

MARRI STRATEGY



2027-
2029

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FOREWORD



It is my privilege to present the MARRI Strategy 2027-2029. This document reflects our collective commitment to strengthen the coordinated response to migration, asylum, and refugee management across the Western Balkans. Building on more than twenty years of regional cooperation, this Strategy represents a renewed dedication to address the evolving dynamics that shape mobility in our region.

Over the recent years, the Western Balkans has navigated profound challenges. We dealt with a health pandemic, increased geopolitical instability and shifting migratory pressures. All these developments have underscored the importance of an inclusive regional response, operational readiness and a shared vision for humane, secure, and sustainable migration governance.

Throughout this period, MARRI has facilitated dialogue, supported capacity development and promoted solutions that serve administrations in the region. The following Strategy emerges from extensive consultations with MARRI Administrations, partners and experts, ensuring that it builds upon the operational lessons learned and the policy innovations developed within the region.

At its core, the document outlines a roadmap for advancing integrated migration management, strengthening data-driven decision making, enhancing regional cooperation and ensuring that all MARRI Participants progress together toward shared objectives.

Looking ahead, this Strategy not only defines our collective ambition for the next period, but also lays the groundwork for an adaptable, responsive, and regional response that can serve navigate the priorities of the administrations.

Together, we are building a region where mobility is managed responsibly, rights are safeguarded, borders/boundaries are secure, and cooperation is key to stability and prosperity.

Angela BORANIEVA
Director
MARRI Regional Centre

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ACRONYMS

CSO	Civil Society Organizations
EES	Entry/Exit System
ETIAS	European Travel Information and Authorisation System
FRONTEX	European Border and Coast Guard Agency
EU	European Union
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
GRETA	Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings
MARRI	Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative
MARRI RC	Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative - Regional Centre
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
THB	Trafficking in Human Beings
WB6	Western Balkan Six

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The MARRI Strategy 2027–2029 outlines the vision and a set of priorities to guide the Western Balkans’ regional response to migration challenges over the next three years, with a view to further enhancing the work of the Initiative and its internal functioning.

It builds on MARRI’s mission as a regional platform for cooperation and is seen by its stakeholders as the catalyst of the Western Balkans’ response to migration, international protection (asylum and refugee protection), border/boundary management, combating human trafficking, visa management, and return and readmission.

Developed through comprehensive consultations with all six MARRI Participants’ administrations, the document focuses on practical and actionable initiatives.

It is structured around six strategic topics aligned with MARRI’s mandate, with an emphasis on regional cooperation, alignment with the EU’s new Pact on Migration and Asylum, capacity building, and data-driven policy making.

By 2029, successful implementation of this Strategy should result in a stronger, more integrated regional response to migration and asylum related challenges, enabling safer mobility, better protection of vulnerable groups and enhanced regional stability.

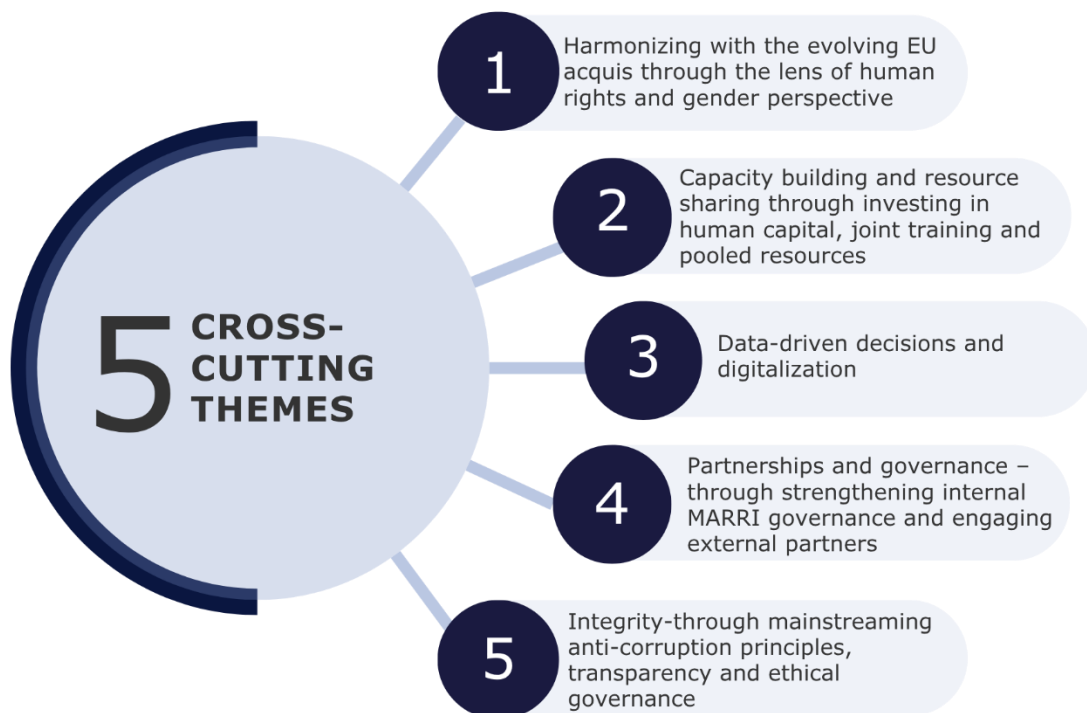
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the MARRI Strategy 2027-2029 is to articulate a clear vision, common goals, and initiatives to guide MARRI Participants and stakeholders in addressing migration management in a coordinated manner. This document serves as a three-year roadmap to align the efforts of the six MARRI administrations into a cohesive regional strategy, informing both internal stakeholders (Ministries and MARRI bodies) and external partners (EU institutions, international organizations, donors) on MARRI's strategic direction and expected outcomes. By outlining these objectives and initiatives, the document provides that all Participants move forward together towards shared objectives, thereby enhancing their capacity to manage migration and mobility in a comprehensive and harmonized way consistent with European and international standards.

This Strategy covers the period 2027 through 2029 and is structured around six topics corresponding to MARRI's areas of competence: migration, international protection (asylum and refugee protection), border/boundary management, combating human trafficking, visa management, and return and readmission. Each section details specific objectives and strategic initiatives in that domain, while acknowledging interlinkages among them.



Cross-cutting themes that are embedded across each topic and reinforce the strategic initiatives are: 1) Harmonizing with the evolving EU acquis through the lens of human rights and a gender perspective, 2) Capacity building and resource sharing through investing in human capital, joint training and pooled resources, 3) Data-driven decisions and digitalization, 4) Partnerships and governance – through strengthening internal MARRI governance and engaging external partners and 5) Integrity - through mainstreaming anti-corruption principles, transparency and ethical governance across all strategic initiatives.



STRATEGIC ROLE OF MARRI

MARRI administrations perceive this initiative as an indispensable, leading regional cooperation platform essential for advancing well-managed migration and supporting the region's European integration. Viewed as a vital bridge connecting WB6 administrations with international and EU partners, MARRI is heavily relied upon to support the harmonization of legislation, institutional capacity building and information exchange in the area of migration.

This role is considered especially critical as our administrations navigate the complexities of the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, with MARRI's support during this transition helping Participants' administrations adapt to the evolving legal frameworks.

To meet these expectations, MARRI is guided by the following vision and mission:

MARRI VISION

Migration is well managed in the MARRI Participants and supports the region's European integration.

MARRI MISSION

MARRI is a relevant and capable platform to support migration management in the Western Balkan region.

I. TOPIC

MIGRATION MANAGEMENT

Strategic Objective

To promote an all-inclusive regional migration approach that balances control of irregular migration with the facilitation of regular mobility and migration. To enhance coordination, data-driven policy making, and legal convergence among MARRI Participants with the EU acquis, so that the region can manage migration flows effectively, humanely and in line with EU standards.

Relevance and Rationale

Migration in the Western Balkans includes a broad spectrum of movements, including irregular migrants transiting toward the EU, students and workers moving regularly within or into the region and the emigration of the region's own citizens abroad. The complexity of these flows means that no single aspect can be addressed in isolation.

Irregular migration pressures have fluctuated over the past years and WB6 remains wary of potential surges if geopolitical conditions change. What is common is that all MARRI administrations acknowledge that irregular migratory flows are unpredictable and influenced by external factors, such as conflicts or global policy shifts.

Meanwhile, a contrasting trend is the sharp recorded increase in regular migration, especially for labour reasons. With domestic workforces shrinking, where the local population continues to leave for the EU, MARRI Participants' economies are increasingly seeking foreign labour to fill the gaps. This has led to a significant rise in work visa and residence permit applications, thus stretching administrative capacities. The coexistence of these trends, i.e. managing

irregular arrivals and integrating growing numbers of legal migrant workers, presents a policy challenge that requires forward-looking and coordinated solutions.

Additionally, MARRI administrations face common operational hurdles, like limited resources in staff and infrastructure at migration authorities, insufficient language interpretation services for rare languages and the misuse of visa-free travel by some individuals to attempt onward irregular migration. Without strong regional cooperation, there is a risk of fragmented responses and the possibility of exploiting administrative loopholes by traffickers.

Harmonized approaches are also essential for EU accession. As we prepare for the upcoming EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and align with the EU acquis, MARRI Participants need to move in parallel to implement the new requirements. Effective migration management on the other hand can yield positive results facilitating circular migration and skills exchange, attracting needed talent to the region and ensuring that migration contributes to economic growth.

Strategic Initiatives

- **Strengthen Regional Dialogue.** MARRI will encourage and facilitate the exchange of good practices regarding migration policies and regulations across the MARRI Participants, with a particular focus on EU frameworks. Regular policy dialogue and lesson-sharing forums will be held, allowing Participants to discuss the policies and measures to be undertaken, as well as their effectiveness in the administrations where those policies are already implemented.
- **Strengthen Human Resources for Migration Management.** Through regional cooperation, MARRI will address capacity building needs. MARRI will initiate regional joint training programs that will provide up-to-date knowledge on modern migration management practices, EU-aligned frameworks, visa and travel procedures and effective inter-agency coordination, by applying gender equality, vulnerability sensitive and needs-based approaches.
- **Engage in Strategic Partnerships and Regional Projects.** MARRI will coordinate closely with international and regional partners to amplify resources and avoid overlapping efforts in migration management. MARRI will serve as a point for collaboration with international and regional donors.

II. TOPIC

INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION ASYLUM AND REFUGEE PROTECTION

Strategic Objective

To promote a coordinated and effective asylum systems across the MARRI Participants that upholds international protection standards, fair and efficient, and rights-based processing of asylum claims, and provides adequate support to refugees and vulnerable persons in need.

Relevance and Rationale

The Western Balkan region is a transit corridor for mixed migration flows. All administrations face common pressures, from managing asylum applications and refugee accommodation to integrating those granted protection. Capacity constraints are evident in asylum authorities, which often have limited human and technical resources and require continuous training to keep pace with evolving EU standards.

At the same time, alignment with the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum is a shared priority as MARRI Participants prepare for closer integration with EU systems. Without enhanced capacity and harmonized procedures, administrations risk being

overwhelmed by surges in asylum claims or failing to meet protection obligations.

Many migrants view the Western Balkans as a transit region on the route to the EU, but even for transit cases, the region must maintain reliable asylum systems. Strengthening international protection mechanisms collectively will ensure that the MARRI Participants are better prepared for increased migrant movements, can prevent secondary movements through fair treatment and can discourage irregular migration by offering legal and safe pathways. Ultimately, a regionally coherent approach to asylum and refugee protection will enhance the quality of asylum decisions and reinforce the integrity of each MARRI Participant.

Strategic Initiatives

- **Build Regional Capacity and Expertise.** Organize joint capacity building programmes for asylum caseworkers and officials across MARRI Administrations. This will involve training modules on asylum procedures, including refugee status determination, interview techniques, dealing with vulnerable groups, and case management. MARRI will also explore possibilities for partnership with EUAA and other actors in order to conduct joint needs assessments and train-the-trainer programmes, while at the same time enhancing other joint capacity building programmes and targeted modules.
- **Coordination and Information Sharing.** Strengthen the coordination and information sharing within the MARRI Asylum Network and hold regular coordination meetings among asylum departments of the six administrations. Under MARRI auspices, regular meetings will be held to exchange case trends, discuss complex cases, compare recognition rates and interpretations, and share best practices.

III. TOPIC

BORDER/BOUNDARY MANAGEMENT

Strategic Objective

Support integrated and smart border/boundary management across MARRI Participants that secures external borders/boundaries, facilitates legitimate travel and responds adaptively to migration pressures and security threats.

Relevance and Rationale

Effective border/boundary management is foundational to addressing many of the challenges, from controlling irregular migration and combatting cross-border crime (including trafficking and smuggling) to enabling faster legal crossings that boost commerce and connectivity. The WB6 collectively face very similar issues at their borders/boundaries. Resource and capacity shortfalls are present among administrations and report insufficient personnel to cover all crossing points and green borders, as well as aging or inadequate equipment and infrastructure. These deficiencies directly affect security and efficiency, making it difficult to intercept illegal activities. Meanwhile, the region continues to experience irregular migration flows and cross-border criminal networks exploiting its position between source countries and the EU. Smugglers use informal crossing routes and increasingly sophisticated methods (fraudulent documents, encrypted communications), requiring ever more vigilance and cooperation to counteract these activities. In addition, legal traveller and trade

volumes have been rising, which is a positive sign of regional integration and economic growth but also strains border/boundary crossing facilities and staff, leading to long queues and delays, especially during peak seasons.

This trend will continue as MARRI Participants' economies integrate and as tourism grows, which means administrations must find ways to process greater volumes swiftly but securely. One fundamental recognition in the region is that no single administration can manage these issues alone.

Borders/boundaries are shared and a lapse on one side, can impact neighbours. Hence all Participants see value in stronger inter-agency and cross-border/boundary cooperation.

During the consultative process, all MARRI Administrations have called for joint cooperation and unified SOPs. Another unifying factor is the aspiration to join the European Union, which brings the requirement of aligning with EU border standards (Schengen norms and Integrated Border Management).

Strategic Initiatives

- **Strengthen Coordination and Joint Measures.** This can be achieved by organising regular meetings among the representatives of the relevant authorities in charge of border/boundary management and will involve measures in areas that will be considered a priority.
- **Promote and Invest in Trainings for Advanced Technologies.** MARRI will make efforts to improve border/boundary management through training on the use of modern technologies. A key step is conducting a comprehensive needs assessment for the region's border/boundary crossings and prioritizing training that could be made more cost-effective through cooperation.
- **Expand and Standardize Training Programs for Border/Boundary Personnel.** MARRI will scale up regional training initiatives for border/boundary personnel that would cover advanced document and identity verification, risk profiling techniques and humane treatment of vulnerable groups. Partnership with Frontex would benefit all training initiatives related to border/boundary capacities and needs.

IV. TOPIC

COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Strategic Objective

Intensify regional collaboration to combat human trafficking through joint efforts for prevention, protection and prosecution. This includes enhancing capacities for the identification and support of victims, harmonizing legal frameworks through best EU practices, and strengthening administrations through training and data-sharing so that the MARRI Participants are aligned in their stance against trafficking in persons.

Relevance and Rationale

Human trafficking remains a serious challenge in the region. Traffickers exploit socio-economic vulnerabilities and the migration context, often treating the Western Balkans as both a source and transit region for trafficking of women, children and men for various forms of exploitation. MARRI Participants should not face significant challenges in combating this type of crime on their own because fragmented approaches only push traffickers to find the weakest link. Currently, all MARRI Participants report gaps in their fight against human trafficking.

Data on cases and victims are siloed or incomplete, and in some places, the over reliance on donor-driven projects has led to uneven progress. There is a recognized need for greater and better regional coordination.

Victim identification is another shared weakness. Many victims, especially migrants, are not identified in time, and those who are identified often lack long-term support for reintegration. Trends are worrying, the rise of

digital technology means trafficking schemes increasingly occur online, where recruiters use social media, encrypted messaging and even deepfake or AI-manipulated content to deceive victims.

Some Participants have noted emerging issues like fake job offers luring people into forced labour and increased targeting of irregular migrants and asylum seekers by traffickers. This calls for sophisticated investigative techniques that MARRI Administrations are still developing.

Meanwhile, international conventions (like the Palermo Protocol), domestic laws, and GRETA (Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings) recommendations are a common obligation that requires legal harmonization among other commitments. By cooperating under MARRI, administrations can share information on new crime patterns which will amplify prevention.

Strategic Initiatives

- **Harmonize Legal Frameworks.** Support legal harmonization across the MARRI Participants in line with EU directives and GRETA recommendations on human trafficking.
- **Cooperation and Coordination.** Promote and support cooperation between law enforcement and protection systems - a permanent, visible part of MARRI's work for early identification, effective referral and support for victims, while upholding an effective victim-centred approach. Promote and support cooperation with judicial organs to improve the criminal justice response. Schedule meetings of MARRI Participants' anti-trafficking coordinators and experts to address emerging trends, challenges and update joint actions.
- **Joint Capacity Building.** MARRI will support regional training programs and study visits on relevant topics, including digital investigations and financial tracking. The aim is to strengthen the capacities of professionals participating in the fight against human trafficking, as well as upskilling the representatives taking part in the referral mechanisms.

V. TOPIC

VISA POLICY AND MANAGEMENT

Strategic Objectives

Support aligning MARRI Participants' visa regulations with EU standards and enhance regional cooperation in tracking travel data and preventing visa-related security loopholes.

Relevance and Rationale

Visa policy is a frontline tool for regulating the entry of foreign nationals and a key aspect of preparation for EU accession.

As WB6 economies grow and as tourism rebounds post-pandemic, there is a rising demand for visas, and consulates are processing substantially more visa applications each year. This surge strains current systems, many of which still rely on manual or paper-based processes and limited staff, leading to backlogs and potential errors. Without digital transformation, the quality and speed of visa services will lag, frustrating travellers and possibly leading to lost economic opportunities (tourism, business travel).

On the other side, increased travel flows raise concerns about visa misuse, instances of

travellers who enter on a visa and then overstay or engage in unauthorized work, and cases of fraudulent documentation. Already, Participants report issues with individuals using tourist visas as a pretext to reach Western Europe irregularly. As the region moves to tighten external borders in line with EU policy, it will need to adapt to the new EU systems - the Entry/Exit System (EES) and European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS).

Finally, by cooperating on visa policy, MARRI Participants will strengthen their mutual visa-free travel arrangements that can boost regional cooperation and people-to-people contact.

Strategic Initiatives

- **Enhance Information Sharing and Joint Risk Analysis.** MARRI will support the established communication channels where MARRI administrations can share information on visa issuance and traveller patterns. It will additionally promote regular dialogue among relevant administrative officials to enhance information sharing at the regional level.
- **Regional Training and Capacity Building.** Develop a joint training programme for consular officers and border/boundary officials focused on visa management. The programme will include practical sessions on using new tools and devices, alongside advanced methods for identifying counterfeit visas and passports.
- **Best practices from European Union countries in consular management.** MARRI will support the Participants in applying best practices from European Union countries in consular management.

VI. TOPIC

RETURN AND READMISSION

Strategic Objective

Support the region's efforts for a comprehensive approach to return and readmission that ensures the orderly, humane, and effective return of individuals who have no legal right to stay, while respecting human rights and promoting safe, dignified and responsive procedures for all individuals.

Relevance and Rationale

Effective return and readmission systems are a critical component of migration management, helping to maintain the integrity of asylum systems and legal migration channels. MARRI Participants face shared challenges in this domain. These include difficulties in obtaining travel documents or identity verification for migrants slated for return, especially when cooperation with countries of origin is weak or formal readmission agreements are lacking. Fragmented procedures and limited resources have meant that many who receive return decisions are not actually returned, undermining the credibility of the migration system. Moreover, the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum is anticipated to accelerate returns from EU Member States to the Western Balkans, including both the region's citizens and transit migrants who passed through. This could lead to a surge of returnees arriving, and

without a coordinated regional approach, individual administrations may struggle to cope with sudden inflows of returnees.

Additionally, MARRI Participants are experiencing migration that might increase the number of foreign nationals wishing to return.

There is also increased emphasis on voluntary returns and reintegration, which requires proper counselling and post-return support.

By collaborating, MARRI Participants can negotiate with administrations from countries of origin, share best practices, and avoid duplication in dealing with return procedures. A unified regional effort will make each administration more effective at returns, reduce burdens, and ensure that returnees are treated with dignity and given better prospects to reintegrate, ultimately helping to deter irregular migration return attempts.

Strategic Initiative

- **Enhance Capacity Building and Knowledge Exchange.** This will be achieved through convening dialogues or working meetings where the MARRI administrations present a joint approach to improving cooperation with countries of origin whose citizens show increased immigration trends. Further, in cooperation with partners, efforts will be made to organize study visits focusing on the latest return procedures and case management.

COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH

Strategic Objectives

To maintain a consistent regional profile for MARRI RC by communicating the practical value and impact of its work on migration management, including gender-sensitive considerations. To foster a shared sense of ownership among MARRI Participants, ensuring that regional cooperation remains an important tool for addressing migration, asylum, and refugee challenges, with the aim of identifying a concrete way forward.

Relevance and Rationale

Effective communication is essential to sustain the political and technical cooperation required for managed migration in a complex regional environment. All communication efforts will be aligned with MARRI's strategic objectives and will clearly reflect its role as a platform for regional dialogue and cooperation. MARRI's work will be promoted through key communication channels, including the website, social media, publications and events, with the aim of highlighting the outcomes of regional dialogues, projects and cooperation activities. In parallel, MARRI will strengthen public awareness and prevention efforts on topics within its mandate, with a particular focus on trafficking in human beings (THB) and human rights. To ensure effective external communication, MARRI RC will develop a Communication Strategy covering the same implementation period as the MARRI Strategy 2027-2029, defining communication priorities, target audiences, tools and key messages.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

The MARRI Strategy 2027 - 2029 provides a streamlined roadmap to address the complex challenges of migration management in a unified way. By articulating a common vision of a more integrated regional response and delineating concrete actions under each topic, the Strategy rallies all MARRI Participants around shared strategic priorities and initiatives. It is ambitious yet grounded in practical actions that are within the region's collective capacity to implement, especially with continued alignment to European Union standards and support from international partners. Key cross-cutting themes weave through the document, ensuring that efforts under different topics complement each other and move in the same direction.

These themes contribute to the Strategy by supporting harmonized approaches across the region, enhancing the protection and inclusion of vulnerable groups, fostering capacity development, strengthening transparency and evidence-informed decision-making, and maximizing the strategic impact of regional cooperation through coordinated engagement with international partners, donors and civil society organisations (CSOs).

With the Strategy adopted, MARRI is expected to operationalise its priority initiatives by mobilising partnerships, expertise and resources to deliver region wide and EU-aligned results.

By 2029, these actions are expected to produce system-level improvements that will lead to more efficient and interoperable migration and asylum procedures, safer and better-managed borders/boundaries with reduced irregular flows and strengthened protection frameworks for refugees and victims of trafficking. As these outcomes consolidate, they will contribute to better regional security and stability, while ensuring that the protection of fundamental rights and the dignity of migrants and refugees remain embedded in migration governance.

The focus now shifts to implementation. MARRI RC and its participating administrations are committed to working together to turn this Strategic Plan into reality through the guidance of the actual Presidency-in-Office of MARRI.

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