



**Belgian Presidency of the Council
of the European Union
Home Affairs Programme**



Introduction

Under the Belgian Presidency of the Council, the European area of freedom, security and justice without internal frontiers will be further strengthened, against the background of a challenging geopolitical context. From January to March, the Presidency will strive to adopt all key pending legislative proposals in the areas of i.a. asylum and migration and the prevention and fight against organised crime. From April to June, the priority will shift towards the implementation of the agreed reforms and the shaping of the future: an open and secure Europe, promoting the Union's core values and the well-being, security and safety of all Europeans. At its heart will be a resilient Schengen area, a well-managed asylum and migration system, an efficient crisis management system, a reinforced European mechanism of civil protection, cross-border law enforcement cooperation and optimised access to and exchange of information in an increasingly digital world.

Towards a more fair and efficient asylum and migration system

The Presidency's primary objective will be, first, to finalise all remaining legislative files under the Pact on Migration and Asylum. Subsequently, the emphasis will shift towards its operationalisation and implementation. At this crucial time for our European migration policy, at the transition between two institutional cycles, it will be essential for Europe to take decisive steps, not only on paper, but also in practice. We need to show that we can agree on essential reforms, and that we, in close cooperation with the Commission and the agencies, prepare the ground to make these reforms a reality in how we organise migration together. At the same time, we need to continue to address the day to day challenges and to prepare for the future.

The Belgian Presidency will put every effort into making sure that the structural reform of the Common European Asylum System is finalised before the end of the current legislative term. The new legal framework that will consist of the new Screening Regulation, the new Eurodac, the Asylum Procedures Regulation, the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation and Crisis Regulation, the enhanced Reception Conditions, Qualifications Directives and the new Resettlement Framework. This new legal framework will serve the ultimate objective of establishing a well-functioning and fair asylum system, that will reinforce trust between Member States in a spirit of responsibility and solidarity, while bringing clarity for people arriving in the EU, and ensuring Europeans of the humane and effective management of migration, in line with our values and international law. It will provide for a common and fast reaction to migration crises and improve legal pathways to international protection. It will strengthen the management of external borders, define clear rules pertaining to responsibility, and ensure balanced responsibility-sharing, ensure more harmonised reception and protection standards throughout the EU. It will provide for efficient and swift procedures that enable the protection of those in need while at the same time being designed to prevent abuse, to deter secondary movements, and to effectively follow-up on return decisions.

Furthermore, the non-legislative work of the Presidency will, next to the operationalisation of the pact, also consist of enhancing the implementation of the current acquis, and the practical collaboration and convergence between Member States in the area of asylum.

Considering that a coherent, efficient and innovative legal migration policy is an integral part of a well-managed and controlled migration system, the Belgian Presidency will continue to steer discussions realistically and pragmatically to strike a compromise which takes due account of the economic realities of the Member States while providing for real added value. This will entail making progress on the legal framework and taking further policy discussions on legal migration. More particularly, the recast of the Single Permit Directive and the Long-Term Residents Directive have to be finalised before the end of this legislative term in order to streamline admission procedures for third country workers and to strengthen their rights. The Belgian Presidency will also strive to reach a general approach in the Council for the proposal for a Regulation on the establishment of a Talent Pool. Legal migration is also part of the comprehensive approach in migration management in our collaboration with third countries. That is why the Presidency will play its part in strengthening EU actions in developing legal migration opportunities through comprehensive and mutually beneficial collaborations with partner countries, as well as further developing the structural Talent Partnerships with third countries to foster talent mobility to the EU with key migration partner countries.

A coherent and strong migration management requires the establishment of mutually beneficial, adapted and comprehensive partnerships with third countries of origin and transit. In this context, the Belgian approach for the external dimension of migration will be centred around both a route-based and a Team Europe approach. In addition, this approach recognises the intrinsic link between the external and internal dimensions of migration. We will be dedicated to the monitoring the situation in priority countries and along the main migratory routes, and to the follow-up of the implementation of projects and agreements. The Belgian Presidency will do so with the objective of bringing the reality of the field closer to our discussions.

Creating a common EU return system based on efficient, humane and more robust procedures within the Union, as well as on more effective cooperation with third countries, is a fundamental aspect of a comprehensive and credible EU migration and asylum policy. Consequently, the Belgian Presidency will aim to tackle the issue of returns both from an internal and external perspective, with the core objective of improving the efficiency of returns of persons with no right to stay, and particularly those posing a security threat. In order to do so, the Presidency will reflect on how to make the most of existing tools and policies, such as visa leverage and the European strategy for voluntary return and reintegration. On the legal side, during the second half of the semester, the Presidency will initiate an in-depth discussion on the future of the legal framework on returns, as recent discussions have shown that the current framework is facing increasing challenges.

A Schengen area without internal borders cannot work without an effective visa policy that attracts travel to the EU while ensuring its internal security. The Belgian Presidency is therefore committed to further embed the visa policy within Schengen and to ensure it can appropriately respond to growing migration and security challenges, notably by striving to

adopt a general approach on the proposal for the revision of the visa suspension mechanism and leading a forward-looking discussion on the future of visa policy.

The Belgian presidency finally intends to continue the reflections in order to find stable solutions beyond 2025 for displaced citizens from Ukraine who have found temporary protection in the European Union.

Consolidate Schengen governance

Schengen governance is the overarching structure that ensures common responsibility for the coordination and implementation of policies pertaining to external borders, asylum, immigration and the prevention and combatting of crime in order to guarantee the integrity of the area of free movement. The Belgian Presidency will concentrate on a limited number of priorities identified in the 2023 State of Schengen report, namely the reinforcement of the political governance of Schengen, the strengthening of external borders, returns and the fight against organised crime, particularly drug trafficking.

The **governance of Schengen** has gradually developed over the past two years, most notably with the establishment of a Schengen Council. In this informal Council formation, Interior Ministers steer the coordination and implementation of all the policies needed for a well-functioning Schengen area of free movement. The objective of the creation of this new political forum is to allow for an informal ministerial discussion about the collective responsibility for and tackling of common challenges. The dynamic context of the Schengen area requires that Ministers closely monitor its state and coordinate the implementation of individual and joint actions. A key aspect of this consolidated governance is the Schengen Cycle, a political calendar providing structure and predictability to the collective efforts of the institutional stakeholders of this area. The Schengen Barometer+, the Schengen Scoreboard and the new Schengen Country Reports are the tools allowing for facts-based governance and the identification of the right course of action to address emerging threats and challenges for the stability of the Schengen area. The Belgian Presidency is consequently adamant on continuing to **consolidate both the Schengen Cycle** and its governance **tools**, by fine-tuning them and making sure they come at the opportune time, with a view on making the Schengen area more predictable, resilient and functional.

In this regard, the Belgian Presidency aims to build upon the Spanish Presidency's efforts surrounding the transversal role of the Schengen Matters Working Party, as guardian of the Schengen process. In addition, the Belgian Presidency will seek to strengthen the strategic preparation of the Schengen Council through a Senior officials Schengen meeting relying, *en cascade*, on three dimensions of Schengen governance:

- i. **Identification:** The indicators of the state of Schengen, be they contained in the general, thematic (such as the report on drug trafficking) or individual country reports, will serve as a starting point and factual basis for the discussions of the *ad hoc*,
- ii. **Remediation:** The recommendations following the evaluation reports that aim to remedy the identified shortcomings will provide an overview of both the remaining gaps of Schengen governance, which still taunt the stability and resilience of the Schengen area as a whole, and the way and urgency to address them;
- iii. **Strategic foresight:** Building upon the identification of the remaining gaps and other actual or future elements having a potential bearing on the stability of the Schengen area, the ultimate objective will be to reflect prospectively and

strategically on the future of the Schengen area. By proposing avenues and means of improvement, the aim will be to embed the Schengen area further in a holistic, forward-looking and resilient governance structure, thereby ensuring its sustainability in the long run.

Strengthening of border management is another priority for a resilient Schengen zone and a well-managed migration management. The Belgian Presidency will seek to conclude the negotiations with the European Parliament on the **Schengen Borders Code**, especially in light of the recurrent reintroduction of controls at the internal borders by several Member States. The Commission evaluation of the European Border and Coast Guard Regulation will be an opportunity to reflect on the role, responsibilities and future of the agency as an essential partner in European border management. The Belgian Presidency will also ensure the follow-up of the multiannual Integrated Border Management cycle.

In addition, the Presidency will ensure the necessary follow-up for the enlargement of the Schengen area, with the accession of Romania and Bulgaria.

Ensure a high level of internal security

The Belgian Presidency will prioritise the battle against organised crime, terrorism, and violent extremism due to their detrimental effects. These efforts are crucial insofar such crimes threaten the foundational values of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law, which are the pillars of our Union. Therefore, European access to and exchange of information will also feature prominently on our agenda.

Organised crime

The Belgian Presidency will draw particular attention to **illegal drug trafficking**, which is one of the main sources of income for criminal organisations in the EU and is accompanied by increasing levels of violence.

We will build on the ongoing efforts deployed in the framework of the EMPACT-actions and existing strategies such as the *EU Strategy to tackle Organised Crime 2021-2025* and the *EU Drugs Strategy 2021-2025*. Additionally, we will implement the *Roadmap to Fight Drug Trafficking and Organised Crime* published by the European Commission in October 2023. We will prioritise a number of initiatives that give our authorities and law enforcement agencies new opportunities in the fight against organised crime. In doing so, we will continuously emphasise the importance of a chain-based approach, in which all actors - including the private sector - work together to tackle the various elements of drug-related organised crime.

Firstly, and entirely in line with the Roadmap published by the Commission, we will emphasize **enhancing the resilience of our logistic hubs**. In this context, the Belgian Presidency, together with the European Commission, will launch the *European Ports Alliance*, in the framework of a ministerial meeting on the eve of the informal JHA Council. This alliance aims to unite the private sector with customs and law enforcement authorities. Together, they will develop operational strategies to stop criminal networks from using European ports for drug trafficking.

We will also work on **building a clearer picture of the foremost criminal networks operating in the EU and the interactions between them**. This should make it possible to develop an intelligence picture at European level that enables effective strategic and operational decision-making. As one of the initiatives within the High-Risk Criminal Networks priority within EMPACT, Europol will publish an enhanced situational picture at European level for the first time in spring 2023. During our Presidency, we will work on the report of this exercise and seek to identify methodological areas for improvement, in cooperation with Europol, in order to fine-tune this picture towards the future.

Thirdly, we will focus on **strengthening international cooperation, especially with Latin America**. More specifically, we will organise a first COSI-CLASI meeting to further intensify and institutionalise structural cooperation between our law enforcement authorities. We will also use this opportunity to establish more structural security cooperation between the EU and CLASI countries.

Following the EU Roadmap we will also further emphasise the **importance of prevention and the role of administrative measures** in the fight against organised crime.

The **High-Level Group on Access to Data for Effective Law Enforcement** should finalise its work during the Belgian Presidency. This high-level group will present a thorough analysis of the various needs of the law enforcement community within a context in which the digitalisation of interpersonal communication and the use of end-to-end encryption have become the standard. Priority should be given to access to encrypted information and data retention. The Belgian Presidency will ensure that the main conclusions of this reflection are submitted to the JHA Council in June 2024 for validation.

We will also strive to ensure our children's well-being and provide them with a safe environment, both offline and online. In this respect, the Belgian Presidency will take forward the **Regulation on preventing and combating child sexual abuse material**. Furthermore, the Belgian Presidency will – based on the Commission proposal – negotiate the appropriate extension of the temporary derogation from the Directive on privacy and electronic communications.

We will also work on the **evaluation of the Council Recommendation on operational police cooperation** to further strengthen cooperation between the law enforcement authorities of the Member States.

In addition, the Belgian Presidency will negotiate the **Regulation on enhancing police cooperation in relation to the prevention, detection and investigation of migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, and on enhancing Europol's support to preventing and combating such crimes and amending Regulation (EU) 2016/794**. This text will strengthen Europol's mandate in the fight against human trafficking and require from Member States that they step up their efforts and information-sharing. The Belgian Presidency will ensure as much progress as possible in the negotiations about the Council's position on this proposal.

Terrorism

The Belgian Presidency will continue the work on the achievements of previous Presidencies and highlight several new themes and initiatives. The armed conflicts outside the EU have an impact on the EU's internal security and can also act as a trigger for extremism and terrorism. During these last months, Europe had to face terrorist attacks perpetrated by lone wolves inspired by hate speech and online disinformation linked with Quran burnings and the situation in the Middle-East.

Therefore, the **developments in terrorism and violent extremism online is one of our priorities**. The Belgian Presidency will focus on the various measures taken at EU level in recent years to monitor and restrict terrorist content online. Besides the implementation of the Terrorist Content Online (TCO) Regulation, this will also cover related topics and challenges, such as the dialogue with internet companies, cooperation between Internet Referral Units and the development of the PERCI platform by Europol. We will pay a

particular attention to the **spread of disinformation online and its impact on violent radicalisation**. The Belgian Presidency, with the support of the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, will highlight the links between disinformation and violent extremism and terrorism, to create awareness, identify possible countermeasures and good European practices. Policy Recommendations will also be developed in order to achieve a better European approach.

The Belgian Presidency is committed to taking concrete steps to put into practice the Council Conclusions "Protecting Europeans from terrorism: achievements and next steps" adopted under the French Presidency. These Conclusions call i.a. for **stronger cooperation between counter-terrorism (CT) authorities and asylum and migration authorities**, both at national and European level. We will provide initiatives to better understand each other's practices and structures with regard to the exchange of information and to identify good practices in this area.

Another important topic for us is related to the Council Conclusions on **strengthening the international exchange of information on released, radicalised prisoners** adopted under Spanish Presidency. New good practices, studies and insights will be shared, in particular on recidivism among terrorism convicts and on the follow-up of persons repatriated from detention camps in North-East Syria in recent years. In 2017, the European Database of Terrorist Offenders (EDT) was created. Besides Belgium, four other Member States have been involved in this initiative (The Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Sweden). The database contains profile information on convicted terrorists, provided by the Member States involved. This information has proved useful, for instance, to fine-tune risk assessment tools, used in the prison system of many Member States. The Belgian Presidency intends to launch a reflection to safeguard the future functioning of this important instrument further.

Our **resilience to possible attacks with weapons containing chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) components** will be another point of attention. Since 2017, the European Union has established an action plan to strengthen its preparedness and response to possible incidents in this domain. The Belgian Presidency would like to underline good practices and hold a stocktaking discussion on implementing the EU CBRN Action Plan, from a CT-perspective.

Finally, we will continue to monitor closely the **developments in the Middle East, the war in Ukraine, the precarious security situation in Afghanistan, the situation in the detention camps in north-east Syria**, and their impact on the terrorist threat in Europe. One region we also want to highlight specifically, from both a domestic and foreign security perspective, concerns the **North Caucasus and Central Asia**.

Information exchange

The **new fully interoperable IT architecture** will further strengthen internal security with the world's most advanced external border management system. This will facilitate smooth entry into the Schengen area of third-country nationals who will have been checked before departure, tackle irregular immigration and allow us to obtain information about persons exceeding their legal stay. New information systems are being operationalised (Entry/Exit System (EES), European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) and the European Criminal Records Information System for third country nationals (ECRIS-TCN)) and existing databases are being upgraded (the Schengen and Visa Information Systems and EURODAC). The interoperability of these systems will also enhance cooperation and information exchange between law enforcement, immigration and border control authorities within the EU.

The focus in 2024 will be on the further development and implementation of EES, which will be the first new system to be launched. The Belgian Presidency will closely monitor the progress of the IT systems' development and ensure that the implementation of the new roadmap, which was approved by the Justice and Home Affairs Council in October 2023, follows the set deadlines. Transparency and open communication between the EU Member States, the European institutions and eu-LISA are crucial in this respect. EES can only go live once all tests have been successfully completed, the system is stable and all EU Member States have declared their technical and operational readiness. A number of measures will support a smooth implementation. These measures, such as a gradual introduction of EES and the possibility of pre-registration, will be important to reduce waiting times at borders when EES is launched. The Belgian Presidency will ensure that the measures are developed in a timely and satisfactory manner so that EU Member States can deploy them efficiently.

Following the formal adoption of the **Prüm II Regulation**, we will pay attention to the first measures to implement the new opportunities created by this regulation.

We will closely monitor the progress of the negotiations on the cooperation **agreement between the EU and Interpol** at Council level in order to ensure the timely adoption of this agreement. Such an agreement is of great importance for the full implementation for the interoperability architecture and will also provide the (re)new(ed) legal basis for information exchange between Interpol and Europol, EPPO and Eurojust

Another point of interest is the United States' proposal to various Member States of the Union to strengthen information exchange for border management purposes. We will focus on gaining greater clarity on how and within which boundaries negotiations with the US on this **Enhanced Border Security Partnership (EBSP)** could be conducted.

The Belgian Presidency will also seek to improve Member States' **travel intelligence capabilities**. We will organise a conference on the future of travel intelligence to kick-off the dialogue on the more effective use and harmonisation of existing and soon-to-be API, PNR and ETIAS systems.

The Passenger Name Record (PNR) instrument has been used by the security services of the various Member States extensively in the fight against terrorism and serious crime over the past few years. The recent ruling of the European Court of Justice has however, a significant impact on the work of the Passenger Information Units and other authorities. Therefore, the Belgian Presidency will support the Member States in the implementation of the EU Ruling and ensure as much as possible that **adaptations to the working of the PNR systems** are made in a harmonised way and in such a way that it answers to the Court's grievances without losing its efficacy.

A particular point of attention is the way in which Member States deal with the **cross-matching of PNR data with SISII**. It is Belgium's ambition to develop, in cooperation with the European Commission and the Member States, **guidelines** to make possible a more harmonised approach in how is dealt with this cross-matching.

It is of equal importance **to closely monitor the European Union's external policy in regard to PNR** as more and more countries worldwide are implementing PNR systems requiring 'European' air carriers to transmit data to these respective countries. It should be made sure that these carriers do not encounter conflicts of interest whereas our Passenger Information Units need to continue receiving all relevant PNR data of importance for their operational activities.

A changing threat landscape and many evolutions in the areas of border management and law enforcement have made the 2004 **Advance Passenger Information (API)** Directive due for renewal. To this end, the Commission launched two new initiatives in December 2022: a Regulation for the use of API in the field of border management as well as a Regulation for the use of API for law enforcement purposes. The adoption of these instruments will be one of our main priorities.

Belgium strives for strong competences to the Member States in this area and seeks to find the balance between the protection of personal data and the efficient use of API in the fight against terrorism and serious crime as well as its use for border management purposes. Since there is comprehensive support to further analyse an extension of the API/PNR system to other modes of transport, Belgium will also partner with the European Commission in **the execution of the announced studies on the extension of the API system to maritime and land transport**, making use of Belgium's experience in that regard.

Crime Prevention

In terms of prevention, the Belgian Presidency will focus **on strengthening information exchange and involving citizens in security policies**.

To facilitate information exchange, we will establish two platforms to foster cooperation and exchange of experiences among Member States. We will set up an information-sharing platform on combating football-related misconduct and violence, and a European network of experts on private security in the competent public authorities of EU Member States.

Furthermore, we also want to strengthen the role of citizens in security policies and the relationship between citizens and security professions with the aim of preventing violence against security professions. Finally, during our Presidency, we will make the necessary efforts to shape the Secretariat of the European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN) and the European Network on the Administrative Approach (ENAA) further into a permanent organ.

Reinforce capacities to prevent, prepare for and respond to crisis and disasters

The main focus of the Belgian Presidency will be on **reinforcing the EU's crisis management mechanisms** by putting in place a formal working group of the Council. When the final form of this working group has been decided by the Member States, the Belgian Presidency will make the necessary efforts to make it operational.

Another focus of our Presidency will be the lessons learned from activating the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) mechanism during the Covid-19 pandemic and for the earthquakes in **Türkiye** and Syria, as well as from the activations still in progress. We will also keep on with the Spanish efforts aiming at strengthening the links between the IPCR mechanism and national crisis management authorities, in particular by drawing up Council Conclusions in that sense. Another dimension in strengthening these links will be the revitalisation of the Horizon Scanning Network. We will also follow up on the reflexion initiated by Spain on the transborder cooperation regarding crisis management. Finally, the Belgian Presidency will keep on supporting Ukraine and monitoring the developments in the Middle East through the continued activation of EU's crisis management mechanisms such as the IPCR for as long as necessary.

Furthermore, we will continue the negotiations on the draft of the "Council Recommendation on a blueprint for Union-wide coordination in the response to disturbances in important infrastructures with significant cross-border interest". Moreover, we will seek a pragmatic approach for an efficient cooperation between Member States in these matters.

In the **fight against hybrid threats** such as foreign interference through information manipulation and for the purpose of strengthening democratic resilience, we will keep on applying and developing the relevant tools of the Strategic Compass such as hybrid toolboxes, Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference (FIMI) and Hybrid Rapid Response Teams.

We will also pay particular attention to the **European elections**. In order to protect the elections' integrity and to reinforce our democratic resilience against hybrid campaigns, we will draw up Council Conclusions on the elections' preparation and security and organise a table top exercise. In this respect, the other major priorities for the Belgian Presidency will be economic security, the hybrid threats in Africa and the links between hybrid threats and terrorism/extremism.

The Belgian Presidency will keep on and deepen works and initiatives pertaining to the **strengthening of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM)** by drawing on its important contribution in the resilience in case of disaster. The works will be based in particular on the five-year report on the execution of the UCPM Decision which is about the efficiency, the profitability and the continuation of the UCPM Decision's execution as well as the discussion on the UCPM's future that started under the Spanish Presidency. The Presidency will put forward the UCPM's part and place within the larger architecture of risk management in Europe, which has undergone significative changes in the last few years due to disasters

such as the Covid-19 pandemic, hence the needs for new initiatives. A particular attention shall be granted to the interaction between UCPM and other mechanisms and players, including intersectoral initiatives, such as the ICPR, HERA (Health Emergency Preparedness and Response) and the upcoming project preparEU which aims at encouraging citizens' participation.

Conclusion

*The Belgian Presidency is firmly committed to advancing a **comprehensive and coherent agenda** that addresses the critical challenges facing the European Union. With a focus on strengthening the asylum and migration systems, enhancing Schengen governance, ensuring robust internal security, and preparing for and responding to crises and disasters, we aim to reinforce the foundations of our Union.*

Through collaborative efforts, innovative solutions, and a steadfast commitment to our shared values and principles, we endeavor to build a more resilient, secure, and prosperous Europe. As we navigate these complex and evolving landscapes, our vision is not only to address the immediate needs of our Union but also to lay the groundwork for a sustainable and inclusive future for all European citizens.

The Belgian Presidency looks forward to working closely with all Member States and stakeholders in this vital journey, confident that together, we can achieve a stronger and more unified Europe.