

Budapest Process

Joint Working Groups Meeting on Enhancing Cooperation between South East European and the Silk Routes Countries

Dates: 19-20 May 2022

Location: Ohrid, North Macedonia and online

Report

1. Budapest Process (BP) representatives were invited to attend the meeting and included law enforcement officials, as well as practitioners, investigators and frontline responders. The Joint Working Group Meeting gathered **70 participants from 30 countries and organisations** – Albania, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iran, Iraq, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Pakistan, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom, as well as the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process, European Commission, European Union Asylum Agency (EUAA), European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

2. Meeting background and objectives:

While developing the BP [Implementation Plan of the Call for Action](#) in 2019, both the South East Europe (SEE) and Silk Routes (SR) Regions Working Groups (WGs) proposed to work together to find mutually agreeable short and long-term solutions for contemporary migration challenges while adopting a Whole-of-Route approach. Their focus was in the areas of law enforcement cooperation on irregular migration as well as on asylum systems and rights-based approaches in reception centres. This was reinforced in September 2020 when the EU established a [new Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) placed a renewed priority on capacity building of law enforcement authorities for effective border management in SEE. The Budapest Process (BP), for its part, continued to facilitate exchange and cooperation between the SEE and SR regions in 2020 and 2021. In October 2021, a [joint meeting of the SEE and SR WGs](#) was organised, and via evidence-based research and practical experience of practitioners, several recommendations were provided on preventing smuggling of migrants and trafficking of persons, countering organised criminal groups, facilitating effective return and reintegration as well as providing international protection to vulnerable groups.

The objective of the two-day meeting was to develop a meaningful follow up to the previous joint meetings in order to start suggesting tangible actions that can be implemented in the short, medium and long term as part of the Implementation of the Call for Action. Several guiding questions on the topics of asylum, return, readmission and reintegration as well as smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings were provided to the presenters and participants to ensure discussions.

3. The meeting was opened by the Assistant of the Minister for EU and International Cooperation from the Ministry of Interior of North Macedonia, which is also the Chair of the South East Europe Region Working Group. Subsequently, **opening statements** were given by the Chair of the Budapest Process, Türkiye; Co-Chair of the Budapest Process, Hungary; the European Commission; and the Secretariat of the Budapest Process, International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). The meeting was held under Chatham House Rule.

4. This working group meeting comprised of three sessions: Session 1 focused on “Enhancing cooperation among asylum authorities of Silk Routes and South East European countries to improve international protection of vulnerable groups-on-the-move”. Session 2 focused on “Preventing and Countering Smuggling of Migrants and Trafficking of Human Beings”. Finally, Session 3 focused on “Promoting Dignified Return and Reintegration”. The three sessions therefore focused on Priority Goals 1 and 5 and 6 from the Istanbul Commitments Ministerial Declaration.

As a result of the interventions and discussions over the two days, the following **recommendations** emerged:

➤ **Asylum**

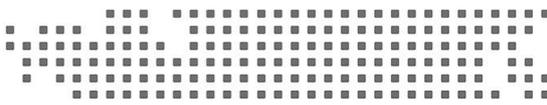
- Due to the varying status of accession of international conventions and diversity of legislative frameworks and policies – **national asylum systems in the Western Balkans are, at times lacking certain elements or are prone to be overburdened**, hence require concerted policy attention in order to enable the systems to be aligned to international conventions, responsive to needs of asylum seekers but fair in regards to resource allocation;
- **Past crises increase learning on how to manage asylum systems** and have led some countries in the Western Balkans to adopt Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to understand and address the needs of vulnerable groups seeking asylum; therefore, setting up structures such as an early warning system in the aftermath of a crisis by learning lessons therein, can strengthen response capabilities to future unexpected crises of a different nature – whether linked to health or conflict;
- The situation in **Ukraine** has led to a new influx and has also affected migration routes and services in the Western Balkans. There is a need for **coherence and sustainability of asylum systems**, with all countries along migration routes providing protection before migrants arrive in the Western Balkans;
- The Silk Routes Countries, while being source countries of asylum seekers, are themselves also transit and host countries. This places the **Silk Routes countries at a unique position to advise other countries along the routes** and to address issues faced by their asylum authorities, therefore it is recommended to place more liaison officers in key transit and destination countries for this purpose;
- **Most Silk Routes Countries do not have national asylum systems and some not having signed the 1951 International Refugee Convention.** The Afghan situation has further exacerbated the burden on the Silk Routes Countries, therefore establishing national asylum systems would be advisable;
- **Asylum systems and procedures need to be simplified and improved**, especially for the first port of entry which is often not capable of taking the burden, due to which people are sent forward, with flows going through peaks and lows. A recommendation would be to provide further capacity building within the country for improvement of the national system in place or to develop a national system in case it is not existing;
- The **temporary protection system in Europe can be considered a good practice** and it can be seen to address multiple crises in a relatively quick manner, as without this system, asylum systems would have collapsed otherwise. It is also important that procedures be followed up with adequate and humane reception facilities on the ground;

➤ **Smuggling of Migrants and Trafficking in Human Beings**

- **Trends and modus operandi of smugglers and traffickers change with time and circumstances, therefore, knowledge sharing of these changes are essential;** setting up an agency or hub for knowledge sharing is a recommendation in this regard;
- It is important to find the nexus between trafficking and smuggling routes and find a way to prosecute smugglers and traffickers through transnational coordination; regional cooperation can be increased by **sharing data on the most wanted traffickers;**
- There is continued and **increased violence emanating from smuggling groups,** such as through abduction of migrants, followed by ransom request as well as cases of labour trafficking cases; further knowledge needs to be shared on this;
- Establishing **local/liaison offices can really help with follow up of cases of trafficking and smuggling** as the speed of assistance in these cases is essential and can be life-saving;
- Providing some sort of **welfare and rehabilitation assistance in cases of trafficking** is important to ensure the victims are able to properly recover;
- **Countries of Origin can benefit from the experience of countries of destination in regards to the rehabilitation of victims of trafficking,** especially vulnerable groups (women and children), therefore a frequent exchange of best practices is an important recommendation;
- There is a need to **talk more about legal options** in order to lessen the appeal of smuggling as a majority of people move for economic reasons due to unemployment and destitution;
- **Trust in traffickers and smugglers is not to be underestimated** and needs to be tackled by increased awareness raising in Countries of Origin and Transit;
- There is a continued **issue with identification of victims of trafficking,** especially in transit, and there is a need to continue protection of people on the move while understanding the narrow line between smuggling and trafficking;
- **An emergency call center** in several languages for victims of trafficking is considered a good practice and can be replicated in countries, coupled with awareness raising on this system.

➤ **Return, readmission and reintegration**

- **The Covid-19 pandemic led to a substantial increase in returns to the Silk Routes Countries, meaning that the need to reintegrate these returnees has become an even bigger challenge,** hence, innovative measures are needed to address the matter – public-private partnerships are seen as a good method to create the needed socio-economic solutions for reintegration;
- Another good practice shared is to **establish permanent reintegration centres,** which includes health, psycho-social and socio-economic support: Successful reintegration is highly correlated with good mental health, as there are returnees suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and mental health issues following detention; these must be addressed at the earliest – children tend to be especially sensitive and therefore require special attention in terms of reintegration efforts;
- Establishing **user friendly and fully integrated digital platforms** for returning migrants can prove to be very helpful to aid the overall referral system;



- **A functional readmission framework is an essential aspect when discussing returns:** an important incentive to keep in mind when trying to negotiate readmission agreements involves providing improved visa facilitation and business/trade concessions and to increase options for economic migrants with increased quotas for legal entry;
- **Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration's** timing is crucial to ensure sustainable reintegration by providing support to the returnees for their plans upon arrival;
- There needs to be more **research conducted on prospects and consequences of returns to a country of transit** as sometimes return to countries of origin not possible;
- It is advised to **organise study visits to Countries of Origin** in order to see what happens on the ground, based on which specific suggestions can be made to improve response systems;
- It is important to **monitor and evaluate reintegration programmes, processes and procedures** for return in order to learn and prove what is a good practice and should therefore be replicated and scaled.

5. Action points and way forward:

The Budapest Process participants present agreed to:

- **Work more with civil society and local governments** to ensure that reintegration programmes can be incorporated into community level development planning and accordingly more effectively delivered to those identified through referral systems;
- **Continue to exchange knowledge** on how to better support the improvement/establishment of national mechanisms on asylum and protection;
- **Use the BP Secretariat to frequently facilitate closer cooperation with each other** in the form of multi-/bilateral interactions (such as requests for information and knowledge exchange, capacity building, operational partnerships, and other assistance/support);
- **Consider the deployment of more liaison officers** in each other's countries;
- **Share more case studies in the next meeting**, preferably based on on-ground experience;
- **Present and discuss lessons learned from reintegration projects/initiatives**, including but not limited to covering the following aspects:
 - referral systems
 - digital tools for service delivery and awareness raising
 - public-private partnerships
 - community level projects / civil society engagement