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**COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT**

*Accompanying the document*

**Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council**

**EIGHTH REPORT UNDER THE VISA SUSPENSION MECHANISM**

{COM(2025) 792 final}

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\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

## INTRODUCTION

Article 8(4) of the Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 (the ‘Visa Regulation’) requires the Commission to ensure the monitoring of the continuous fulfilment of the visa exemption requirements by those countries whose nationals obtained visa-free access to the EU following the successful completion of a visa liberalisation dialogue.

This **Staff Working Document** includes a full assessment of the continuous compliance with the visa liberalisation requirements for Kosovo, as it completed its visa liberalisation dialogues less than seven years ago. As regards the countries of the EU’s neighbourhood that completed a visa liberalisation dialogue more than seven years ago (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine), the staff working document flags specific challenges linked to visa-free travel and/or being of concern for the EU.

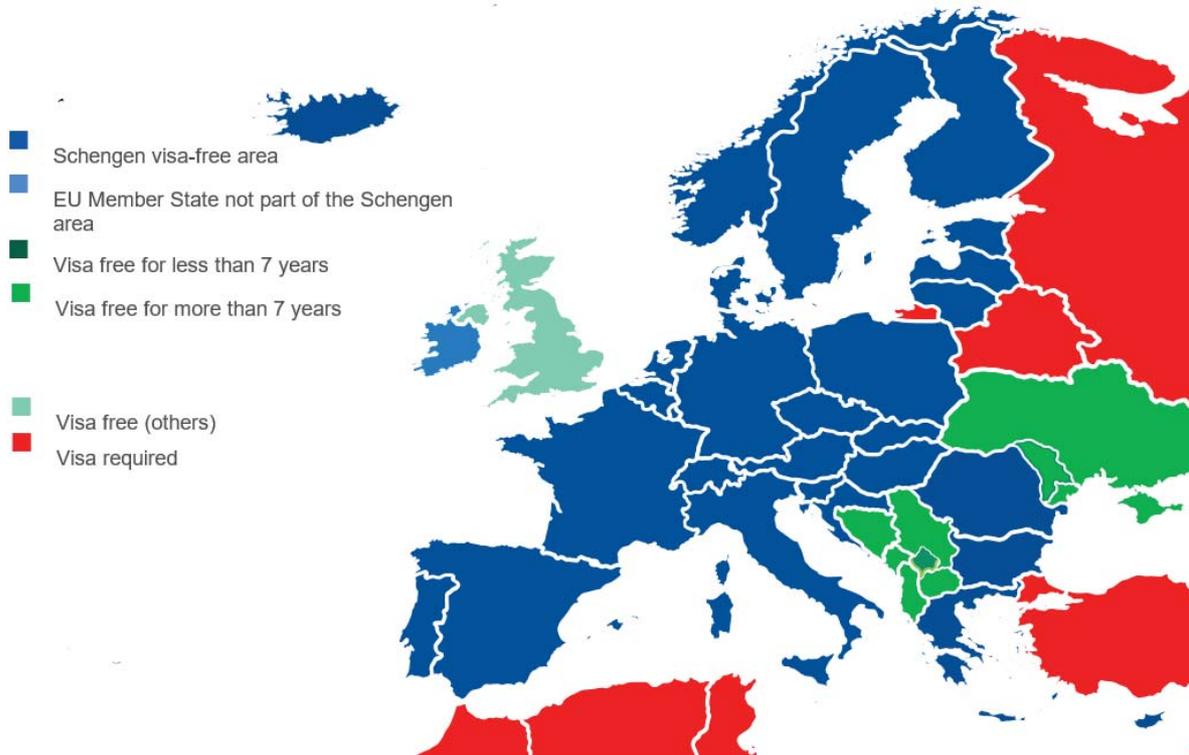
The staff working document also covers other geographical areas beyond the EU’s immediate neighbourhood (Eastern Caribbean and Latin America), focusing on visa-free countries where specific migration and/or security related issues have arisen, that could be assessed under the visa suspension mechanism.

Statistical data was provided by Eurostat and covers Schengen associated countries, explaining slight differences with the enlargement report.

The revised **visa suspension mechanism**, entering into force end December 2025, introduces several modifications, in particular **several new grounds for suspension**:

- **lack of alignment of a country’s visa-free regime with the EU’s visa policy**, in cases where this may lead to increased illegal migration risks
- **the operation of an investor citizenship scheme**, whereby citizenship is granted in exchange for pre-determined payments or investments, without the person concerned having any genuine link to that third country;
- systemic deficiencies in **document security**, law and procedures;
- a **deterioration in the EU’s relations with a third country**, for a number of reasons including hybrid threats, serious breaches of the UN Charter and international law, and human rights and humanitarian law violations.

## I. THE EU'S NEIGHBOURHOOD



### VISA-FREE FOR LESS THAN 7 YEARS

#### KOSOVO

##### 1. Visa policy alignment

Since the **EU lifted the visa requirement for Kosovo** citizens as of **January 2024**, Kosovo reinstated visa requirements for Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa in August 2024. Nevertheless, the list of third countries visa-free in Kosovo while visa required in EU still comprises 17 countries: Bahrain, Belize, Eswatini, Fiji, Guyana, Jordan, Kuwait, Lesotho, Malawi, Maldives, Oman, Papua New Guinea, Qatar, São Tomé and Príncipe, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Vanuatu (removed from the EU's visa-free list in December 2024).

**Visa policy alignment is a key commitment** of Kosovo under its **Reform Agenda**, as part of the **Growth Plan for the Western Balkans**.<sup>1</sup> In this context, Kosovo has committed to transferring **at least one country per year** from this list to the visa-required category between **2025 and 2027**.

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1 SWD(2024) 243 final – Commission Implementing Decision approving the Reform Agendas and the multiannual work programme under the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans – Kosovo.

**Kosovo must make substantial additional efforts to align its visa policy with that of the EU, as the current lack of alignment presents a continued risk of illegal migration to the EU, particularly via the Western Balkan route.** While Kosovo has committed to adopting **additional security screening measures** for visa-free third-country nationals assessed as posing a high migration risk, these measures have yet to be operationalised. Moreover, even when implemented, such **interim measures cannot substitute for its full visa policy alignment with the EU.**

Kosovo currently issues **biometric travel documents** which meet EU requirements on security features and biometrics in travel documents. Kosovo **no longer issues non-biometric passports**, and such documents have not been in circulation since 2021.

A new Law on Identity Cards was approved by the Parliament in 2024. A new Administrative Instruction on the Issuance of Identity Cards, adopted in 2023, is currently being implemented.

Despite these developments, as part of the consultation for this Report, three Member States have reported **concerns regarding document security**, such as 1) instances of documents issued under false identities, allegedly facilitated through corrupt practices; 2) detection of false or forged identity and travel documents and 3) cases of Kosovo citizens subject to alerts in the Schengen Information System (SIS), who subsequently obtained travel documents with changed names or surnames. Kosovo Police continues to cooperate with international partners by reporting lost and stolen passports to Interpol (a total of 4,531 in 2023 and 7,485 in 2024).

## **2. Integrated border management, migration management, asylum**

Following the three IBM strategies covering the period 2009–2024, a **new Strategy for Integrated Border Management (2024–2029)** has been drafted, aligned with the **EU concept on European Integrated Border Management (EIBM)**, and compliant with **Regulation (EU) 2019/1896 on the European Border and Coast Guard (EBCG)**. The draft strategy is currently in the final stages prior to adoption.

The **National Centre for Border Management (NCBM)**, established in 2013, continued to function as a coordination/support body for law enforcement agencies. The **Passenger Information Unit (PIU)**, housed within the NCBM, collaborated with competent authorities in managing **Advance Passenger Information (API)** and **Passenger Name Record (PNR)** requests related to terrorism, narcotics, organised crime, human smuggling, and border security. The **EU–Kosovo Stabilisation and Association Agreement**, in force since 2016, provides the basis for cooperation between the EU and Kosovo. Kosovo remained positively engaged in the implementation of the **EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans**.

Cooperation with Frontex, which began in 2016, has been overall satisfactory, with Kosovo actively participating in IPA-funded regional projects such as “EU Regional Support to Strengthen Border Security Capacities in the Western Balkans” and “EU Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management in the Western Balkans and Türkiye”. Cooperation with Albania and North Macedonia on joint border controls and joint patrolling continued.

Regarding **readmission cooperation**, overall good cooperation was reported, although two Member States noted delays in some cases, and one Member State reported refusals by Kosovo to accept EU travel documents upon the expiry of the deadline set out in the readmission agreement,

resulting in the need to restart the procedure. Cooperation between Kosovo's Ministry of Internal Affairs and the **European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)** also continued. In March 2024, the implementation deadline of the 2022 Roadmap was extended by one year. **Monitoring trends in migration, applications for international protection, and readmission**

With the entry into force of visa-free travel for holders of Kosovo passports on 1 January 2024, the number of **applications for international protection lodged by Kosovo citizens in EU Member States increased significantly** — by **121%**, from 3,075 in 2023 to 6,785 in 2024. This upward trend has shown signs of slight decline since the end of 2024. The **recognition rate dropped from 10% in 2023 to 6% in 2024**.

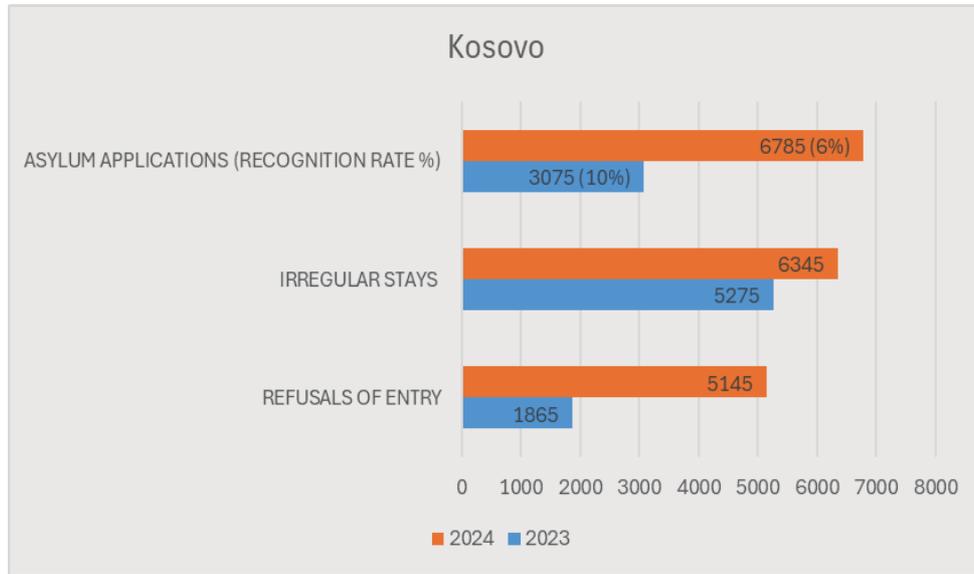
Kosovo has shown **continued engagement** with Schengen Member States to address the increase in unfounded asylum applications and has maintained a **communication campaign** informing citizens of their **rights and obligations** under the visa-free regime.

An **Early Warning Mechanism for Monitoring Migration Trends** was established in **December 2023**, in the run-up to visa liberalisation. It maintains **regular communication with Schengen countries' consular and diplomatic representations in Kosovo**, holding **periodic meetings** and producing reports on migration trends.

In 2024, **illegal border crossings by Kosovo citizens** remained **negligible**, as in 2023. However, the number of Kosovo citizens found to be illegally staying in Member States rose by 20%, from 5,275 in 2023 to 6,345 in 2024. In addition, refusals of entry for Kosovo citizens in Member States increased by 176%, from 1,865 in 2023 to 5,145 in 2024.

The number of **return decisions** issued to Kosovo citizens decreased by 19%, from 3,775 in 2023 to 3,050 in 2024. Nonetheless, the number of actual returns rose from 1,610 in 2023 to 2,025 in 2024 (a 26% increase). The return rate improved from 43% in 2023 to 66% in 2024.

The administrative instruction on the procedure of issuance of passport and return travel document was amended in June 2024 to facilitate return of Kosovo citizens who reported lost travel documents abroad.



Source: Eurostat

### 3. Public order and security

Respectively in March and June 2024 Kosovo adopted the *Strategy and Action Plan on the Control of Small Arms, Light Weapons and Explosives (2024–2028)* and the *National Strategy against Drugs (2024–2028)*. Kosovo adopted the *Law on Beneficial Ownership and a Law on Cryptocurrencies*. Kosovo is also awaiting a ruling from the Constitutional Court regarding the *Law on the State Bureau for Verification and Confiscation of Unjustifiable Assets*, as well as a *Law on Prevention of Money Laundering*. In addition, Kosovo prepared a new *Community Safety Strategy and Action Plan 2025-2029*.

Kosovo adopted a series of implementing laws in 2024–2025 aimed at strengthening the fight against corruption, including Regulation on Asset Recovery, Regulation on the Selection of the Chief State Prosecutor and Chief Prosecutors as well as Regulation on Joint Investigative Teams. Additionally, a **Strategic Plan for the Efficiency of Handling Cases of Corruption, Abuse of Official Duty, and Organised Crime (2025–2027)** was adopted.

In the context of fight against **corruption** Kosovo’s prosecution offices in 2024 received 575 new cases involving 1,324 individuals and resolved 386 cases involving 933 individuals.

Cooperation with Europol continued and was reinforced with the signing of additional agreements/protocols on Secure Communication Line through SIENA-channel and the secondment of Liaison Officers and the exchange and protection of classified information. The information exchange via SIENA doubled compared to 2023 and is six times higher than in 2022. Under the 2024–2025 cycle, Kosovo Police participated in **12 Operational Action Plans** and **72 Operational Actions of EMPACT**: Kosovo cooperates with **Liaison Prosecutors from Eurojust countries**, although there is not yet a dedicated agreement of cooperation with Eurojust.

Kosovo remained engaged in the implementation of the **Joint Action Plan on Counter Terrorism for the Western Balkans** and in discussions on the preparation of the new Joint Action Plan that was signed on 30 October 2025.

Kosovo continues to implement its **2017 working arrangement with CEPOL**, and participates in CEPOL training activities, including those under the EU-funded “**Western Balkans Partnership Against Crime and Terrorism**” project.

#### 4. Fundamental rights

The new **Law on the Independent Media Commission**, adopted by the Assembly in July 2024, was **annulled by the Constitutional Court** on grounds of incompatibility with the Constitution of Kosovo. The law had raised **concerns** from political actors regarding the independence, mandate, financing, and the clarity and proportionality of the regulator’s powers.

The **Ombudsperson Institution of Kosovo (OIK)** operates under a robust legal framework aligned with the **Paris Principles** and the **Venice Principles**. To advance the **rule of law**, Kosovo’s **Ministry of Justice**, the **Judicial and Prosecutorial Councils**, the **Supreme Court**, and the acting **Chief State Prosecutor** signed a **Joint Statement** of Commitment and action plan in March 2023, providing for a series of assessments and legislative revisions to improve the systems of performance evaluation, disciplinary sanctions, recruitments and appointments, integrity checks, status, professional development, and asset declarations. Following EU advice, the government consulted the Venice Commission which provided recommendations. In the area of the rights of non-majority communities, the **Office for Good Governance (OGG)** within the Office of the Prime Minister reviewed the **2025–2026 Action Plan** under the *Strategy for the Advancement of the Rights of the Roma and Ashkali Communities (2022–2026)*. Measures were undertaken to enforce legal provisions ensuring **equal opportunities** for all citizens.

## VISA-FREE FOR MORE THAN 7 YEARS

### ALBANIA

#### 1. Visa policy alignment

Albania maintains a **visa-free regime with 11 countries of visa-required in the EU**, six with permanent visa exemption (Armenia, Azerbaijan, China, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, and Türkiye) and five with seasonal visa waivers allowing entry from 15 April to 31 December 2025 (Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Indonesia), although seasonal visa waivers are not compatible with the EU *acquis*. Additionally, Albania grants visa-free access to third-country nationals who hold a 10-year residence permit in the United Arab Emirates, provided the permit is valid for at least one year at the time of entry.

Albania removed Russia, India, and Egypt from its list of seasonal visa exemptions in April 2023 and revoked its visa-free agreement with Guyana in July 2024. In April 2025, Albania revoked the visa-free regime with Belarus and removed Bahrain from its seasonal visa-free list. However, Albania added Indonesia to the seasonal visa-free list in March 2024.

Under the **Reform Agenda of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans**, Albania has committed to terminate visa-free agreements with **at least two countries that are on the EU list of visa-required countries in 2025, at least one in 2026 and at least one in 2027**, without further extending visa-free agreements to other countries.

**The lack of full alignment with the EU visa policy continues to pose security and migration risks**, particularly along the **Western Balkan route**. Therefore, the **Commission expects faster and more decisive progress** from Albania on visa policy alignment. **Pending full alignment**, Albania must urgently **strengthen the screening of visa-free arrivals** of nationals from third countries presenting **illegal migration or security risks**.

Furthermore, the **visa issuance process requires improvement**. In 2024 and 2025, numerous migrants from Asian countries (notably Bangladesh and Pakistan) arrived illegally in the EU and Schengen countries after legally entering Albania with valid visas, including long-term visas with work permits. The Commission urges Albania to enhance its visa issuing procedures, aligning with EU **best practices** in visa processing and risk assessment.

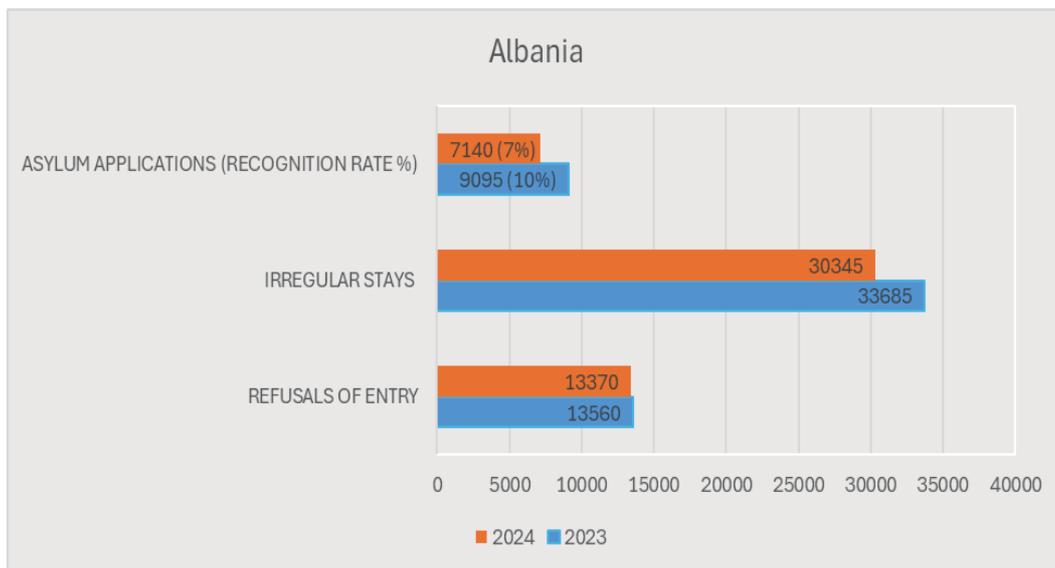
#### 2. Monitoring trends in illegal migration, applications for international protection, returns and readmission

In 2024, the **number of applications for international protection** lodged in EU Member States by Albanian nationals **decreased by 22%**, with 7,140 applications compared to 9,095 in 2023. The recognition rate declined from 10% in 2023 to 7% in 2024.

Member States reported 640 **illegal border crossings** by Albanian nationals in 2024, maintaining levels similar to those in 2023. The number of Albanian nationals found to be illegally staying in Member States decreased by 10%, from 33,685 in 2023 to 30,345 in 2024.

The number of **refusals of entry** remained relatively stable, but at a very high level, with 13,370 refusals in 2024, compared to 13,560 in 2023.

As for return procedures, 15,100 **return decisions** were issued in 2024, marking a 14% decrease from 17,465 in 2023. A total of 8,130 returns of Albanian nationals were reported in 2024, slightly down from 8,230 in 2023 (a decrease of 1%). Nonetheless, the return rate improved from 47% in 2023 to 54% in 2024, continuing the positive trend observed in recent years.



Source: Eurostat

### 3. Cooperation on migration, border management and readmission

Albanian authorities continued departure checks on their own nationals travelling to the EU/Schengen area, with particular attention to minors. In 2024, the Border Police refused exit to 6,944 Albanian citizens, a 7.7% decrease compared to 2023 (7,521 refusals), despite a 14% increase in the total number of Albanians travelling abroad.

In 2024, 1,394 illegal migrants were apprehended in Albania, mostly entering from Greece and attempting to transit through Kosovo or Montenegro to the EU. While Albania remains a **transit country**, illegal flows through its territory are smaller than those along the main Western Balkans route (via Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina). Albania took steps to **strengthen the screening of third-country nationals**, rejecting 67% of visa applications and refusing entry to 671 foreign citizens at the border.

The country remained committed to the **EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans** and continued implementation of its **Intersectoral Strategy for Integrated Border Management 2021–2027**, along with the **National Strategy for Migration 2024–2030** and its corresponding **Action Plan (2024–2026)**.

Albania enhanced cooperation with Frontex, following the entry into force in June 2024 of the new Status Agreement signed in September 2023. This enabled the deployment of standing corps officers at all of Albania's borders. A **Frontex Liaison Officer** based in Tirana covers Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Border and immigration services benefited from **EU support**, including **equipment and specialised training**. Albania continued to **implement the EU-Albania Readmission Agreement**. Member States reported effective cooperation with Albania on readmission, with no major issues flagged.

Albania **maintained its cooperation with the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA)**. A **Roadmap (2024–2027)** endorsed by Albanian authorities in October 2024 is being implemented. Albania has the required institutions in place to handle asylum claims. The asylum law and its bylaws still need to be implemented effectively.

Member States and Schengen-associated countries raised concerns about cases of Albanian nationals evading Schengen Information System (SIS) alerts by changing their surnames, a practice that undermines the system's effectiveness.

#### **4. Actions taken on unfounded asylum applications**

Albania continued to implement the **2022 Inter-institutional Action Plan** “On the Prevention of the Asylum-Seeking Phenomenon of Albanian Citizens in the Schengen/EU countries”, and to maintain close bilateral cooperation with the most affected EU Member States. In parallel, Albania reinforced border checks on Albanian citizens travelling to the Schengen area (see above). The rules governing entry and stay in the EU, as well as the consequences of violations, including deportation for abuse of the asylum system, were broadly publicised in national media.

Albania cooperated also with regional counterparts to address the issue of Albanian citizens seeking to bypass stricter controls by travelling through neighbouring countries before entering the EU.

These measures appear to be yielding results. In 2024, the number of asylum applications lodged by Albanian nationals in the EU decreased compared to 2023.

#### **5. Cooperation on security**

In 2024, Albania continued **cooperation with EU agencies**, including Europol, Frontex, Eurojust, CEPOL, as well as with several **EU Member States**, in the **fight against serious, organised and transnational crime**. Albania actively participated in 19 Joint Investigation Teams (JITs), targeting a broad range of criminal activities, including trafficking in human beings (notably for sexual exploitation), synthetic drug production and trafficking, drug smuggling, etc. Albania has generally provided a high level of cooperation with all partner countries involved.

Albania should make more use of the CEPOL training activities enabled by its working arrangement with the agency and integrate the gained knowledge and competencies into the national law enforcement training system

Albania remained engaged in the **implementation of the Joint Action Plan on Counter Terrorism for the Western Balkans** and in discussions on the preparation of the new Joint Action Plan that was signed on October 2025.

## 6. Citizenship by investment

Albania did not establish any investor citizenship scheme but only suspended instead of repealing the relevant legal basis. The Commission will continue to monitor this issue closely.

## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

### 1. Visa policy alignment

Bosnia and Herzegovina maintains a **permanent visa-free regime with seven third countries** which are visa required in the EU (Azerbaijan, China, Qatar, Russia, Türkiye, Kuwait and Vanuatu, removed from the EU's visa-free list in December 2024).

Bosnia and Herzegovina introduced **visa requirements** for citizens of Bahrain (September 2023) and Oman (March 2024). However, in April 2025 a seasonal visa-waiver was granted to Bahrain and Oman and renewed for Saudi Arabia. Such seasonal visa waivers are not compatible with the EU *acquis*. Bosnia and Herzegovina committed to terminate one visa-free agreement per year during the period of 2025-2027.

The **lack of full alignment** of Bosnia and Herzegovina's visa policy with that of the EU **poses a significant risk of illegal migration via the Western Balkans route**, particularly with regard to nationals of Türkiye, of whom 4 988 were intercepted in 2024 while attempting to illegally cross Bosnia and Herzegovina - Croatia border. The Commission **expects substantial progress** by Bosnia and Herzegovina towards full **visa policy alignment**.

Bosnia and Herzegovina introduced biometric visa applications as of 1 October 2025 in its diplomatic network and work on fully operationalising its central visa information system. Upon introduction of the biometric visa applications, local authorities actively work on engagement of external service providers to make visa application process more efficient as per EU *acquis* and best practices.

**Pending full alignment**, Bosnia and Herzegovina should adopt, as a minimum temporary measure, a **more rigorous screening process for visa-free arrivals**, focusing especially on nationals of countries assessed to pose **elevated risks related to illegal migration or security**. In addition, authorities are encouraged to intensify the establishment of passenger data exchange (API/PNR) systems.

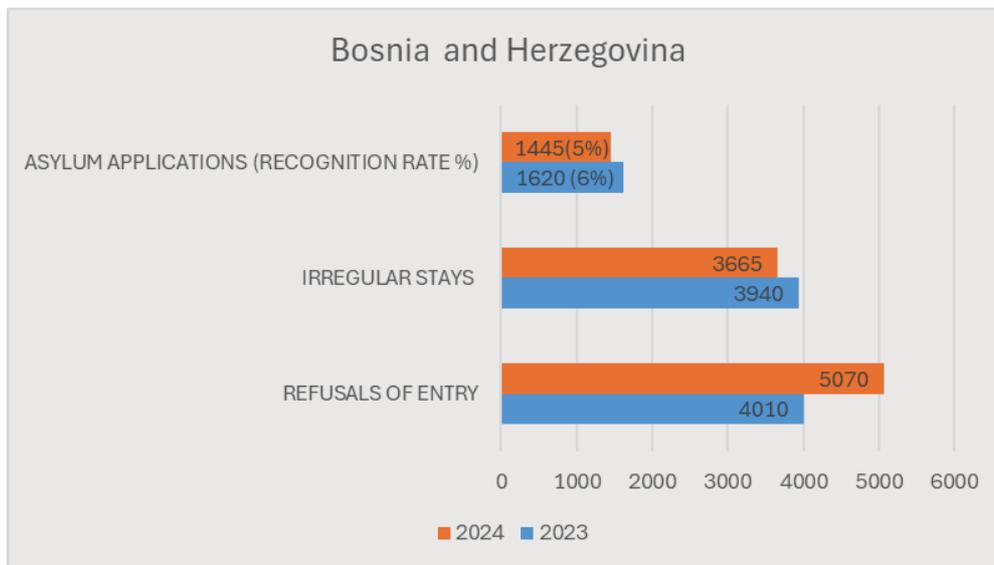
## 2. Monitoring trends in illegal migration, applications for international protection, returns and readmission

In 2024, **1,445 applications for international protection** were submitted by nationals of Bosnia and Herzegovina in EU Member States, representing an 11% decrease compared to 2023 (1,620). This continues the downward trend observed since 2021. The recognition rate remained stable (6% in 2023, 5% in 2024).

The number of **illegal border crossings** by Bosnian nationals remained marginal (78 in 2024, compared to 20 in 2023). The number of Bosnian nationals found to be illegally staying in Member States declined by 7% (3,940 in 2023, compared to 3,665 in 2024).

The number of **refusals of entry** increased by 26%, from 4,010 in 2023 to 5,070 in 2024.

The number of **return decisions** issued to Bosnian nationals increased slightly in 2024 to 2,520, up from 2,465 in 2023 (+2%). The number of returns carried out also increased to 1,275, compared with 1,230 in 2023 (+4%). The return rate remained stable (50% in 2023, 51% in 2024).



Source: Eurostat

## 3. Cooperation on migration, border management and readmission

In 2024, the **border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia** remained the **busiest entry point** for illegal migrants seeking access to the European Union through the Western Balkans route. Croatia reported an **increase in illegal border crossings** from Bosnia and Herzegovina (18,279 compared to 14,957 in 2023, +22%).

Citizens of Armenia, Georgia<sup>2</sup>, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan were detected using **Russian passports** to enter Bosnia and Herzegovina visa-free. **Fraudulent Turkish passports were used by Afghan nationals** to enter Bosnia and Herzegovina with the objective to illegally cross into EU Member States.

Nationals of various third countries which are visa-required in EU were reported entering Bosnia and Herzegovina with **visas or work permits based on fraudulent employment contracts** with purpose to attempt illegal entry into the EU.

Bosnia and Herzegovina **constructively participated in the EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans**. The adoption of a **Law on foreigners** in 2023, a **Law on border control** in January 2025, and a **strategy for integrated border management 2024–2029** in July 2025 marked steps towards alignment with EU standards.

Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a **Frontex status agreement** with the EU on 11 June 2025. Operational cooperation with Frontex resulting in deployment of Standing Corps officers that officially started on 29 October 2025, notably including **deployments at Sarajevo International Airport**, supported by the Frontex liaison officer in Belgrade.

Bosnia and Herzegovina increased the number of police personnel along its borders but is still facing significant staff shortages. EU Member States provided **technical assistance, training, and coordinated patrols**, yet the mountainous **terrain** is a challenge to effective control, especially along the long **border with Croatia**. Once migrants enter Bosnia and Herzegovina, many manage to cross into the EU undetected.

In 2024, Bosnia and Herzegovina carried out 508 voluntary returns (123 in 2023) and 14 forced returns (43 in 2023).

**Cooperation on readmission** was generally positive in 2024, when . Bosnia and Herzegovina accepted 3,255 migrants returned from Croatia under the bilateral readmission agreement (2,458 in 2023). However, two Member States reported **delays and low identification rates** (around 55%), primarily due to **false identities and obstruction** by returnees.

On 11 June 2025, Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted a **strategy for the reception and integration of citizens returning** under readmission agreements, along with an **action plan for 2024–2026**. This framework aims to establish a **sustainable, rights-based return and reintegration system** to **reduce illegal migration** and enhance **societal reintegration**.

Bosnia and Herzegovina also **maintained its cooperation with the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA)**. A **second Roadmap (2025–2027)** has been developed jointly by the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EUAA to strengthen local asylum and reception system.

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2 In case of citizens of Georgia, who can enter visa-free both EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the use of fake Russian passports is of interest essentially to those subject to interdiction of entry into EU.

## Cooperation on security

In 2024, Bosnia and Herzegovina continued to cooperate with Europol, including through its **liaison officer based in the Hague** and the **regular exchange of information via the SIENA communication system**, focusing particularly on the **fight against migrant smuggling**, with **24 joint operations reported**. Cooperation with EU continued also through the **European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT)** - with particular emphasis on the **trafficking of firearms** - and through **Interpol channels**.

An area of concern is the **production and distribution of forged identity documents** including **passports and driving licences** of various EU Member States - **by criminal groups operating in Bosnia and Herzegovina**.

In 2024 Bosnia and Herzegovina continued implementation of the Joint Action Plan on Counter Terrorism (JAP), however some objective remained unimplemented and need to be addressed by BiH in the framework of the new JAP, which was signed on 30 October 2025.

## GEORGIA

### 1. Visa policy alignment

Georgia maintains a visa-free regime with **26 countries** visa-required in EU: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Belarus, Belize, Botswana, China (since April 2024), Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Fiji, Iran, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Tajikistan, Thailand, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Georgia continues to pursue a **visa policy that diverges substantially from the EU *acquis***, particularly by granting entry to nationals of countries visa-required both in the EU and in Georgia on the basis of a **visa or residence permit issued by a third country**. Georgian authorities themselves acknowledged that this practice creates a **risk of illegal secondary migration**, both **into Georgia** and **onward to the European Union**. In response, and as of **16 May 2025**, Georgia introduced a **partial restriction** by limiting this practice to nationals of **17 high-risk countries** (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Uganda, and Yemen) **only if they hold a visa or residence permit valid for less than one year**, issued by one of the **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries**.

This measure is insufficient. The practice must be **fully discontinued**, in line with EU norms.

**No progress** has been made by Georgia in aligning its visa policy with the EU *acquis* **between 2021 and 2024 despite recommendations contained in successive Visa Suspension Mechanism**

reports<sup>3</sup>. The **signature of a visa waiver agreement with China in April 2024** has widened the gap between Georgia’s visa regime and that of the EU.

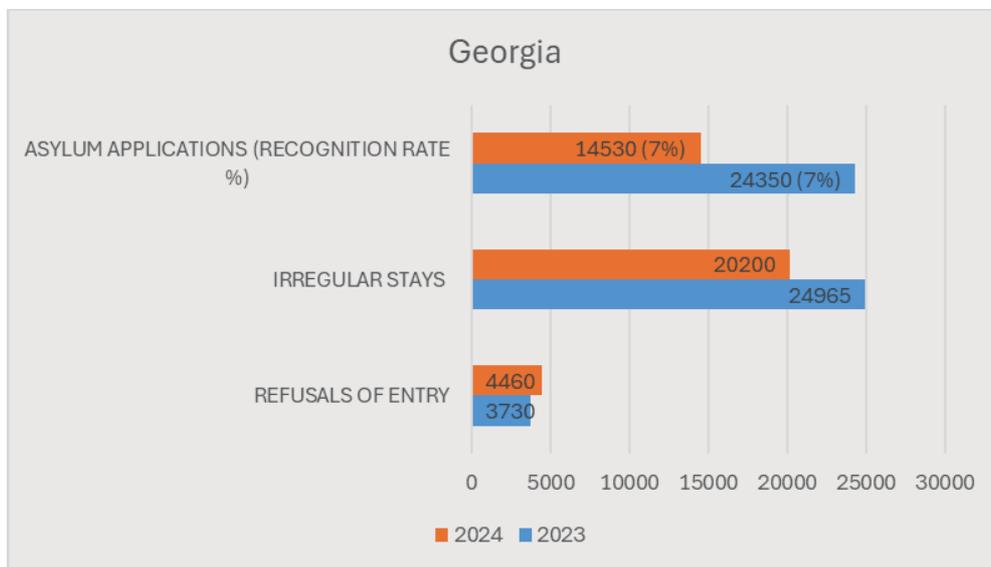
The **alignment with the EU’s visa policy is a core requirement** for all countries in the EU’s neighbourhood benefiting from **visa-free travel to the Schengen area**. The **continued absence of tangible progress** in this area shows the lack of commitment of Georgian authorities to comply with its obligations towards the EU as a visa-free country.

## 2. Monitoring trends in illegal migration, applications for international protection, returns and readmission

In 2024, the number of **applications for international protection** lodged in Member States by nationals of Georgia decreased by 40% compared to 2023, yet remaining at a high level, with 14,530 applications lodged (compared to 24,350 in 2023). The **recognition rate** remained stable at 7%, unchanged from the previous year.

**Illegal border crossings** by Georgian nationals continued to be marginal (10 reported in 2023 and 29 in 2024). The number of Georgian nationals found to be illegally staying in Member States remains high but decreased, falling to 20 200 from 24,965 in 2023. Refusals of entry issued to Georgian nationals increased from 3,730 in 2023 to 4,460 in 2024.

The number of **return decisions issued** to Georgian nationals declined from 20,165 in 2023 to 17,375 in 2024. The number of effective returns increased, reaching 11,525 in 2024 (10,195 in 2023). The return rate improved, rising from 51% in 2023 to 66% in 2024.



Source: Eurostat

3 Fourth VSM Report (4 August 2021), Fifth VSM Report (5 December 2022), Sixth VSM Report (18 October 2023) and Seventh VSM Report (6 December 2024).

### 3. Cooperation on migration, border management and readmission

Following the conclusions of the **European Council** of June 2024, that the Georgian authorities' course of action jeopardises Georgia's EU path, most forms of EU cooperation with the Ministry of Interior and security agencies were suspended.

Cooperation with **Frontex** has remained active, notably through the ongoing deployment of **advisers and observers** in Georgia and the joint execution of **Operation Georgia 2024**, carried out under the **Working Arrangement renewed in 2021**. However, further **renewal of this Arrangement is not foreseen in the foreseeable future**.

Georgia remains a member of the **Eastern Partnership Risk Analysis Network (EaP-RAN)**, a Frontex-led platform for **intelligence-sharing** and **regional cooperation on risk analysis**. Georgian border authorities also participated in several **Frontex-led specialised training sessions** throughout 2024 and continued their involvement in the **Air Borders Risk Analyses Network (AB-RAN)**.

Georgia's level of **cooperation on readmission and returns** in 2024 remained high, particularly considering the number of returnees. In May 2024, Georgia introduced an **electronic case management system** – the **Georgia Readmission Case Management System (RCMS)** – enabling faster and more efficient processing of readmission requests and the **issuance of travel documents**.

Illegal migration of Georgian nationals to the EU remains high (see above). In particular, the issue of Georgian nationals remaining illegally in the EU to access medical care or to apply for asylum on medical grounds continues to be a serious issue of concern. Since 2021, Georgia has undertaken notable efforts to curb illegal migration to the EU, including the adoption of an **Entry-Exit Law**, **implementation of information campaigns**, **exit controls to verify the fulfilment of entry conditions in the Schengen area**, and the **deployment of Frontex officers at Georgian airports**. Nonetheless, the increase in refusals of entry to Georgian citizens in 2024 reflects persisting vulnerabilities in pre-departure awareness and control mechanisms.

One EU Member State has flagged **security and illegal migration concerns** linked to a significant influx of nationals from India and Pakistan into Georgia. Georgia itself is under increasing migratory pressure, including cases of **migrant smuggling**. In April 2024, the country **revised its border and immigration legislation**, introducing **criminal liability for migrant smuggling** and for **facilitating illegal stay**. On 27 December 2024, Georgia adopted the **Fifth Action Plan (2025)** under its **2021–2030 Migration Strategy**. The country also continued implementation of its **Integrated Border Management Strategy** and the associated **Action Plan for 2023–2027**.

Georgia also faces challenges linked to **asylum abuse**. In 2024, Georgian authorities received 1,641 asylum requests, primarily from nationals of Türkiye, Iran, Pakistan, Ukraine, and India, but only 11 applicants were found eligible for refugee status, and 104 applicants for humanitarian protection. Moreover, Georgia has emerged as a **regional hub for commercial surrogacy**, a development that raises **serious concerns about potential risks of human trafficking**.

In June 2025, Georgia adopted a comprehensive legislative package amending 18 legal acts related to the status and regulation of foreign nationals. These amendments introduce provisions whereby

acts such as petty hooliganism committed by a foreigner, disobedience to a police officer, and insulting an official may constitute grounds for expulsion and an entry ban into Georgia for a period of up to three years. The timing and context of the legislative changes raised concerns as similar clauses have been used against Georgian protestors during the ongoing protests. In this context, Georgia is expected to ensure that the rights of foreign nationals are safeguarded, particularly in migration management procedures and in the assessment of applications for international protection, through robust procedural safeguards.

#### 4. Cooperation on security

Throughout 2024, Georgia maintained active cooperation with **Europol**, particularly within the framework of **EMPACT operational activities**, including information exchange and participation in **analytical projects**. In July 2024 the **Arrangement on the Exchange and Protection of Classified Information** between Georgia and Europol entered into force. Georgia continued to implement its **National Counterterrorism Strategy 2022–2026**. Georgia remains a member of **MONEYVAL**<sup>4</sup>. In **December 2024** MONEYVAL adopted Georgia's **Third Enhanced Follow-up Report**, acknowledging improvements in Georgia's **AML/CFT (Anti-Money Laundering/Combating the Financing of Terrorism)** framework. However, further action is required to fully comply with outstanding **Financial Action Task Force (FATF)** recommendations.

Concerning **document security, non-biometric passports** were fully **phased out as of 1 January 2025 and replacement of non-electronic identity cards** with electronic versions was **completed in July 2024**.

There are **security concerns** linked to **Russian influence, in the context of the growth of the Russian diaspora** in Georgia. Since the onset of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine approximately **160 000 Russian citizens** have emigrated to Georgia. Georgian **airports are frequently used as transit points** by Russian nationals travelling to Europe. The number of direct flights and destinations served between Georgia and Russia has been steadily increasing since their restoration in 2023. There is an increasing concern **that Russian presence in Georgia** may be exploited to carry **foreign influence operations**.

Another area of concern is the **potential misuse of Georgian citizenship**, especially when obtained via **simplified naturalisation procedures** by Russian nationals. Such cases raise both **illegal migration risks** and broader **security implications** for the EU.

In addition, weaknesses remain in Georgia's **identity document management**, notably the possibility for Georgian nationals to easily change names and obtain new identity documents. In some documented cases, individuals have reportedly changed identities up to five times, enabling circumvention of EU return and entry bans.

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4 Council of Europe's Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism.

## 5. Fight against corruption

The Sixth Report under the Visa Suspension Mechanism of 18 October 2023, and the Seventh Report of 6 December 2024 recommended that Georgia should:

- set up an Asset Recovery Office and Asset Management Office, and continue efforts in asset tracing, freezing, management, confiscation and disposal.
- adopt a new anti-corruption strategy and action plan, ensuring adequate resources for their implementation and pay special attention to investigation, prosecution, and adjudication of high-level corruption cases.
- amend the Law on Anti-Corruption Bureau to address key Venice Commission recommendations, particularly those pertaining to the Anti-Corruption Bureau's effective independence, political neutrality and functions.

While the National Agency of State Property (NASP) holds the formal mandate for the management of confiscated assets and the Office of Prosecutor General of Georgia has competence in the matter of cooperation and exchange of information with asset recovery offices in other countries, **Georgia did not yet establish a dedicated Asset Recovery Office**, a key institutional component for an effective anti-corruption framework.

Georgia started to draft an anti-corruption strategy and action plan which would tentatively become operational in 2026; they are foreseen to cover the periods 2026-2030 and 2026-2028 respectively, however, **no comprehensive anti-corruption strategy and action plan** exist currently.

The recommendations from the **Fifth Evaluation Round of the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO)**, which included amongst others the **introduction of a code of conduct for persons entrusted with top executive functions**, remain only **partially implemented**.

As noted already in the **Seventh Report under the Visa Suspension Mechanism**, the **Law on the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB)**, adopted in **May 2024**, **did not sufficiently address the core recommendations** of the **Venice Commission**, particularly concerning the **ACB's independence, political impartiality, and operational scope**.

On 18 November 2025 Georgian authorities announced that Anti-Corruption Bureau, created in 2022, will be abolished on 2 March 2026, and its functions transferred to the State Audit Office.

Considering these developments, it is evident that the **recommendations outlined in the Seventh Report regarding anti-corruption** remain **unimplemented** and the integrity framework in Georgia has further progressed in a manner inconsistent with EU standards.

## 6. Fundamental rights

The **adoption of the Law "On Transparency of Foreign Influence" in May 2024**, followed by the **legislative package on "Family Values and Protection of Minors" in September 2024**, contributed to a significant deterioration in relations between the **EU and Georgia**. The EU considers these legislative measures to be **incompatible with fundamental rights and freedoms**,

notably **freedom of association**, freedom of assembly, **freedom of expression**, and the **right to privacy**.

In view of the developments in Georgia, the **European Council** concluded in June and October 2024 that the authorities' course of action jeopardised Georgia's EU path, de facto leading to a halt of the accession process. In December 2024, the **European Council** regretted the Georgian government's decision to suspend the country's EU accession process until 2028.

As a consequence of these developments, on **27 January 2025**, the **Council** decided to **partially suspend the application of the 2011 EU–Georgia Visa Facilitation Agreement**, opening the possibility for Member States to take national measures to reintroduce a **visa requirement for holders of Georgian diplomatic, service, and special passports**<sup>5</sup>. The Commission adopted guidelines recommending Member States to introduce such a requirement on 15 February 2025<sup>6</sup>. As of November 2025, nineteen EU Member States and Norway notified introduction of such requirement.

Following the **European Council's** conclusions from 17 October 2024, the Seventh Report under Visa Suspension Mechanism recommended the following actions to Georgia:

- Ensure and uphold the protection of fundamental rights of all Georgian citizens, including the freedoms of association, assembly and expression, the right to privacy, the right to participate in public affairs, as well as the prohibition of discrimination.
- Avoid and repeal any legislation that may restrict fundamental rights and freedoms, go against the principle of non-discrimination and contradict relevant European and international standards. In particular, repeal the Law on 'transparency of foreign influence' and the legislative package on 'family values and protection of minors', and amend the national strategy and action plan on human rights to ensure that the rights of LGBTIQ persons are fully upheld.

**Georgia has not addressed the recommendations of the Seventh Report and has instead regressed further in key areas of governance and fundamental rights**, with legislative changes such as the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) as well as amendments to the Law on Grants, the Law on Political Associations of Citizens, the Code on Administrative Offences, the Law on Broadcasting and the Criminal Code. Collectively, these measures have served to restrict dissenting voices, including those of protestors, opposition representatives, civil society actors, human rights defenders and independent media, severely curtailing human rights.

Following the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, the parliamentary elections of 26 October 2024 and the government's announcement on 28 November 2024 that Georgia would not pursue the opening of accession negotiations until 2028, widespread protests erupted. During these events, demonstrators were subjected to unlawful, and excessive use of force by law enforcement, including cases amounting to torture and ill-treatment. While no law enforcement officers have been held accountable for their actions, protestors have been receiving

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<sup>5</sup> Council Decision (EU) 2025/170

<sup>6</sup> C(2025) 980 final

disproportionate sentences revealing the political instrumentalisation of the justice system. Several opposition figures have been arrested and sentenced to prison and ineligibility, further threatening the existence of a pluralistic democracy in Georgia. The safety of journalists has significantly deteriorated, with cases involving intimidation, hate speech, physical violence, and legal harassment. These trends combined with the effects of repressive legislation have severely hampered media professionals' ability to operate freely and independently.

In parallel, Georgian authorities have failed to acknowledge or address the **systemic discrimination faced by LGBTIQ individuals**. Impunity persists for those who incite or perpetrate violence against LGBTIQ persons. Moreover, legal amendments in April 2025 removed the term “gender” from fifteen legal texts, replacing it with “equality between women and men,” and eliminating references to “gender identity” altogether. This marks a significant departure from previous efforts to align Georgia’s legal framework with international human rights standards and the EU gender equality *acquis*.

Separately, the Seventh VSM Report had recommended aligning the Law on Personal Data Protection with the EU *acquis*, in line with Venice Commission guidance on institutional independence, impartiality, and enforcement powers. However, as of December 2025, no legislative progress has been made in this area.

## REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

### 1. Visa alignment

Moldova has currently a **visa-free regime with 11 countries that are on the EU list of visa-required countries** (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Qatar, Russia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Uzbekistan and Vanuatu, which was removed from EU’s visa-free list in February 2025).

Moldova-Ecuador and Moldova-Cuba agreements on visa-free travel were terminated in April 2024 and February 2025 respectively. Moldova declared that it will fully align its visa policy with the EU’s visa policy by the date of accession. In the meantime, the possibility for further alignment with the EU’s visa policy will be assessed yearly as part of updates of the National Plan for adoption of the EU *acquis*.

The Commission expects Moldova to make **significant further progress on visa policy alignment to address the illegal migration and/or security risks for the EU** and its Member States, posed by EU visa-required countries which are on Moldova visa-free list.

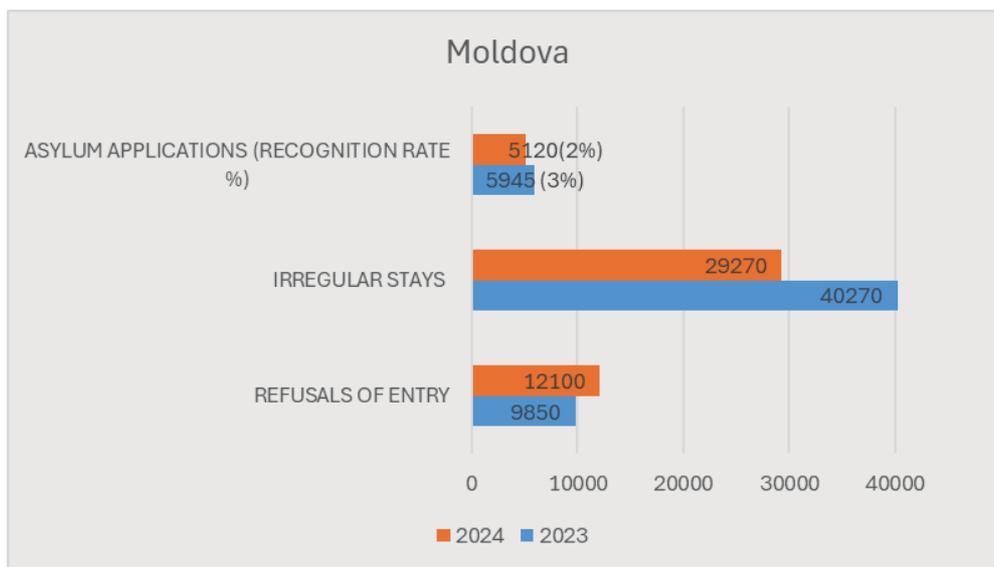
Pending full alignment, Moldova has committed to carry out more rigorous screening of visa-free arrivals of third-country nationals, in particular those from countries presenting security or illegal migration risks.

## 2. Monitoring trends in illegal migration, applications for international protection, returns and readmission

The **number of applications for international protection by Moldovan nationals in Member States decreased**, with 5,945 applications lodged in 2023 against 5,120 applications in 2024. The **recognition rate was 2 % in 2024 (3% in 2023)**.

Illegal crossings of the EU's external borders by Moldovan nationals trying to cross remained marginal (20 in 2023, 39 in 2024). The number of Moldovan nationals found to be illegally staying in Member States decreased from 40,270 in 2023 to 29,270 in 2024. In the same period, the number of Moldovan nationals **refused entry rose** from 9,850 in 2023 to 12,100 in 2024.

In 2024, the number of return orders issued to Moldovan nationals decreased from 9,115 in 2023 to 8,225 in 2024, while the number of returns increased from 3,590 in 2023 to 4,035 in 2024. **The return rate was 49% in 2024, (39% in 2023)**.



Source: Eurostat

## 3. Cooperation on migration, border management and readmission

Despite the efforts of the Moldovan government, the country's proximity to the EU, coupled with its visa-free status, continues to contribute to **illegal short-term labour migration and frequent overstays by Moldovan nationals**. Moldovan citizens are consistently among the most frequently detected visa-free nationals found to be staying illegally within the EU.

Moldova continued to address the issue of illegal migration in cooperation with Frontex, Europol, CEPOL, and the European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM), including through the EU Support Hub for Internal Security and Border Management in Moldova.

In the area of border management, Moldova continued its cooperation with Frontex in 2024 under the framework of the Status Agreement signed in March 2022. Joint Operations "Moldova 2023" and "Moldova 2024" were conducted between 25 January 2023 and 22 January 2025, involving the deployment of numerous Frontex officers at both the air border (Chişinău International Airport) and land borders with Romania and Ukraine. A follow-up operation, "Moldova 2025," was launched on 22 January 2025.

The Frontex Liaison Officer to the Eastern Partnership countries, initially intended to be based in Kyiv, continues to operate from Chisinau instead, since July 2022. A European migration liaison officer to the Eastern Partnership countries started working in 2024.

The EU and its Member States and EU agencies continued to assist Moldova with training (communications, cyber security, mobile border surveillance, etc.) and equipment (donated, co-owned or leased), the latter including patrol boats, vehicles, border surveillance equipment, various electronics, etc. Joint border patrols with Romania continued. The law on the State border, partially aligned with the EU *acquis*, has introduced provisions for the collection of biometric data, but Moldova still needs to adopt implementing legislation to operationalise the measure at border crossing points.

**Moldova's cooperation on readmission and returns was rated as excellent both by Frontex and numerous Member States**, especially considering the high volume of cases treated. Travel documents were delivered quickly and efficiently. One EU Member State signalled some issues with the acceptance of third-country returnees, who transited through Moldova but were not residents.

#### **4. Cooperation on security**

In 2024, **Moldova continued to face significant security challenges**, primarily as a result of the **spillover effects of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine**. The country has been subject to a wide range of destabilising factors, including **hybrid threats, cyberattacks, transborder criminal activity**, and **foreign interference from Russia and its proxies**.

In response, Moldova maintained **intensive operational cooperation with Europol**, marked by the **deployment of a Moldovan liaison officer** to Europol headquarters in 2024 and the **presence of Europol Guest Officers in Moldova**. These deployments aimed to enhance **joint operational support** and promote the **exchange of expertise and best practices** in combating cross-border organised crime. Moldova remained actively engaged in the **European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) Operational Action Plans 2024–2025**, contributing to **priority areas** such as **trafficking in human beings (including minors), migrant smuggling, drug trafficking, and firearms trafficking**.

Cooperation with **Eurojust** intensified, notably through the **deployment of a Moldovan liaison prosecutor** and participation in several **joint investigation teams (JITs)**. In April 2025, Moldova further signed a new **Working Arrangement with CEPOL**, aimed at **enhancing training and**

**institutional capacity.** Collaboration with EUDA and **bilateral partnerships with several EU Member States** continued to focus on addressing **cross-border criminality**, including targeting the **use and detection of forged and falsified documents.**

Nevertheless, security concerns remain, including regarding firearms trafficking through Moldova into the EU. This issue was addressed as part of the **EU Support Hub for Internal Security and Border Management.**

## **MONTENEGRO**

### **1. Visa policy alignment**

As of 2025, **Montenegro maintains a permanent visa-free regime for 8 countries** visa-required in EU (Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Belarus, China, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye) and grants a seasonal visa-waiver to citizens of Kazakhstan.

Montenegro also grants a **seasonal visa waiver of up to 10 days** to certain third-country nationals holding a **residence permit from the United Arab Emirates valid for at least three years.** **Montenegro removed Armenia, Egypt, Kuwait, Uzbekistan and Vanuatu from its visa-free list. in 2025,** but earlier, in December 2024, granted a permanent visa-waiver to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. **Seasonal visa-waivers are not compatible with EU *acquis*** and full visa policy alignment is a **closing benchmark for Chapter 24** of the EU accession negotiations. In October 2025, Montenegro suspended its visa free regime with Türkiye, but only as a temporary measure.<sup>7</sup>

**Montenegro has committed to reviewing existing visa-free regimes** based on **tourism-related data**, with the aim of **progressively aligning** its visa policy with that of the EU. Montenegro continued to pursue objectives under its Reform Agenda, notably:

- the **modernisation of its border and security information systems**, aiming for **full interoperability between systems and databases by the end of 2025;**
- the **initiation of biometric data collection for visa applicants**, in preparation for full alignment with EU visa procedures, by the end of 2026.

Under the Reform Agenda, **Montenegro has also committed to introducing**, by June 2027, **screening mechanisms** for visa-exempt nationals considered to pose a **risk of illegal migration, including** a wider use of requirement that the nationals of certain visa-free third countries travel as part of a group (this measure is already in place for certain nationalities)

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<sup>7</sup> On 27 October 2025, in response to a domestic incident involving Turkish nationals, the Government of Montenegro introduced a temporary visa requirement vis-à-vis citizens of Türkiye with the primary aim of preserving public order and the safety of Montenegrin citizens. As it is temporary (although with no known expiry date), this measure cannot, at present, be considered as a permanent termination of Montenegro's visa-free regime with Türkiye. The Commission will monitor the situation as it unfolds.

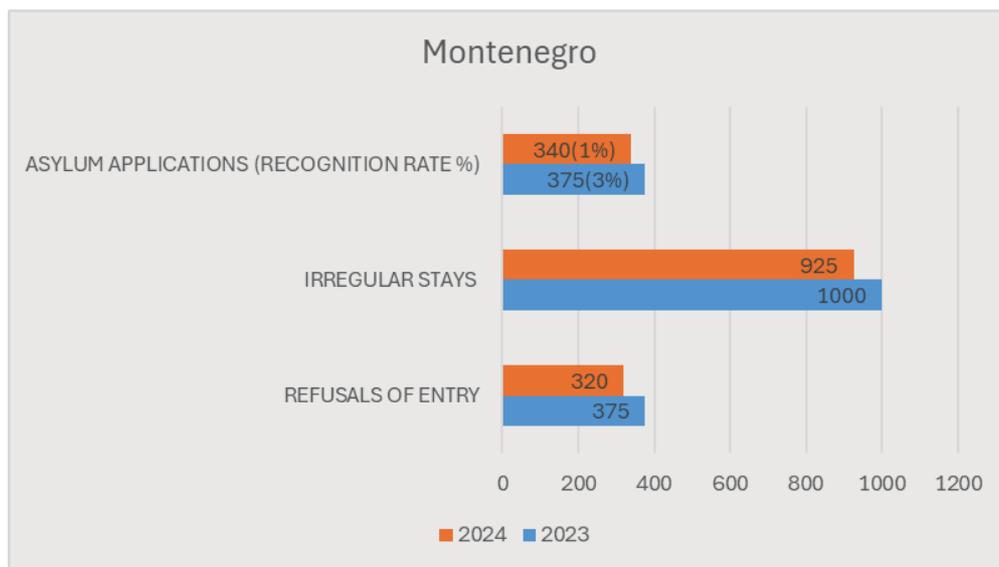
## 2. Monitoring trends in illegal migration, applications for international protection, returns and readmission

In 2024, the number of **applications for international protection lodged in EU Member States by nationals of Montenegro** decreased with **340 applications** submitted (**375 in 2023**). The **recognition rate fell from 3% in 2023 to 1% in 2024**.

The number of **illegal border crossings** by Montenegrin nationals remained marginal (**10 in 2024, 4 in 2023**). The number of **Montenegrin nationals found to be illegally staying** in Member States decreased from **1,000 in 2023 to 925 in 2024**.

Member States issued **320 entry refusals** to Montenegrin nationals in 2024 (**375 refusals in 2023**).

The number of **return decisions** issued in 2024 remained stable at **405 (410 in 2023)**. The number of **actual returns** rose from **195 in 2023 to 290 in 2024 (a 49% increase)**. As a result, the **return rate rose from 48% in 2023 to 72% in 2024**.



Source: Eurostat

## 3. Cooperation on migration, border management and readmission

Montenegro adopted its new *Integrated Border Management (IBM) Strategy 2025–2028*, aimed at further aligning Montenegro’s border management framework with the EU IBM concept. **Regarding readmission cooperation**, Member States generally reported good collaboration with Montenegrin authorities. In 2024, Montenegro submitted draft Implementing Protocols to the EU-Montenegro Readmission Agreement to ten Member States, and formal negotiations were launched with two of them. In addition, Montenegro made significant progress in 2024 in building communication channels with key countries of origin of illegal migrants, notably Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal, in view of enhancing readmission cooperation.

**As concerns cooperation with Frontex**, the annual joint operation under the framework of the 2023 *Status Agreement* commenced in January 2025. Joint operational activities involving Montenegrin and Frontex officers have continued at border crossing points and police stations. Frontex also deployed a *Joint Debriefing Team* at the Centre for Reception of Foreigners and continues to support Montenegro's border police with material and technical resources, including surveillance equipment.

Further efforts to enhance border security are being undertaken through the EU-funded project "*Individual Measure for Strengthening Integrated Border Management Capacities in Montenegro*," implemented by the International Organisation for Migration. The *2025–2027 Roadmap for Cooperation between the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) and Montenegro* was signed in March 2025.

#### 4. Cooperation on security

Montenegro continued to **cooperate with Europol and strengthened its institutional framework for tackling cross-border crime**. A new Interagency Working Team was established to plan and implement *EMPACT* (European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats) operational activities coordinated by Europol. Following the creation of a dedicated *Group for the Suppression of Human Smuggling and Cross-Border Crime*, **Montenegro enhanced its efforts to combat migrant smuggling**. Notably, in 2024, it took part for the first time in a Europol-led *Operational Task Force (OTF) "Zebra"*, focused specifically on this issue. Additionally, with the support of the *EU4FAST* project, Montenegro established a new *International Operational Centre* to serve as a *Single Point of Contact (SPoC)* for **coordination and information exchange between national law enforcement authorities and international partners**, including Europol and the law enforcement authorities of EU Member States.

Montenegro remained engaged in the implementation of the Joint Action Plan on Counter Terrorism for the Western Balkans and in discussions on the preparation of the new Joint Action Plan that was signed on 30 October 2025.

#### 5. Investor citizenship schemes

Montenegro's **investor citizenship scheme was terminated on 31 December 2022**, but authorities have continued to process applications for citizenship submitted before the termination date. In 2024, Montenegro's Ministry of Interior (MoI) **has issued 1,282 decisions granting Montenegrin citizenship** to applicants and their family members, which represents an 82,9% increase compared to 2023. Of those 1,282 decisions, **709 concerned individuals holding the citizenship of the Russian Federation, 42 of Belarus**, 35 of Türkiye, 29 of Saudi Arabia and 28 of the People's Republic of China. Citizenship was granted to nationals of other visa-required third countries (South Africa, Vietnam, India, Egypt, Pakistan, Lebanon, Thailand, Philippines, Senegal, Eritrea, Azerbaijan, Ivory Coast, Jordan, Bahrain, Armenia, Iran, Sudan, United Arab

Emirates, Vanuatu, Indonesia, Kazakhstan).<sup>8</sup> The MoI also issued 31 negative decisions. As of April 2025, **29 applications were being processed by the MoI.**

The processing of applications for citizenship involves checks by Montenegro's National Security Agency regarding the existence of security-related circumstances; checks by the Police Directorate against Interpol and Europol databases; and checks by Montenegro's Ministry of Justice on national criminal records.

Necessary security checks are required while analysing the remaining applications for citizenships under the provisions of the investor citizenship scheme and ensure that the citizenship granted to persons subject to international restrictive measures are revoked.

The Commission will continue to monitor any developments in the processing of applications for citizenship, with a particular focus on those presenting a security risk, until all pending applications have been processed.

## **NORTH MACEDONIA**

### **1. Visa policy alignment**

**Türkiye remains the only third country that is visa-free for North Macedonia while being visa-required under the EU visa regime. North Macedonia is therefore very near to full alignment of its visa policy with EU visa policy.**

North Macedonia has committed to introducing **additional security measures** by 2027 aimed at enhancing the screening of visa-exempt third-country nationals entering its territory.

### **2. Monitoring trends in illegal migration, applications for international protection, returns and readmission**

In 2024, the number of **applications for international protection** in Member States by nationals of North Macedonia **decreased by 50%**, with 3,435 applications lodged in 2024 compared with 6,890 in 2023. The recognition rate remained the same: 1%.

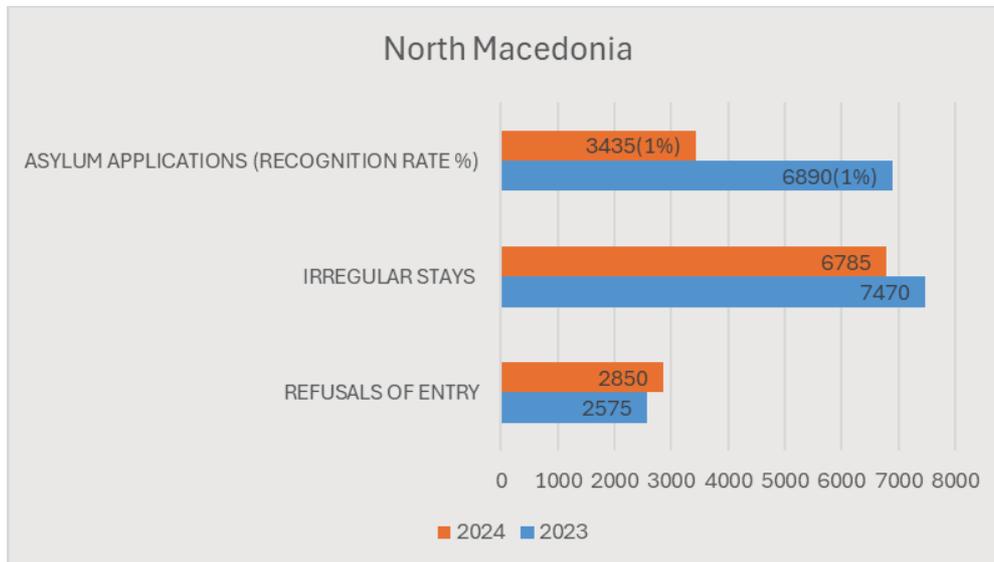
In 2024, the number of nationals of North Macedonia found to be illegally staying decreased with 6,785 illegal stays in 2024 (7,470 in 2023). The number of refusals of entry increased, (2,575 refusals in 2023, 2,850 in 2024).

The number of return decisions issued to nationals of North Macedonia decreased by 15% (2,600 in 2024, 3,045 in 2023). The number of persons returned increased by 27% (2,485 in 2024, 1,965 in 2023). Member States reported good cooperation on return and readmission; the return rate increased in 2024 (96% compared with 65% in 2023).

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<sup>8</sup> In decreasing order from the highest to the lowest number of citizenships.

Member States reported approximately 2,700 refusals of entry in 2024 - a 13% increase compared to 2023. In 2024 5,072 nationals of North Macedonia were identified as illegally staying/overstaying in the Schengen area, a figure that is similar to that from 2023.



Source: Eurostat

### 3. Cooperation on migration, border management and readmission

The implementation of the Status Agreement with Frontex continues without difficulties, notably through the activity of the *Frontex Joint Operation (JO) North Macedonia 2024*. In the area of border management, the application of Frontex training standards is ongoing.

**Cooperation on readmission in 2024 was generally satisfactory**, with Member States reporting smooth implementation of the relevant agreements. North Macedonia needs to improve its cooperation with countries of origin, especially because occasional delays in processing readmission requests were reported. **In the area of asylum**, the Asylum Sector, in cooperation with the *European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)*, has developed a third *Roadmap for Cooperation 2025–2027*, replacing the previous one. Staff from the Asylum Sector continue to participate in EUAA training programmes on asylum and refugee law. However, the quality of asylum procedures remains a concern.

### 4. Cooperation on security

**In 2024, North Macedonia continued cooperation with Europol.** In February 2025, a *Joint Investigation Team (JIT)* comprising North Macedonia, Serbia, Europol, and Eurojust successfully dismantled an organised criminal group involved in counterfeiting currency, primarily euros. Over the course of 2024, North Macedonia also participated in two additional JITs focused on currency counterfeiting. Between 2024 and 2025, North Macedonia has participated in **94 Operational Actions**, structured across **14 Operational Action Plans**, acting as **Co-Leader in six**. A National EMPACT Coordinator and Deputy were appointed in May 2022, and a new Deputy National Coordinator was appointed in 2025. Use of *CT-SIENA* (for counter-terrorism purposes) increased

substantially in 2024—North Macedonia’s second year of usage— with 4,520 messages exchanged, compared to 759 in the previous year.

North Macedonia remained engaged in the implementation of the Joint Action Plan on Counter Terrorism for the Western Balkans and in discussions on the preparation of the new Joint Action Plan that was signed in October 2025.

## 5. Investor citizenship schemes

The Law on Citizenship of North Macedonia allows the **acquisition of citizenship without prior residence requirements** for individuals deemed to represent a ‘**special economic interest**’ for the country. No amendments to this legal provision were adopted in 2024. During 2024, three applications for citizenship by citizens of Türkiye were submitted; two resulted in the granting of citizenship. Of the five applications submitted in 2023, one led to the granting of the citizenship to the applicant (from Bosnia and Herzegovina); four are still under assessment.

The Commission reiterates that the **implementation of this provision should not result in the systematic granting of citizenship in exchange for investment**. If misused, this scheme could negatively impact the integrity of the visa-free regime.

## SERBIA

### 1. Visa policy alignment

Since October 2022 Serbia progressed regularly towards more visa policy alignment with EU. In December 2024 Serbia introduced a visa regime for nationals of Kuwait, Mongolia, Oman and Qatar , fulfilling its commitments in this policy area under its *Reform Agenda* within the framework of the *Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*. Despite this progress, Serbia **currently maintains a visa-free regime with 12 countries which are visa-required in EU**: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Belarus, China, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Suriname, and Türkiye. In November 2023, Serbia adopted a *Plan for the Harmonization of the Visa Regime with EU Policy*, which states that full alignment with the EU list will take place six to twelve months prior to Serbia’s EU accession. However, this plan does not meet the EU expectations.

Several EU Member States and Frontex have identified visa-free access to Serbia for third-country nationals—especially from Türkiye, China, and Russia—as contributing to illegal migration flows to the EU. As such, the Commission urges Serbia to accelerate its efforts toward full alignment as a matter of priority.

**Pending full alignment, Serbia is urged to implement robust screening procedures for visa-exempt third-country nationals**, particularly those originating from countries presenting heightened security or illegal migration risks.

In May 2025, Serbia launched a new *digital platform for travel authorisations* as a pilot phase in the digitalisation of its visa application and approval procedures. The platform currently covers 42 countries which are visa required for Serbia, of which 26 are also visa-required in the EU, therefore Serbia should ensure appropriate safeguards and security checks when processing the travel authorisations from these countries. At this stage, digitalisation applies exclusively to tourist visas and short-term stays.

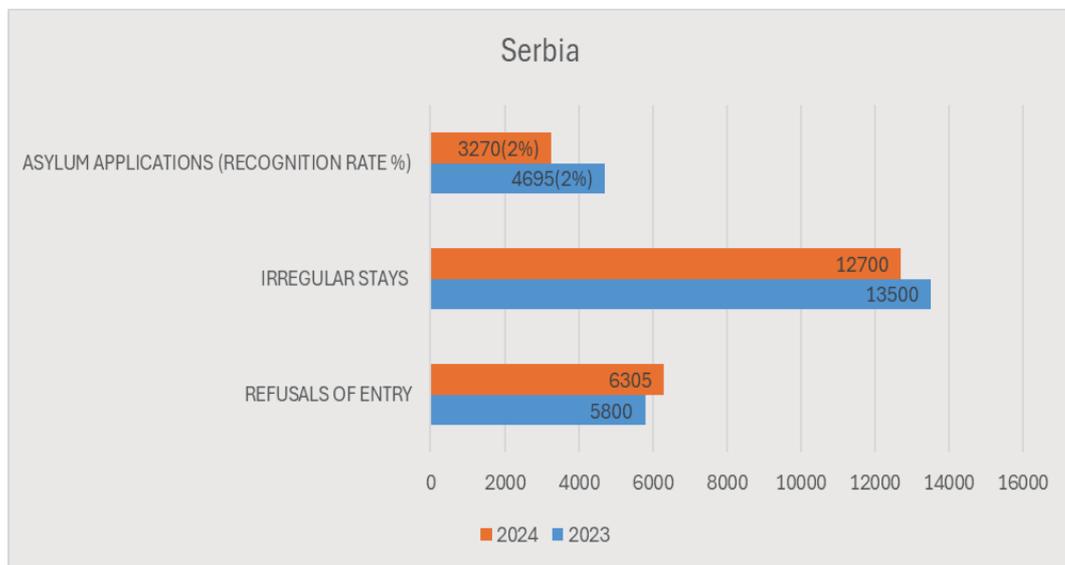
## 2. Monitoring trends in illegal migration, applications for international protection, returns and readmission

In 2024, **3,270 applications for international protection** were submitted by Serbian nationals in Member States, a decrease of 30% compared to 2023 (4 695). The recognition rate remained stable with 2% in 2023 and in 2024.

The number of **illegal borders crossings into the EU by Serbian nationals remained marginal** (21 in 2023, 35 in 2024). The number of Serbian nationals found to be staying illegally in Member States continued to decrease (12,700 people in 2024, 13,500 in 2023). On the other hand, the number of Serbian nationals refused entry increased (5,800 in 2023, 6,305 in 2024).

In 2024, approximately 1,900 illegal border crossings by third-country nationals from Serbia to the EU were recorded, mainly occurring at the Hungarian border. This represents a 96% decrease compared to 2023, when about 84,100 such crossings were registered.

The **number of return decisions issued to Serbian nationals** rose slightly from 6,030 in 2023 to 6,140 in 2024. The number of people returned increased (3,610 in 2024 compared to 3,415 in 2023) and the return rate increased from 57% in 2023 to 59% in 2024.



Source: Eurostat

### 3. Cooperation on migration, border management and readmission

Serbia continued to **implement the EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans**, the Integrated Border Management Strategy 2022–2027 and the corresponding Action Plan 2022–2024. During 2023 and 2024, Serbia intensified **actions to strengthen border security and dismantle migrant smuggling networks**. However, **illegal migration towards the EU** via Serbian territory **persisted**, and Serbia remained a **key transit country** where migrant smuggling groups continued to operate with notable intensity and violence.

In 2024 and 2025, a growing concern emerged regarding **illegal migrants arriving in the EU or Schengen states, who had first entered Serbia legally**, often holding short- or long-term visas or work permits. It highlights **vulnerabilities in Serbia's visa issuance and migration control systems**.

Serbia continued its **operational cooperation with Frontex**. In June 2024, Serbia and the EU signed a **Second-Generation Status Agreement**, which entered into force on 1 April 2025, replacing the earlier framework and allowing the enhanced deployment of Frontex officers. Serbia maintained its cooperation with the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), based on successive bilateral roadmaps. Serbia also pursued **bilateral and multilateral partnerships** with EU Member States in migration and border management, receiving **technical assistance, equipment and training**, sharing information and risk analysis, conducting joint border patrols, etc.

On readmission, Frontex and Member States generally reported good cooperation with Serbia. Delays in issuing return travel documents were noted in 2024, but the situation improved in 2025. However, concerns persist over Serbia's practice of conditioning the issuance of return documents on the prior submission of a flight plan.

A further longstanding issue concerns Serbia's limited cooperation on the readmission of third-country nationals who transited through its territory, including in cases where credible proof of transit exists (e.g. identity documents issued by Serbia to asylum seekers). This practice remains a matter of concern for the Commission.

Regarding the return of Third Country Nationals to their countries of origin, Serbia returned 101 persons voluntarily with EU support in 2024, mainly to Türkiye, India, Morocco, Armenia and the Russian Federation. This marks an increase of 13% in comparison to 2023 (89).

### 4. Cooperation on security

In 2024, Serbia continued its **close cooperation with Europol, particularly in the fields of organised crime and counterterrorism** through Joint Investigation Teams (JITs) and multinational task forces, dismantling criminal networks engaged in migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. A Serbian Liaison Officer is stationed at Europol headquarters, facilitating operational cooperation with EU Member States.

Serbia also remained an active participant in the EMPACT framework, supporting multiple priority crime areas. Cooperation with CEPOL intensified further in 2024, with Serbian law enforcement personnel participating in training sessions and staff exchange programmes. Close

collaboration continued with Eurojust, particularly through the Serbian Liaison Prosecutor. Serbia also contributed to Joint Investigation Teams supported by Eurojust in complex cross-border cases.

Serbia maintained security cooperation with neighbouring EU Member States - notably Croatia and Romania - in combating serious cross-border crimes, including the smuggling of migrants, narcotics and firearms.

Criminal networks based in Serbia engaged in the large-scale production of counterfeit and forged identity documents, including Serbian but also a wide range of those issued by EU Member States. The scale and sophistication of these forgeries are alarming, including high-quality e-passport counterfeits capable of circumventing modern document verification systems.

The possibility for Serbian nationals expelled from the EU to change their identity and obtain new official documents under a different name continues to present a systemic vulnerability. This practice allows undetected re-entry into the EU, undermining the integrity of return procedures and border controls.

Serbia remained engaged in the implementation of the Joint Action Plan on Counter Terrorism for the Western Balkans and in discussions on the preparation of the new Joint Action Plan that was signed on 30 October, 2025. The Strategy on counter terrorism and prevention of violent extremism expired in 2022, and the new strategy has not yet been adopted.

## **5. Fast-track acquisition of Serbian citizenship**

It has been established that since 2022, over 200 Russian nationals have obtained Serbian citizenship under Article 19 of the Law on Citizenship, which allows for the granting of citizenship “in the interest of the Republic of Serbia.” This provision permits the acquisition of citizenship without any prior mandatory residence in Serbia and without requiring applicants to renounce their existing citizenship(s).

Granting of Serbian citizenship to Russian nationals outside the regular naturalisation process might enable circumvention of the Schengen visa regime and the security checks it entails. The profiles of several individuals who have acquired citizenship in this manner have raised alarm on the EU side. These developments warrant further scrutiny to assess whether this practice is abusive.

## **UKRAINE**

### **1. Visa policy alignment**

Ukraine’s visa policy is not aligned with the EU as it maintains a **visa-free regime with 15 countries that are on the EU list of visa-required countries** (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Belarus, Ecuador, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan).

There was no progress towards more alignment with the EU list of visa-required countries in 2024.

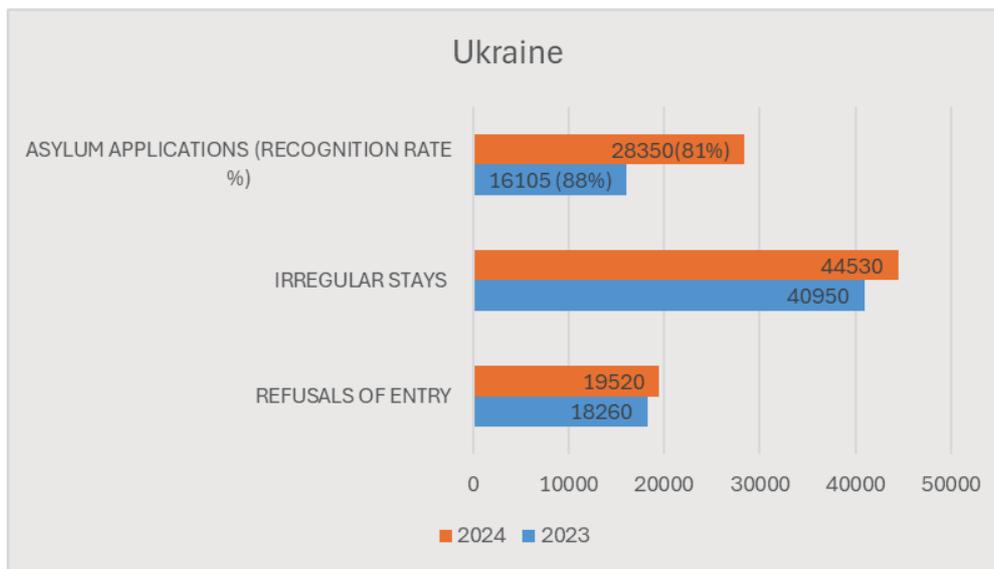
## 2. Monitoring trends in illegal migration, applications for international protection, returns and readmission

Following the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive in 2022, as of 30 April 2025 the estimated number of active registrations for temporary protection in the 27 Member States, Norway, Liechtenstein, Iceland and Switzerland, according to Eurostat, is 4,415,585 of which 4,261,805 in the EU Member States.

In 2024, the number of Ukrainian applicants for international protection in Member States was 28,350, 76 % more than in 2023 (16,105). The recognition rate was 88% in 2023 and 81% in 2024.

The number of Ukrainian nationals illegally crossing the EU border in 2024 increased by 217% (14,503 in 2024 compared with 4,579 in 2023). In 2024, 44,530 Ukrainian nationals were found to be illegally staying in EU (40,950 in 2023, an increase of 9%). The number of refusals of entry to Ukrainian nationals rose by 7%, from 18,260 in 2023 to 19,520 in 2024.

The number of return decisions issued to Ukraine nationals rose by 15% (8,730 in 2024 compared to 7,610 in 2023). The number of people returned decreased by 6% (1,170 in 2024 compared to 1,245 in 2023) and the return rate decreased from 16% in 2023 to 13% in 2024.



Source: Eurostat

## 3. Cooperation on migration, border management and readmission

Since the start of Russia's war of aggression in 2022, a large number of Ukrainian nationals have fled to EU Member States, prompting the activation of the **EU's Temporary Protection Directive**. 2024 saw an increase in the number of Ukrainian citizens illegally crossing EU borders, overstaying in the Schengen area, or applying for asylum. A significant portion of these illegal

crossings has been motivated by conscription avoidance. The use of forged or fraudulent documents has become increasingly frequent among illegal Ukrainian migrants.

The last non-biometric Ukrainian passports were issued in 2016 and are expected to be fully phased out by 2026. The number of such passports still in circulation is currently marginal. However, concerns have been raised regarding Ukrainian nationals possessing multiple valid biometric passports. This can allow individuals to manipulate the 90/180-day visa-free rule in the Schengen area by alternating travel documents. There have also been instances of manually altered passport expiry dates—raising concerns about the validity and integrity of such renewals.

**Despite the ongoing war, Ukraine's migration and border management systems remain operational in government-controlled areas.** In 2024, Ukrainian migration and border authorities maintained active cooperation with a wide range of international partners, including the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA), the Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine, the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM), Frontex, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD).

As a result of the prolonged Russian aggression, Ukraine's institutional needs remain substantial. EU and Member States have continued to provide support to Ukraine's border services through the provision of training and material assistance, including drones, armoured vehicles, engineering and surveillance equipment, and other specialised technology.

**Ukraine has remained active in combating trafficking in human beings,** including by continuing the implementation of the *Common Anti-Trafficking Plan*.

Although war conditions have reduced the flow of illegal migrants through and towards Ukraine, in 2024, border guards and immigration services intercepted 8,227 foreign nationals for offences such as illegal border crossing, illegal residence, or visa overstays (compared to 8,856 in 2023). Approximately 40% of detected illegal migrants were citizens of Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Russia.

**Ukraine continues to examine and grant international protection.** As of 2024, there were 1,301 recognised refugees in Ukraine and 1,095 beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.

While many EU Member States suspended the return of Ukrainian nationals following the 2022 invasion, limited cooperation on readmission has continued with others. For cases in which returns were carried out, Member States reported overall good cooperation with Ukrainian authorities, although administrative procedures were occasionally delayed due to the difficult operating conditions created by the war.

#### **4. Cooperation on security**

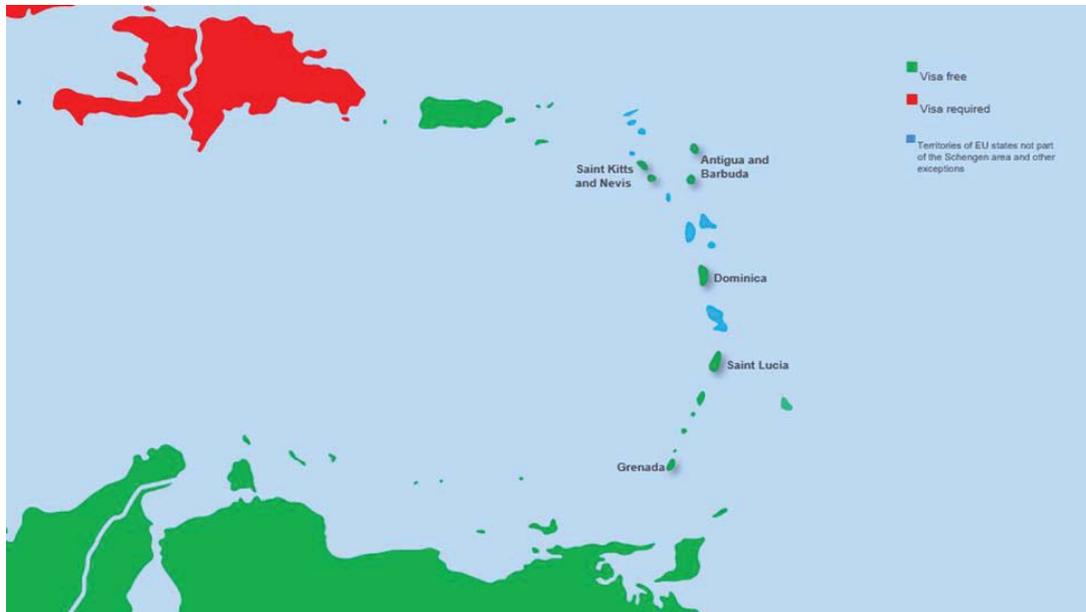
In 2024, Ukrainian law enforcement authorities continued cooperation with EU agencies, Member States, and international organisations in the field of security. Cooperation with Europol remained particularly strong in counter-terrorism efforts, as well as the fight against the trafficking of firearms, explosives, and CBRN materials, trafficking in human beings, financial crime, and cybercrime. Ukraine also cooperated closely with Europol and Eurojust, including in the investigation of war crimes committed by the Russian armed forces on Ukrainian territory.

**Eurojust** continued to support the *Joint Investigation Team (JIT)* established between six EU Member States, Ukraine, and the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC). *CEPOL* provided capacity-building support to Ukrainian law enforcement, training 1,400 police officers over the course of 2024. The *Asset Recovery and Management Agency (ARMA)*—Ukraine’s central authority for identifying, tracing, and managing assets from criminal proceedings—intensified its cooperation with Europol to recover assets concealed by criminals in several EU Member States.

In the **fight against organised crime**, Ukraine participated in the implementation of Operational Action Plans (OAPs) under the *EMPACT* framework for the 2022–2025 cycle. The **fight against illicit firearms trafficking** remains a shared priority between Ukraine and EU Member States. In February 2025, Ukraine established a *Coordination Centre for Combating the Illegal Trafficking in Firearms*, bringing together representatives from the national police, border guard, and military services. In December 2024, the *Working Arrangement* between Ukraine and the *EU Drugs Agency (EUDA)* was renewed.

As part of the implementation of Ukraine’s *Anti-Corruption Strategy 2021–2025* and the *State Anti-Corruption Programme 2023–2025*, steps were taken to enhance the independence of the *Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor’s Office (SAPO)*, increase staffing for the *National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU)*, and introduce *single-judge criminal proceedings* in the *High Anti-Corruption Court (HACC)* as the court of first instance for relevant cases.

## II. EASTERN CARIBBEAN



Since 2020, the Commission has been engaging with the **five visa-free Eastern Caribbean countries operating investor citizenship schemes**—Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Saint Lucia—to obtain detailed information and data on the operation of these schemes.

All five countries run distinct investor citizenship schemes which generally involve foreign nationals making direct contributions to the state budget or investing in major infrastructure, utility, or real estate projects in exchange for citizenship.

The application process and the due diligence and security screening procedures used across the five Eastern Caribbean countries operating investor citizenship schemes are broadly similar. In March 2024, the governments of the five countries operating investor citizenship schemes have signed a *Memorandum of Agreement* as a joint commitment to harmonize the minimum investment threshold to USD 200,000, enhance the cooperation on due diligence, strengthen security screening procedures, establish common information-sharing and transparency standards, create a regional competent authority to enforce international standards, regulate authorised agents and marketing practices, develop joint training and capacity-building initiatives and set out mechanisms for dispute resolution.

In parallel to the Memorandum of Agreement, **six core principles for the governance of investor citizenship schemes** were agreed in February 2023 between the five Eastern Caribbean countries operating such schemes and the United States Department of the Treasury. They include the mutual recognition of and cooperation on application denials, mandatory interviews with applicants (which may be conducted virtually), additional due diligence by national Financial Intelligence

Units, annual independent audits of schemes, retrieval of passports that have been revoked and the suspension of applications from nationals of certain designated countries. It must be noted that the concerns raised by the U.S. Department of Treasury relate to Anti-Money Laundering policy, not to visa policy.

In August 2025, the five Caribbean countries jointly notified the Commission of the **establishment of a regional regulator** for the operation of investor citizenship schemes. The five Caribbean countries described the key provisions of the legislation as follows: funding of the schemes regulator, enforcement mechanisms for compliance, collection of biometrics of new applicants, residency requirement for approved applicants and financial support for CARICOM JRCC.

Since the publication of the Seventh VSM Report, **the total number of investor citizenship schemes applications across the five countries, has remained substantial (13,113 in 2023, 10,573 in 2024)**. In Saint Kitts and Nevis, the volume of applications went from 1,987 in 2023 to 223 in 2024 and in Grenada from 2,297 to 420 applications. Application numbers remained relatively stable in Dominica and Saint Lucia, while Antigua and Barbuda recorded a notable increase, from 685 in 2023 to 1,733 in 2024.

To date, an estimated 107,625 **passports** have been issued across the five Eastern Caribbean investor citizenship schemes operating countries. At the same time, in 2024 rejection rates remained low: **1.7% in Antigua and Barbuda, 5.3% in Saint Lucia, and 6.5% in Dominica**. These figures, considered alongside the **short statutory processing times**, raise concerns about the adequacy of the security and due diligence procedures applied.

The table below presents the most recent and, in some cases, partial data submitted to the Commission by the five countries. Applications may include several members of a family, explaining why the number of applications can be lower than the number of passports issued to each family member in case of a successful application.

	Antigua and Barbuda	Dominica	Grenada	Saint Kitts and Nevis	Saint Lucia
<b>Total applications received</b>	4 332 (2015-2023) 1 733 (2024) 78 (2025 until 30/4)	13 161 (2015-2022) 4 068 in 2023 3 893 in 2024	5 847 (2015-2023) 420 (2024) 123 (2025 until 31/03)	19 655 (2015-2023) 223 (2024) 171 (2025 until 30/4)	7 437 (2015-2023) 4 304 (2024) 120 (2025 until 30/4)
<b>Rejections</b>	169 (2015-2023) 30 (2024) 5 (2025 until 30/4)	420 (2019-2022) 210 (2023) 255 (2024)	256 (2015-2023) 93 (2024) 25 (2025 until 31/03)	739 (2015-2023) 98 (2024) 86 (2025 until 30/4)	97 (2015-2023) 227 (2024) 151 (2025 until 30/4)

<b>Rejection rate (2024)</b>	1.7%	6.5%	22.1%	43.9%	5.3%
<b>Total passports issued</b>	7 995 (2015-2023) 1 276 (2024) 540 (2025 until 30/4)	29 590 (2018-2021) 9 539 (2023) 9 586 (2024)	16 086 (2015-2023) 5 180 (2024) 1 518 (2025 until 31/03)	48 844 (2015-2023) 6 437 (2024) 734 (2025 until 30/4)	N/A

In 2024, among the four Eastern Caribbean countries that reported data on the main nationalities of successful applicants (Saint Kitts and Nevis, Dominica, Saint Lucia, and Antigua and Barbuda) the majority of applicants continued to originate from countries that are subject to visa requirements for entry into the EU. Notably, successful applicants included 531 nationals of Syria, 365 of Iraq, and 333 of China. In Grenada, which also reported partial data, the leading applicant nationalities in 2024 were China (96 applicants) and Nigeria (82 applicants).

All five countries apply a restricted countries policy, under which individuals holding certain nationalities are excluded from applying to their investor citizenship schemes.

These countries include:

- *In Grenada:* Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Russia, Yemen
- *In Antigua and Barbuda:* Russia, Belarus, Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia
- *In Saint Lucia:* Russia, Belarus, Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, North Korea
- *In Saint Kitts and Nevis:* Russia, Belarus, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Afghanistan
- *In Dominica:* Russia, Belarus, Iraq (Northern part), Yemen and unless certain criteria met North Korea and Sudan

Investor citizenship schemes **inherently carry security risks for the Schengen area**. No such scheme can be considered risk-free from a security and migration control perspective and obtaining visa-free access to the EU continues to be a major benefit for beneficiaries of investor citizenship schemes that would be otherwise visa-required.

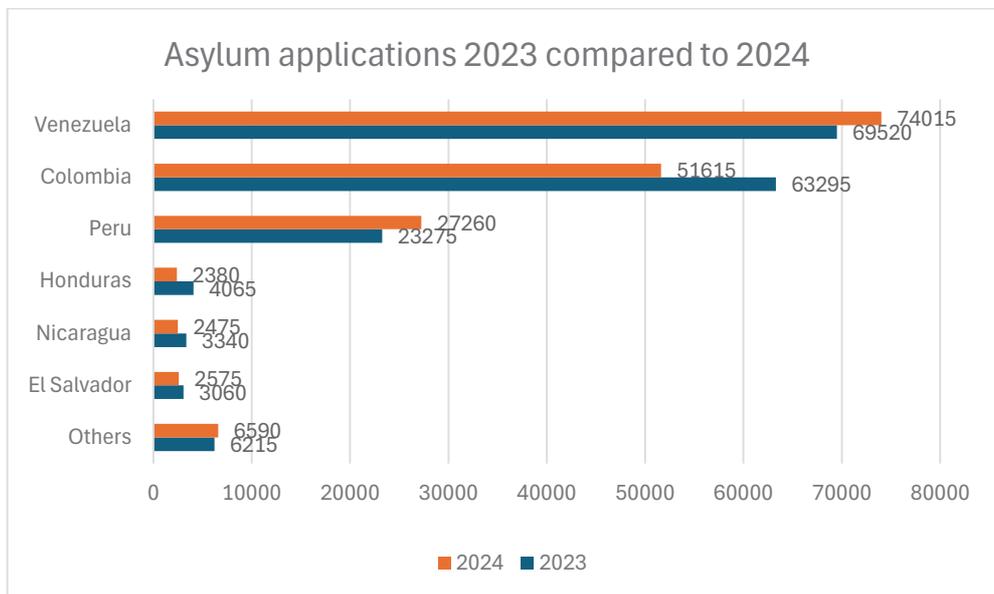
### III. LATIN AMERICA



Unfounded asylum applications lodged by visa-exempt third-country nationals continue to pose a significant challenge for EU Member States. These applications have **low recognition rates**, placing a disproportionate burden on national asylum systems. Between 2015 and the first quarter of 2025, **18% of all asylum applications received in EU were lodged by nationals from countries benefiting from visa-free access to the EU.**

**A substantial share of these claims originates from Latin America.** Between 2015 and Q1 2025, nationals of Latin American countries with visa-free access to the EU lodged over **50% of all asylum claims submitted by visa-exempt third-country nationals** during this period.

In 2024, a total of **166,910 asylum applications** were lodged by nationals of the fifteen Latin American countries with visa-free access to the EU, compared to 172,770 in 2023—a decrease of approximately 3% year-on-year. While asylum requests have been recorded from nationals of all fifteen visa-exempt countries in the region, the **highest numbers are observed among nationals of Venezuela, Colombia, and Peru.** These are followed, at lower levels, by **Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.** The remaining countries in the region currently account for **lower numbers of applications.**



Source: Eurostat

As regards **Venezuela**, the number of applications for international protection lodged by Venezuelan nationals in EU Member States has shown a consistent upward trend over the past three years, with annual figures exceeding 50,000. In **2024**, a total of **74,015 applications** were submitted, compared to **69,520 in 2023**.

The Commission recognises that this increase is closely linked to the ongoing political and economic crisis in Venezuela. The majority of Venezuelians obtain a national residence permit on humanitarian grounds in one of the Member States after the completion of the international protection procedure. The Commission reaffirms the EU's commitment to supporting a peaceful, democratic, and inclusive Venezuelan-led solution to the crisis, in coordination with its international and regional partners. Nevertheless, the steady increase of asylum applications by Venezuelan nationals in the EU on the 2015-2025 period, combined with the low recognition rate constitute a reason for concern.

**Relations with Venezuela remain strained**, due to persistent and serious concerns regarding the state of democracy and human rights. Currently, there are **no accredited Ambassadors** between the EU and Venezuela in Brussels and Caracas, and **no structured dialogue** is in place.

As regards **Colombia**, in 2024, Colombian nationals lodged 51,615 applications for international protection in EU Member States—a 19% decrease compared to 2023 (63,295 applications). The Commission acknowledges that these trends are partly linked to Colombia's role as a host country for nearly 3 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela, which places considerable pressure on its social and economic systems. As reaffirmed in the *Joint Communication*, the EU will continue to support Colombia and the broader region in responding to this migration crisis and in managing the humanitarian, social, and institutional challenges it entails.

The Commission services, in cooperation with the European External Action Service (EEAS), have engaged in dialogue with Colombia in the context of growing concerns over unfounded asylum applications. This engagement has taken place through the *technical EU–Colombia Roundtable on Migration and Mobility*, held on **12 November 2024**, and the *EU–Colombia Political Dialogue* of **26 June 2025**. The issue of unfounded asylum applications has also been raised in several high-level meetings between the Commission and Colombian counterparts at senior official and ministerial levels. In response, Colombia expressed its readiness to take concrete actions. As part of this commitment, a **communication campaign was launched in April 2025** to raise awareness among potential migrants regarding the conditions of visa-free travel and asylum eligibility. Following those dialogues, a significant decrease —close to 50%— in international protection applications has been observed in 2025.

As regards **Peru**, there was a sharp increase of 17% in the number of applications for international protection lodged in Member States between 2023 and 2024, with 27,260 applications submitted in 2024 compared with 23,275 in 2023. This issue has been discussed at the end of 2025 in high-level meeting with the Peruvian authorities. The Peruvian authorities expressed readiness to address it.

As regards **Honduras**, in 2024 there were 2,380 applications for international protection in Member States, compared to 4,065 in 2023, representing a decrease of 42%.

As regards **Nicaragua**, in 2024 there were 2,475 applications for international protection in Member States, compared to 3,340 in 2023, representing a decrease of 26%.

As regards **El Salvador**, in 2024 there were 2,575 applications for international protection in Member States, compared to 3,060 in 2023, representing a decrease of 16%.

Following those dialogues, a significant decrease —close to 50%— in international protection applications has been observed in 2025. To ensure the sustainability of visa exemptions, **visa-free travel must remain strictly limited to short stays**. In this context, the Commission services—working closely with the EEAS—will continue to engage with the most affected countries in the region, including by exchange of information and best practices, support to national authorities in the implementation – when possible - of effective **border control measures** at departure points, launching of **awareness-raising campaigns** on the rights and obligations under visa-free regimes and promotion of other relevant actions to address the issue of abuse of visa free regime, resulting in **high numbers of asylum applications and illegal stays**.

In parallel, and with regard to longer stays, parties are encouraged to **strengthen cooperation on legal pathways and develop mutually beneficial mobility arrangements**, as outlined in the *Joint Communication: A New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean*.