

MANAGING THE REFUGEE CRISIS

WESTERN BALKANS ROUTE: PROGRESS REPORT



On 25 October, President Juncker convened a Leaders Meeting on refugee flows along the Western Balkans route to address the unfolding emergency situation. The objective was to improve cooperation, step up consultation between the countries along the route and take pragmatic operational measures to tackle the refugee crisis. Leaders representing Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia agreed on a **17-point Action Plan**.

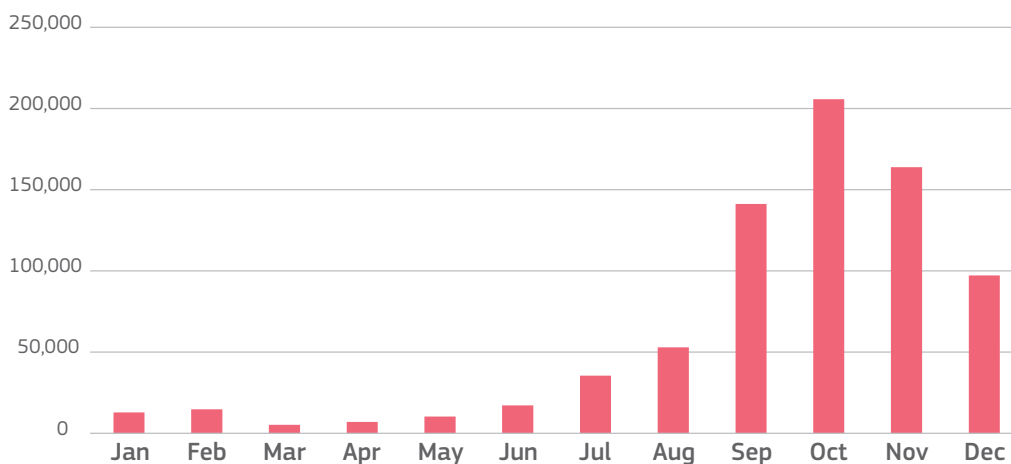
By the end of October, nearly 700,000 people had travelled along the Western Balkans route from Greece to Central Europe. By end of December, the figure stood at 760,000.

Weekly meetings organised by the Commission have taken place to monitor the 17-point plan agreed at the Leaders' Meeting hosted by President Juncker on refugee flows along the Western Balkans route.

At a time when communications had all but broken down, this coordination has been crucial in reducing the risk of unexpected steps being taken in one country having an impact on another. This has been backed up with direct support.



THE WESTERN BALKANS ROUTE DETECTIONS OF ILLEGAL BORDER-CROSSING IN 2015



INFORMATION EXCHANGE AND COORDINATION

What has been done

- All participating countries, institutions and agencies nominated contact points
- Weekly high-level videoconferences held among these to share information and report on progress
- Daily reports on migration flows shared by Frontex with data provided by all countries on the route
- Increased bilateral and multilateral contacts in the region
- Comprehensive exchange of information between police chiefs on policies and practices at the borders
- Increased cooperation and communication between border authorities
- Needs assessments submitted by most countries, initial assessments and on-the-spot missions carried out by the Commission
- Identification of possible EU funding for the reported longer term gaps and emergency

What remains to be done

- Cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkan route remains insufficient
- Ensure prior notification to partners about policies or measures which impact them
- Avoid unilateral measures including de facto nationality -and destination- based entry conditions and fence constructions



RECEPTION CAPACITY

What has been done

- Commitment by Leaders to provide 50,000 reception places in Greece and 50,000 along the route
- Launch of the UNHCR rental scheme for 20,000 reception places in Greece through Commission financing of €80 million of which 14,950 have already been made available by the UNHCR and a further 7,000 places in the hotspots through a rent subsidy scheme
- Increased reception capacity provided by several countries along the route
- Extensive EU financial support to all countries along the route to help increase capacity
- Activation of Civil Protection Mechanism by Greece and Croatia
- Establishment of a network of International Financial Institutions to coordinate support
- 14 European Investment Bank projects have been adapted to respond to migration related demands, as well as a Council of Europe Bank grant agreement worth €13.2 million.

What remains to be done

- Improve and expand longer-term reception capacities to slow down the flows
- Reach the 50,000 reception capacity target in Greece.
- Commit the remaining places along the route to reach the 50,000 target
- Develop medium- and long term responses as regards financial support by International Financial Institutions
- Commit to increase reception capacity for stays of more than 24 hours along the route
- Member States to meet requests for assistance under the Civil Protection Mechanism
- Member States to apply relevant EU rules as regards the limiting of secondary movement
- Encourage Frontex to support the relevant countries with further developing their operational capacity to apprehend, register, identify and return irregular migrants who are not in need of international protection



BORDER MANAGEMENT

What has been done

- Deployment of a Rapid Border Intervention Team (Joint Operation Poseidon-Rapid Intervention) in the Aegean Sea on the request of Greece
- Joint operation agreed by Greece and Frontex at the border to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
- Bilateral support by a number of countries and by Frontex to enhanced surveillance activity at the border between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece
- Over 200 guest police officers sent to Slovenia to help with border management
- Frontex operations under way at Bulgaria-Turkey border
- Request for Frontex assistance by Croatia
- Strengthening of the Frontex Western Balkans Risk Analysis Network
- Start of implementation of the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan
- EU support for return and voluntary return programmes
- High-level dialogues and Joint Readmission Committees with third countries, including Turkey and Pakistan

What remains to be done

- All Western Balkan Countries to move to the restoration of the full application of EU and international law
- Reduce bottlenecks and prepare for potential build-up of stranded people in border areas
- Improve cooperation at the Greece-former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia border
- Any complementary assistance to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to be taken within an EU framework
- Step up return operations and overcome obstacles to effective readmission including by Pakistan
- Ensure the opportunity to apply for international protection whenever a person irregularly crosses a border, and provide for systematic registration of persons by all countries along the route;
- Ensure that the Member State of first entry grants access to national asylum procedures, as required by international and European law



1,000 winterised tents and 8,900 blankets from the UK are delivered to Greece under the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.

The EU Civil Protection Mechanism has been used to support 5 countries, with 4 requests still active, from Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Greece. In total, 15 countries have made offers of assistance, supplying items such as tents, sleeping materials, personal protective items, heaters, generators and lighting.

HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT AND FIGHT AGAINST MIGRANT SMUGGLING AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

What has been done

- Civil Protection Mechanism (CPM) triggered by Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia and Greece
- Task force on communication launched to provide information to migrants
- Information products on asylum and relocation available in 14 languages and being used by EASO including in hotspots
- Large scale operations against migrant smuggling and human trafficking supported by Europol and Member States
- European Migrant Smuggling Centre to be set up by Europol in February 2016 to fight smugglers and traffickers
- Conclusion of a memorandum of understanding between Europol and Frontex to allow for the exchange of personal data

What remains to be done

- Member States to pledge the resources requested under the CPM – eg bedding, accommodation, clothing, heating and medical equipment
- Improve communication to migrants on EU asylum rules
- Increase information sharing with Europol on migrant smuggling as well as on stolen and forged documents
- Systematic checks by Member States of all travel documents at borders and checks against the Interpol Stolen and Lost Document database and the Schengen Information System
- Member States to provide Europol with investigative data on forged documents
- Frontex to further deploy at hotspots specialised officers for the detection of document fraud

