



ADVANCING THE SKOPJE DECLARATION: ACTION PLAN FOR SUSTAINABLE MIGRATION GOVERNANCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS 2023-2025

The *Action Plan for Sustainable Migration Governance in the Western Balkans 2023-2025* contains 21 key measures that were identified as critical to advance comprehensive, sustainable and solutions-oriented approaches to effectively manage migration in the Western Balkans. This Action Plan is in line with the objectives of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and aims to support and complement existing Strategies and Actions Plans in the WB, including the EU accession pathway. While the level of progress towards achieving the key actions identified varies depending on local contexts; in principle, all the actions listed are identified as important steps to advance sustainable migration governance in the region.

Actions proposed to strengthen cooperation to address smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings (Skopje Commitment 1)

The migration situation in the Western Balkans remains complex, testing institutional capacities, particularly in the context of mainstreaming protection and combatting smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings. Migrants and asylum seekers undertaking risky journeys along the Eastern Mediterranean Route are vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse – with increased risks for minors and women. As the Western Balkans continue to experience mixed migration flows, all efforts must be made towards **leveraging risks and vulnerability analyses to improve identification of migrants in vulnerable situations and inform operational response.**

Action 1

Strengthen the protection capacities of migration authorities through use of data for risks analysis and screening, including sharing of practices on use of screening tools and route-based indicators.

Action 2

Enhance use of digital tools for detection of smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings in mixed migration flows.

Effective prevention, prosecution and protection strategies can only be achieved through partnerships, including operational and judicial cooperation, as well as rights-based and victim-centered approaches. Institutions must have the tools, knowledge and resources to enable rapid action and exchange of information. Due to the transnational, poly criminal and ever more sophisticated nature of these crimes, steps towards **enhancing cooperation mechanisms for smuggling and trafficking prosecution and victim-centered investigation** have been identified.



Action 3

Engage in capacity development for detection and investigation of smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings through rights-based, victim-centred and gender-sensitive approaches.

Action 4

Enable rapid and direct exchange of information and coordination to facilitate referrals where applicable, in line with existing relevant obligations.

Action 5

Identify sustainable solutions to overcome cultural and language barriers by improving cooperation within the region and communication with people on the move.

Actions proposed to increase access to regular pathways to harness the potential of migration (Skopje Commitment 2)

Regular pathways can sustainably address challenges related to irregular movements and help harness the benefits of migration and human mobility. The potential benefits for the Western Balkans partners include more effective and selective processes through which the rights of the persons and the interest of the receiving community can both be served. While regulatory frameworks are in place to facilitate labour mobility and help employers attract and retain workers in key sectors, administrative barriers and gaps in migration statistics or labour market analysis continue to hinder workers recruitment in the region. In this context, **adopting and implementing measures to address labour market needs through regular pathways** can positively contribute to shift regional migration dynamics.

Action 6

Increase key stakeholders' knowledge of labour migration schemes and ethical recruitment, including regularization.

Action 7

Advance knowledge on labour gaps/shortages through available data and consultations with stakeholders to define measures to attract and retain workers.

Action 8

Review regulatory frameworks and streamline procedures for employment of non-locals, including digitalization of obligatory permits procedures, with a view to facilitate recruitment and increase alignment with the EU acquis in the field of regular migration.

Action 9

Promote skills mobility partnerships that contribute to address development and labour mobility priorities for the countries of origin and mobility destination by facilitating skills anticipation, development, and recognition.



Action 10

Continue supporting pilot inclusion measures to fight discrimination and xenophobia in local communities.

Regular pathways are essential to provide alternatives to irregular migration, enhance the integrity of asylum and immigration systems, and protect migrants in situations of vulnerability. Despite the existence of regulatory provisions both at local and international level, few long-term solutions are currently accepted by stranded migrants in need of other forms of protection as an alternative to onwards movements towards Europe. **Advancing rights-based actions to expand access to regular pathways for vulnerable categories**, including unaccompanied or separated children, victims of trafficking or gender-based violence, will require effective and individualized case determination processes and optimized use of existing regulations.

Action 11

Develop capacities and promote dialogue on migration between administrative and non-administrative actors to increase awareness of regular pathways for vulnerable categories.

Action 12

Review regulatory provisions to expand availability and use of regular pathways for vulnerable categories, in alignment with EU and relevant conventions.

Action 13

Step up use of pathways and case management to improve assistance to unaccompanied and separated children, including family reunification.

Action 14

Ensure regulatory provisions, infrastructures and resources are available to provide alternatives to detention, especially for vulnerable groups, in line with international standards and EU practices.

Actions proposed to support progress towards a holistic return management approach (Skopje Commitment 3)

As mixed migration movements become an enduring feature in the Western Balkans, cooperation to facilitate the return of migrants to their countries of origin emerges as a key policy area. In the Western Balkans, concrete steps have been taken to further operationalize return processes, and to discuss regionally coherent return systems and practices as applicable. However, **consolidating rights-based and process-driven systems and procedures for effective return management frameworks** implies further actions and cooperation between Western Balkans partners.



Action 15

Work towards adopting and enforcing administrative frameworks for effective return, readmission and reintegration, aligned with EU and international standards.

Action 16

Facilitate capacity-building for rights-based return, readmission and reintegration practices and procedures, learning and building on Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) practices such as individual counselling and cultural mediation.

Action 17

Assess and adopt functional/interoperable digital solutions to facilitate effective return operations with countries of origin and the EU.

Effective return, readmission and reintegration systems are integral to sustainable migration governance. In the past few years, Western Balkans partners have reported several positive developments on return and readmission cooperation with countries of origin. However, returns continue to be complex to operationalize, requiring extensive cooperation with countries of origin, both at the political and technical level. Continued efforts towards **strengthening dialogue and cooperation with countries of origin** is therefore an important area of engagement for the Western Balkans to set-up effective return and readmission systems.

Action 18

Launch an informal learning platform on the topics of return, readmission and reintegration to be used for exchange of knowledge and capacity development among Western Balkans and other relevant partners, as applicable.

Action 19

Continue to foster cooperation on return management with key countries of origin and countries of transit and facilitate regional dialogues on return management and cooperation.

Action 20

Strengthen the role of Western Balkans administrations with the aim to improve return and readmission cooperation with countries of origin and promote dialogue on regular migration pathways.

Action 21

Broker overall cooperation for sustainable reintegration support to people in situations of vulnerability.

This Action Plan was accepted in June 2023 and presented at the third Sarajevo Migration Dialogue, co-hosted by the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU, with facilitation by IOM.