. They supported the simplification of the rules for allocating EU financial means and ensuring an adequate level of procedural flexibility within the framework of JHA funds, *inter alia*, to enable EU Member States to respond adequately to sudden changes in migratory trends and security threats in a situation of changing geopolitical circumstances. Actions within the external dimension of migration should also be

supported by appropriate EU financial instruments, with priority given to projects contributing to reducing irregular migration and strengthening the capacities of partner countries. An appropriate degree of autonomy of the JHA funds in relation to the other financial instruments of the future Multiannual Financial Framework was also supported by the Ministers.

While emphasizing the national competences of the Member States in ensuring the efficient operational management of the external EU borders, the Ministers recognised the important role of JHA agencies in providing support to EU Member States in their response to migration and security challenges. They also agreed on the importance of providing these Agencies with adequate financial resources within the framework of the new EU budgetary perspective.

Considering the planned extension of the Europol's mandate, and Frontex's potential future mandate regarding the implementation of returns from third countries, the Ministers called for substantial impact assessments preceding their publications.

The Ministers welcomed the submission of the Commission proposals for a new Return Regulation, and are looking forward to further discussion on the Regulation establishing an EU common list of safe countries of origin as well as on the revision of the safe third countries concept and called for further legislative work. In this context, the importance of cooperation through strategic partnerships with third countries of origin and transit as well as continued work on innovative solutions was emphasised. This cooperation should focus on eliminating the root causes and drivers of irregular migration such as combatting smuggling, increasing the returns, readmissions and reintegration in accordance with international obligations, taking into account responsible use of legal migration pathways in line with national competencies.

Given that, in addition to irregular migration, the European Union is faced with numerous other security challenges, the Ministers welcomed the recent launch of the new European Internal Security Strategy: *ProtectEU* as an important step towards strengthening the European Union's ability to anticipate and combat new and complex security threats.

They welcomed the fact that the Strategy places a greater emphasis on establishing capacities for an effective risk recognition in order to anticipate potential security threats more effectively, as well as on the consistent and more effective exchange of information.

The Ministers identified potential terrorist threats, access to data for law enforcement, hybrid threats, and the activities of organised crime groups involved in the smuggling of migrants, drugs and firearms as key challenges on which law enforcement authorities need to focus on in the coming period.

In the context of the war in Ukraine and an increasingly volatile security landscape, the challenges posed by cyber and hybrid threats, as well as the instrumentalisation of migration and unconventional threats are becoming increasingly prevalent. In that context, the Ministers recognised particular importance of investing additional efforts for the protection of the critical infrastructure of the Member States.

Bearing in mind the essential role of the JHA Agencies in addressing these challenges, the Ministers recognised the importance of strengthening Europol's capacities to support Member States in responding to new threats. They also agreed on the need for the optimal use of capacities and enhancing quality of training of the Frontex standing corps in order to increase the efficiency of the return policy and the fight against irregular migration along all migratory routes.

Combating Environmental Crime

The Ministers recognized environmental crime as a serious threat, not only to ecosystems and public health, but also to economic development and national security of the EU Member States. They stressed that this form of crime is often transnational and strongly connected to organised crime groups, economic crime, and corruption.

Insufficient operational capacities in combatting environmental crime as well as differences in national criminal justice frameworks were highlighted as a particular challenge. For this reason, the likelihood of being prosecuted for environmental crimes is relatively low. This, together with high profitability, contributes to the attractiveness of committing these crimes.

The Ministers agreed that solving this challenge must be addressed more decisively and underlined the importance of coordinated activities at EU level and closer cooperation of Member States' law enforcement authorities.

In this respect, they called for the environmental crime to be appropriately addressed in the strategic documents of the EU and for the EU Environmental Crime Directive to be promptly transposed into the national legislation of Member States.

Moreover, the need to strengthen operational cooperation and data exchange with Europol and Eurojust in tackling environmental crimes, as well as the exchange of good practices between Member States was also emphasised.

In that sense, the Ministers agreed on the importance of supporting the seven EMPACT priority areas for the period 2026-2029. Having in mind its devastating effect on the environment, human health and economies, they prioritised the tackling of environmental crimes, as well as criminal networks with a capability to infiltrate legal business structure or to set up their own companies or similar organisational structures as a mean to facilitate unlawful activities.

Lastly, the Ministers called for making additional efforts and ensuring financial resources in the new Multiannual Financial Framework for the training of law enforcement authorities, state attorneys, judges, and forensic experts for the purposes of combating environmental crime. Member States should also consider creating special law enforcement units or otherwise ensuring adequate tools and resources for law enforcement authorities to effectively enforce the law.

Cross-border cooperation on tackling irregular migration and organised crime

Even though a decrease in the number of illegal border crossings has been lately recorded, the Western Balkans migratory route is still one of the most active routes for migrants to reach the European Union. The deterioration of the current situation on the eastern borders and in the Middle East may have an additional negative impact both on the Western Balkans and the European Union.

For this reason, the Ministers of the Salzburg Forum Member States discussed the matter of cross-border cooperation in the fight against irregular migration and organised crime in extended format with the Ministers from the Group of Friends of the Salzburg Forum from the Western Balkans countries.

The Ministers confirmed that the partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans countries in tackling irregular migration and organised crime networks, including through both cooperation with central and regional authorities, is key to strengthening stability and security and that it contributes to meeting the preconditions for candidate countries to join the European Union.

The importance of effective border protection along the Western Balkans route through strengthening cross-border cooperation was highlighted in particular. In this context, the Ministers welcomed the trilateral joint patrols of the Croatian, Slovenian, and Italian police on the external border between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the joint patrols of Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania on the external border between Bulgaria and Türkiye, which the Hellenic police also joined at the end of May.

The Ministers recognised the status agreements between the Western Balkans countries and Frontex as particularly useful and called for a targeted deployment of Frontex standing corps to the locations under increased migratory pressure. Equally, the Ministers recognised the importance of addressing the digital dimensions of migrant smuggling, encompassing preventive measures, responsive strategies and international collaborative efforts, stressing initiatives such as the Europol-led DigiNex.

The Ministers agreed that the organised networks for migrant smuggling in the Western Balkans are a growing challenge and expressed their concern over the increasingly brutal methods of smuggling networks that put the lives of migrants and police officers protecting the border in danger for their own profit. The Ministers acknowledged the increasing presence and use of illegal firearms among smugglers and migrants as a particular security challenge.

For this reason, they expressed their full support to additional strengthening of cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans countries within the framework of EMPACT activities aimed at combating migrant smuggling, and through joint investigation teams and operational task forces supported by Europol such as ZeBRa and ITER. Moreover, the Ministers recognised the great added value of active participation in the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling, launched by the European Commission in November 2023.

Since up to 50% of irregular migrants in certain Member States came to the Western Balkans first by misusing visa-free regimes, it was reiterated how important it is to fully harmonise the visa regimes of the Western Balkans countries with the visa policy of the EU as soon as possible.

The Ministers also recognised the activity of organised crime networks involved in smuggling and illegal drug trade as a prominent challenge in the Western Balkans and called for the strengthening of operational capacities for addressing this form of crime as well as for the exchange of operational information between national law enforcement authorities and Europol.

Acknowledging all of the aforementioned challenges, the Ministers expressed their readiness for continued partnership between the European Union and the Western Balkans through consistent implementation of the EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans and called on the European Commission to monitor its implementation.

Overview of the Croatian Presidency of the Salzburg Forum

The Ministers took note of the information on the operational meeting of border police chiefs held in Solin on 7 and 8 May and the meeting of the Salzburg Forum Member States Working Group on Witness Protection held in Šibenik from 20 to 22 May and their conclusions.

Incoming Czech Presidency of the Salzburg Forum

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

Zagreb, 17 June 2025