

## **JCP Ministerial Return Conference – Regional Return Mechanism, Return Partnerships**

Vienna, 21/22 February 2022

### **JOINT DECLARATION**

We, the Ministers of the Interior and Migration and representatives of the Western Balkans, the Salzburg Forum, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, France as the current Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Switzerland, in the presence of the European Commission, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), who met in Vienna on 21 and 22 February 2022 on the occasion of the "JCP Ministerial Return Conference – Regional Return Mechanism, Return Partnerships",

WELCOME the steps to operationalise the Joint Coordination Platform (JCP) since the adoption of the "Vienna Declaration" at the "Ministerial Conference on effectively combating irregular migration along the Eastern Mediterranean Route" held on 22 and 23 July 2020 in Vienna with the aim of improving the joint efforts and support in the areas of border management, return, tackling migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, and asylum,

RECALL the importance of the "Prague Declaration on Political Guidelines for the Joint Coordination Platform", which was adopted at the Salzburg Forum Ministerial Conference on 23 and 24 June 2021 in Prague,

ACKNOWLEDGES the ongoing efforts at European level to put in place an effective and common system for returns, combining both stronger structures within the EU with closer cooperation with partners outside the EU,

ENCOURAGE further efforts by the Secretariat of the Joint Coordination Platform to improve coordination and alignment of appropriate measures along the Eastern Mediterranean / Western Balkan Route and to conduct needs assessments to ensure demand and target-driven action,

UNDERLINE in view of the continuing high migratory pressure along the Eastern Mediterranean / Western Balkan Route and in neighbouring EU Member States the importance of coordinated return efforts along one of the main migration routes in Europe,

REFER in particular to the crucial central challenge of primary flows leading to secondary migration as well as to the potential increase of irregular migration, following substantial containment of the COVID-19 pandemic,

ARE DETERMINED, in accordance with international obligations, to take early and active action against irregular migration along the Eastern Mediterranean / Western Balkan Route and to take appropriate measures to curb it and prevent irregular onward migration,

ARE COMMITTED to further strengthen fast and efficient asylum procedures, including the development and use of country of origin information, enabling swift return of those not eligible for international protection,

SUPPORT the conclusions of the Brdo Process Ministerial meeting in June 2021 where Ministers signaled their willingness to further explore the possibilities of establishing a truly comprehensive return system within the region and the decision of the Salzburg Forum Ministerial Conference of 14 December 2021 under the Hungarian Presidency to continue coordination efforts within the framework of the Joint Coordination Platform with a special focus on returns from the Western Balkans,

RECALL the results of the “EU - Western Balkans Ministerial Forum on Justice and Home Affairs” held under the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU on 1 and 3 December 2021 in Brdo pri Kranju,

EMPHASIZE the necessity for effective and functioning return systems in line with international standards, as essential components of a comprehensive migration policy, as well as the requirement for safe and dignified returns of irregular migrants, not eligible for international protection, to be carried out consistently in the interests of a credible migration policy,

RECOGNISE the key role of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in providing return related capacity building support to the Western Balkans,

UNDERLINE the necessity for enhanced support in the implementation of return operations,

BUILD UPON experiences and lessons learned from the European Return and Reintegration Network,

REITERATE the added value of cooperation within the framework of the Joint Coordination Platform with the aim of ensuring the provision of needs-based support and coordinating support services.

Therefore, we, the Ministers and representatives agree:

1. to intensify cooperation within the framework of the Joint Coordination Platform and existing EU frameworks with a view to ensuring the provision of demand-oriented and targeted support in the field of return, in particular from the Western Balkans towards third countries – without neglecting all other areas of the JCP mandate – based on needs assessments by the Joint Coordination Platform;
2. to establish a Regional Return Mechanism that facilitates the rapid matching of needs and possible return assistance, promotes voluntary return and supports the implementation of non-voluntary return of migrants who are not in need of international protection or do not have the right to stay, provides a common return toolbox to assist JCP partners in their work, facilitates the development of technical guidance and the development of a Standard Operational Return Procedure (SORP), based on relevant technical and legal international standards and fully respecting human rights, provides JCP partners with capacity-building support services as needed, improves communication among all stakeholders and promotes the exchange of best practices on returns with appropriate tailor-made measures, which should be brought together in a Return Action Plan, the implementation of which will be reported on to the Ministers and representatives at least once a year;
3. to establish flexible Return Partnerships between Western Balkan partners, EU partners and/or Switzerland and/or on thematic areas of importance for returns, in order to facilitate the implementation of the Regional Return Mechanism activities, to allow for customised use of the common return toolbox, to facilitate the exchange of best practices, as applicable, including better communication with specific regions of origin and transit, to support the building of expertise on voluntary and non-voluntary return and to facilitate and support returns via scheduled and chartered flights;
4. to ensure complementarity between the capacity building activities in the area of return made available to the Western Balkan Partners by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency and the bilateral and multilateral assistance provided by other partners;
5. to support the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the forthcoming Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union as well as future Council Presidencies in close cooperation with the European Commission and the relevant EU

agencies and other organisations in their ongoing efforts to put in place an effective and common EU system for returns and implement relevant measures with the same objectives and ambition.

We, the Ministers and representatives, task the JCP Secretariat, in cooperation with our relevant experts and representatives of Agencies and International Organisations, to coordinate the implementation of the Regional Return Mechanism and develop the Return Action Plan and other relevant documents. The JCP Secretariat should make every effort to explore synergies taking into consideration similar actions, particularly, EU funded programmes and projects in the area of return and more generally on tackling irregular migration.

We, the Ministers and representatives, are keen to promote further cooperation between the Western Balkan partners, the European Union and Switzerland, and to support joint efforts using existing formats for regional cooperation such as the Salzburg Forum, the Brdo Process, the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe, the Budapest Process, Prague Process as well as other similar initiatives aiming to promote cooperation along the Eastern Mediterranean / Western Balkan Route.

We will actively work to promote a common understanding with regard to the significant challenges in the field of irregular migration.

We look forward to evaluate progress on the above as stated in the Prague Declaration.