

Brussels, 17 December 2025

Dear colleagues,

Managing migration effectively entails a balance of fairness and control, shared responsibility and solidarity among Member States, and mutually beneficial cooperation with partners beyond Europe. We have been developing this approach consistently and it has delivered results. Our ambition should be to strengthen it further.

Looking back at the past year, the number of illegal border crossings decreased further by more than a quarter compared to 2024. We have kept up our joint efforts with partners to deter irregular departures and break the business model of smugglers, as well as ensure the fast, effective and dignified return. And we need to strengthen them further as we see an increase in irregular border crossings in the Central and Western Mediterranean over the past few months.

*With only six months to go before the **Pact on Migration and Asylum** enters into application, it is time to focus on putting in place all the building blocks of our Common Implementation Plan. The decisive step of the Council to establish the first Annual Solidarity Pool puts the implementation of the solidarity mechanism on track. While progress has been steady, there is still some important work ahead as identified in the state of play presented in November: Eurodac must be ready to use, arrangements for the border procedure need to be in place, and reception capacities must be adequately ensured across all Member States. The success of the Pact hinges on ensuring the right balance between solidarity and responsibility. We will closely support Member States to make sure that the solidarity mechanism and responsibility rules are operational on time.*

*In March, the Commission had tabled proposals to **complete our legislative framework** notably on return, and the Council now has a mandate to enter negotiations with the European Parliament. On the proposals for a revised use of the 'safe third country' concept and on the first EU list of safe countries of origin, a political agreement between the European Parliament and the Council may still be found before the end of the year.*

*At last week's second **Conference of the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling**, we renewed our collective commitment to combat migrant smuggling and strengthen our international cooperation. The Joint Declaration was agreed by 58 countries and partners, setting out a common way forward. Intervening more effectively in the online dimension and applying the "follow the money" approach is crucial for enhancing our*

capacity to dismantle criminal networks. Projects such as the Global Anti-Smuggling Initiative on Digital and Illicit Financial Flows, which we recently launched with UNODC for an overall amount of EUR 15 million, or the Global Alliance Rapid Response Initiatives, to be launched soon, will deliver agile responses to sudden and emerging developments impacting migrant smuggling, and will equip us with more efficient tools. We are also working on setting up a new system of sanctions against migrant smugglers. I count on your support to be able to move as fast as possible on this for Europe to deliver a clear and effective deterrent to migrant smugglers.

Following up on the joint statement of the EU-UK Leaders' Summit in May, and in the context of the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling, we are increasing our cooperation with the United Kingdom, including by working on increasing information exchange. The rising number of migrants smuggled across the **English Channel** from France to United Kingdom calls for a robust response to tackle illegal migration and fight organised criminal groups, while doing our outmost to prevent further loss of life at sea. In this context, the pilot project agreed by France and the United Kingdom, and supported by the Commission, is useful to deter these dangerous journeys and address this challenging situation at the EU's external border.

For a well-functioning migration management system, increased effectiveness of returns is indispensable. With an average EU return rate of 24%, a stronger legal framework complemented by intensified operational measures is necessary. The proposed Regulation for a **common European system for return** will put in place key common elements such as the European Return Order, a new legal basis for the possible use of return hubs, and tightened rules for managing absconding and security cases. The implementation of the Pact with the new return border procedure will bring about a step change in our border management. However, this will need to be accompanied by the further strengthening of our comprehensive partnerships with third countries to build a system that is sustainable over time. Frontex is increasing its return operations and in September 2025, the Agency supported the return of almost 6 000 third country nationals most of which through Frontex-supported voluntary return.

Returns to politically sensitive countries, particularly to **Afghanistan**, which still faces an acute humanitarian and human rights situation, pose challenges that need to be addressed comprehensively and in a coordinated manner. We are continuing discussions, including in the High-Level Network for Returns, particularly on the handling of cases of third country nationals with criminal convictions and those posing a security risk. In close coordination with the EEAS and Frontex, Commission services have further strengthened joint efforts with Member States to advance on the issue of returns to Afghanistan, including through preparatory steps towards a possible technical-level mission early next year. As of 5 December, Frontex has extended the EU Reintegration Programme (EURP) to voluntary returns to Afghanistan.

I will visit Syria and Jordan in January. One year after Assad's downfall, **Syria** still faces significant political, security, humanitarian and development challenges. The EU supports a peaceful and inclusive, Syrian-led transition, as well as socio-economic recovery efforts

to prevent the resurgence of violence and allow for Syrians to rebuild their lives. We have substantially increased our financial support to Syria and in March, the EU hosted the Brussels IX Conference on Syria. On that occasion, the EU cemented its role as the leading donor and, together with Member States, pledged EUR 3.4 billion to address the huge humanitarian and socio-economic needs of Syria and the region.

UNHCR estimates that between December 2024 and November 2025, more than 1.2 million Syrians have returned to Syria, and more than 1.9 million internally displaced people have gone back to their place of origin. It is necessary to create the conditions for a safe, dignified and sustainable returns of refugees and internally displaced persons, and together with UNHCR we are working to support voluntary returns and sustainable reintegration of returnees. A pilot cross-border programme of EUR 80 million, signed in December, will be implemented in Lebanon and Syria to support durable solutions, including voluntary returns, for Syrians refugees and internally displaced people.

*Engagement with **Türkiye** on matters regarding migration continues as per European Council Conclusions. The Commission advocates for a full and effective implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement and the EU-Turkey readmission agreement towards all EU Member States. With the EUR 1.15 billion package adopted on 15 December, we are stepping up support to Türkiye to support essential needs for refugees and migration management, to strengthen its border management capacities and to enhance the protection response for sustainable voluntary returns to Syria. This includes a project of EUR 150 million to be implemented with UNHCR in Syria, with a component for cash assistance worth EUR 60 million. Engagement on counter-smuggling with Türkiye also continues, as well as cooperation with Turkish authorities and air carriers to address the use of commercial means of transport to facilitate illegal migration to the EU.*

*The **first EU-Jordan Summit** taking place in Amman at the beginning of January will focus on further deepening the EU-Jordan Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership. Migration, management and support to refugees is one of five key areas of common interest. In fact, under this partnership, we support Jordan with EUR 240 million over three years to provide social assistance and services to Syrian refugees, including sustainable skills development and access to durable solutions. However, UN agencies have already had to reduce their capacities in the region and the UN World Food Programmes (WFP) warns of the potential closure of refugee aid programmes in Jordan early next year, which we need to be attentive to.*

*Following the **EU-Egypt Summit** last October, we are working on deepening our comprehensive cooperation with Egypt. Work continues to agree on the allocation of the EUR 200 million for the operationalisation of the migration and mobility pillar under the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership for 2024-2027. Our support will cover all priority areas jointly identified with Egyptian authorities, including border management and anti-smuggling, protection and asylum, addressing the root causes of illegal migration, assistance to vulnerable persons and host communities, labour mobility, as well as returns and reintegration. Work on legal pathways and skills development for Egyptians is also progressing under the framework of the Talent Partnership. With the*

support of the EU and UN agencies, Egypt is working on becoming the main humanitarian hub for the region, considering its strategic location in proximity to various crisis situations.

The **Pact for the Mediterranean**, which sets out a comprehensive strategy that strengthens our relations with the Southern neighbourhood, was welcomed by partners at its launch in Barcelona at the end of November. As part of its third pillar, the Pact aims to further operationalise the external aspects of our migration policy, by addressing root causes to promote stability, enhancing preparedness and resilience of partners, supporting economic growth and creating jobs through investments. It promotes whole-of-route and rights-based approach with a view to preventing illegal migration and breaking the migrant smugglers' business model. Actions will focus on enhanced border management, improved protection of migrants in vulnerable situations, asylum seekers and refugees, as well as effective returns and readmission, sustainable reintegration, and the expansion of legal pathways, including scaling up our Talent Partnerships with Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt.

The comprehensive nature of our cooperation allows us to deter irregular departures and disincentivise dangerous journeys, while working to create beneficial opportunities for socio-economic developmentstrengthen protection-related capacity and uphold human rights. The multi-country migration programme of **EUR 675 million for the Southern Neighbourhood**, adopted this week, testifies to the EU's strong commitment to deepening cooperation with the region and supporting comprehensive migration and border management efforts.

The Central Mediterranean route remains the busiest, with almost 90% of departures originating from **Libya**. The Commission and the EEAS, together with international partners, must continue to engage with Libyan authorities and all relevant actors, with the aim of improving conditions for migrants and asylum seekers, ensuring compliance with international standards and norms, and reinforcing dialogue mechanisms, as well as pursue a strengthening of border management, fighting migrant smuggling and addressing the abuse of Libyan work visas for onward movements.

The implementation of all pillars of the Memorandum of Understanding with **Tunisia** is ongoing. Despite challenges, an open and continuous dialogue with the authorities remains essential, in a Team Europe spirit. EU support continues to focus on border management, the fight against migrant smuggling, as well as protection, legal migration and assisted voluntary returns. In 2025, IOM facilitated the voluntary return of 7 864 migrants from Tunisia to their countries of origin. Assisted voluntary returns from North African countries to countries of origin have also intensified significantly through EU-funded operations, with over 29 800 returns in 2025.

Morocco remains a key partner in our efforts to combat migrant smuggling. In addition to ongoing and new financial support, a Talent Partnership with Morocco is under way to promote mutually beneficial labour mobility. Discussions are ongoing on a strategic and

comprehensive partnership including joint efforts to enhance legal migration, fight migrant smuggling, ensure protection and support returns.

*Reinforced border controls and coordination with Mauritanian and Senegalese authorities have resulted in a reduction of 60% of irregular arrivals along the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands compared to last year. The partnership with **Mauritania** brings an element of stability to a difficult region, addressing migration management including the protection of Malian refugees, and we should reflect on upgrading it. We have been gradually stepping up our engagement and support since the Joint Declaration of March 2024. Mauritania has operationalised its first migrant transit centre for persons disembarked or rescued at sea, with a second one to follow, allowing for proper screening and assistance to disembarked migrants. Discussions with **Senegal** continue in a very constructive manner on security and migration, paving the way for a future partnership. The Sahel Strategy will provide an opportunity for targeted engagement with countries in the region to further improve the management of migration.*

*Illegal border crossings along the **Western Balkans** have almost halved this year compared to 2024. Whilst operational cooperation has improved, it remains imperative to push for the alignment of our partners' visa policies with the EU list of visa-required third countries, with particular focus on those countries whose nationals present an irregular migration or security risk to the EU.*

*Key partners, such as the **UNHCR and IOM** are facing difficult budgetary times. The UNHCR has already substantially reduced its operations in countries and regions such as Sudan, Sahel, Syria, Egypt and Afghanistan. Without both organisations' support for refugees and migrants upstream, including for the purpose of implementing innovative ways of managing migration, we may face increasingly challenging situations at our borders. The work of the UNHCR and IOM must be supported to allow them to maintain their operations in regions that are essential for the whole-of-route approach. Ongoing discussions in the Council on the **European Development Fund** are crucial in this regard, and I would strongly encourage you all to look favourably upon the proposal for the decommitment of funds so as to keep up the necessary level of financial support for the external dimension of migration.*

*On 11 November, the Commission put forward the **Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Plan for 2026–2027**, aiming to mobilise voluntary national contributions to open safe and legal pathways for those in greatest need. This comes at a time when resettlement is facing a dramatic decline globally, risking significant repercussions longer-term. By focusing on key migratory routes and allowing flexible adjustments, the Plan strengthens Europe's leadership on protection, our unity on migration management and our partnerships with countries along these routes. Swift agreement would not only ensure protection for those in need, but will also contribute to reducing irregular arrivals, reinforcing our capacity to act decisively against smugglers.*

*We are also developing tools for a fair and well-managed mobility of talent. With our **Talent Partnerships** and the agreement reached on the proposal for a Regulation*

establishing the **EU Talent Pool**, we are sending a clear signal that the EU is open to global talent. We will now start the implementation of the Talent Pool, expected to be fully operational by 2028. The EU Visa Policy Strategy, to be presented by the Commission early next year, will be accompanied by a Recommendation to make the EU more attractive for talent, facilitating the arrival of top students, researchers and skilled workers. In our efforts to attract global talent, **India** remains an important partner. Alongside the trade and investment framework that the Free Trade Agreement is expected to create, we are working on a framework of cooperation to boost mobility and support skills development. We are also working to launch the first pilot European Legal Gateway Office in India, as a coordinated instrument to attract and facilitate the mobility of Indian ICT professionals, students and researchers to the EU.

We are advancing well to strengthen EU rules on the **European Border and Coast Guard**. The Commission is in the process of gathering views, evidence and data on the current and emerging issues and challenges related to Frontex's tasks, deployments, cooperation with third countries, structure and governance. The revised rules will be based on a thorough impact assessment on how best to strengthen the standing corps so that it complements the resources of Member States, not only in terms of quantity but also quality of tasks, thereby contributing to stronger common borders in line with an integrated border management approach.

In the meantime, we cannot stand idly by in the face of the ever-increasing challenges of **instrumentalisation of migration**, posing a challenge at our external borders and undermining our Union's internal security. We are committed to doing as much as possible to support Member States in countering these threats. To this end, EUR 250 million will be made available under the Border Management and Visa Instrument to support Member States with the purchase of drones and counter-drone measures for border control to support surveillance measures.

Finally, while focusing on the coming year and the start of the full application of the Pact, we also need to set out our ideas for the next five years. At the start of the year, we will present the **EU Migration and Asylum Strategy**, as foreseen by the Pact and building on Member States' national strategies. Our aim will be to strengthen our cohesion at European level, seek innovative ways forward and assert our regional and global role on migration cooperation, including within the context of the Council of Europe.

The Annex to this letter provides a more detailed overview of ongoing actions.

Looking forward to our discussions this week.

Yours sincerely,



Ursula von der Leyen