

ROADMAP TO IMPROVE LABOUR MIGRATION MANAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND PREVENT SECONDARY IRREGULAR MIGRATORY MOVEMENTS TO THE EU

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These findings are based on desk-based analysis, consultations with relevant national stakeholders, and a subsequent validation phase.

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Introduction

Labour migration is no longer a marginal issue in the Western Balkans. It is becoming a structural feature of the region's labour markets as populations decline and labour shortages deepen. Given that the foreign labour force will increasingly be needed to sustain economic activity and essential services, labour migration governance across the region will have to be adapted.

Legal frameworks vary in scope and consistency of application. Procedures may be unclear or administratively demanding, and post-entry follow-up and support for foreign workers are relatively limited. In practice, many foreign workers encounter bureaucratic hurdles, language barriers, and social isolation. These conditions may undermine retention in lawful employment and encourage irregular movement towards the EU.

This roadmap addresses that risk by outlining practical steps to keep legal labour pathways clear, predictable, and protective, and helps institutions detect problems early and respond proportionately. Credible screening, transparent recruitment, and clear obligations lead to consistent post-entry follow-up and easier management of legal status. Employers can plan recruitment with more confidence, and workers are less exposed to deception, labour exploitation, precarious situations that may increase vulnerability, or sudden loss of lawful options. When these conditions are unmet, lawful pathways are more likely to break down due to misinformation, weak oversight, or loss of visibility after entry, thereby increasing the risk of irregular onward movement.

The roadmap aligns with wider EU policy efforts, emphasising practical cooperation, integrity of legal pathways, prevention of irregular movement, effective protection, and improved data interoperability as part of the region's approximation to the EU. **The EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans (2022)** puts strong emphasis on practical cooperation to strengthen migration governance. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum also reinforces this approach by placing migration governance within a more comprehensive EU framework and by strengthening and integrating key EU policies on migration, asylum, border management, and integration. **The EU Action Plan against Migrant Smuggling (2021–2025)** highlights that gaps in legal pathways can be exploited, and that strengthening the integrity of legal routes is part of the irregular movement prevention. The roadmap complements these efforts by translating evidence and stakeholder input into a set of regionally shared priorities and partner-adaptable implementation approaches.

Purpose and scope of the roadmap work

This roadmap has been developed in the framework of the regional project Preventing Secondary Irregular Migration Movements to the EU: Assessing the Situation and Developing a Roadmap for Improving the Screening of Foreign Workers in the Western Balkans (PSIMM). It should be read alongside the background report, which highlights key insights from Western Balkans.

The roadmap's purpose is not to prescribe a single model of labour migration governance. It rather supports convergence on the operational basis, which is of utmost relevance for maintaining the integrity of legal labour migration pathways, those that are transparent, lawfully managed and resistant to misuse, while recognising different institutional starting points and labour migration governance models across the Western Balkans.



More specifically, it translates the PSIMM comparative evidence and recommendations into (i) shared regional priorities for improving labour migration governance across the region; and (ii) a set of partner-level implementation approaches that economies can select from and adapt within their own legal and institutional contexts.

The roadmap is anchored in six priority areas: evidence-based labour migration policy design; oversight of recruitment intermediaries and employers; post-entry visibility and follow-up; institutional communication and information exchange; safeguards for foreign workers and employers; and operational cooperation with countries of origin. For each priority area, it sets out:

- ➔ the baseline issue;
- ➔ a strategic regional direction for regional partners;
- ➔ a set of partners' implementation approaches and recommendations.

The roadmap targets Western Balkan authorities involved in labour migration governance, including those responsible for labour and employment, migration and residence, border management, labour inspection, police, social insurance, consular coordination, and worker protection. It is designed to support the management and oversight of labour migration pathways across the full cycle—from recruitment and admission to post-entry follow-up and information exchange.

Methodology

The roadmap was developed through a structured comparative assessment and validation process across all six Western Balkan economies. It was built on two working assumptions.

- ➔ No single approach fits all partners: economies differ in legal traditions, institutional architectures and administrative capacities, and the roadmap therefore does not prescribe uniform solutions.
- ➔ Alignment is sought on shared challenges and the overall direction, rather than on identical implementation: the roadmap sets a shared regional direction for cooperation. It offers implementation approaches that partners can further tailor to suit their own needs.

The methodology followed a clear sequence. National partner-level assessments were undertaken to identify how labour migration governance functions in practice across the full pathway (from entry decisions to post-entry follow-up), using the same analytical structure covering admission and screening, recruitment, post-entry monitoring and enforcement, coordination and information exchange, protection safeguards, and cooperation with countries of origin. Each member was reviewed through structured desk research and analysis (laws/bylaws, strategies, operational guidelines, statistics, and ex-ante analysis), complemented by interviews with stakeholders to compare the findings with operational reality. This resulted in six assessment baselines and a background report, which consolidated the findings and enabled the identification of recurring patterns, challenging points and good practices, as well as opportunities for regional collaboration to add practical value (for example, through the exchange of practices, soft common tools and coordinated approaches).

This effort was followed by validation and prioritisation processes, carried out with institutions and stakeholders who operate labour migration systems on a day-to-day basis. It additionally included the regional workshop (Tirana, February 2026) and structured review steps. Through this process, the key priorities were agreed on and refined, and the roadmap was structured accordingly. Internal quality assurance and regional validation ensured coherence, consistent terminology, traceability to evidence, and integration of feedback into the final roadmap.



The scope of assessment and main findings

The assessment examined labour migration governance across five interconnected areas, and the conclusions drawn from this analysis were used to inform and shape the roadmap's priority areas.

Main Finding 1. Governance foundations (legal and institutional frameworks)

Across the region, the basic legal mandates for labour migration are largely in place. Implementation, however, depends on multiple institutions that do not always operate as a single chain. Parallel registries and databases are common and are not consistently linked. Coordination often relies on informal procedures rather than standardised ones. The legislative and regulatory frameworks of several partners need to be updated to reflect the current realities of labour migration. In particular, they need to clarify institutional roles, formalise the transfer of competences between ministries, labour inspectorates and migration authorities, and define accountability more explicitly. Where these gaps persist, case processing may be delayed as responsibility moves from one institution to another, follow-up becomes less consistent, and the administrative burden increases for institutions, employers and foreign workers.

Main Finding 2. Pre-entry procedures and screening

Admission and screening procedures are generally the most structured part of the pathway. Inter-institutional coordination is built into the process, and some economies have introduced standardisation or digital elements. Even so, the assessment identified significant variations across Western Balkan partners and admission routes. Verification of applicants, employers, and supporting documents is not equally thorough in all cases; timelines and decisions are not always predictable; and documentary requirements are applied inconsistently. Approaches to identifying and scrutinising higher-risk or non-genuine cases also vary. In some parts of the workflow, slow or incomplete digitalisation still leads to reliance on manual processing and fragmented administrative steps.

Main Finding 3. Labour market alignment and recruitment

Most Western Balkan partners use tools such as labour market tests, quotas, employer opinions or sector procedures. The gap is that evidence-based policy-making is not consistently embedded. Planning often relies on partial datasets and limited time-series analysis, which makes it harder to calibrate tools over time or anticipate emerging pressures. At the same time, recruitment chains are becoming longer and more commercially complex, while oversight of intermediaries and employer compliance remains uneven. Informal brokerage persists in some sectors, while transparency regarding fees, contract terms and conditions, and the identity of the responsible recruitment actors is not consistently assured. Where these weaknesses persist, misinformation and contract substitution are more likely, early employment breakdowns increase, and trust in legal pathways is undermined. These shortcomings can also increase the risk of deception, labour exploitation and, in some cases, trafficking in human beings.

Main Finding 4. Post-entry monitoring and enforcement

The most consistent pattern across the region is the gap after approval. Labour migration systems do not always confirm whether authorised employment has actually commenced. They do not always capture key changes in time, such as changes of employer, worksite or address. Early termination does not consistently trigger a timely status review or follow-up. Existing databases and administrative records are often fragmented, and where digitalisation is partial, automated triggers remain limited. Inspection procedures can detect obvious violations, i.e. during workplace inspections, but findings do not always feed back into risk treatment and targeting.



The result is a loss of traceability after entry, with cases drifting out of institutional view and protection and compliance responses becoming delayed or inconsistent.

Main Finding 5. Cooperation with countries of origin, data and transparency

Information exchange exists in all Western Balkan partners, but it is often ad hoc rather than routine. Systems are not well connected, and data definitions and reporting practices vary. The above reduces end-to-end visibility and weakens early warning, including the ability to spot recurring patterns such as repeated non-activation in a corridor or sector. Cooperation with countries of origin is expanding, including verification channels and bilateral engagement. Still, it remains uneven and is not consistently embedded as a standardised workflow for document verification and contract clarification. Where formal channels are slow or unclear, labour migration systems continue to rely on informal contacts and intermediaries, which reduces predictability for employers and workers and delays problem-solving.

Cross-cutting issues

It is important to note that ministries, labour inspectorates, and migration authorities highlighted two cross-cutting issues that underpin progress across all roadmap priorities: legislative improvements and digitalisation.

Legislation: In many cases, progress does not require full legal reform, but targeted bylaws, procedural instructions or administrative decisions that each Western Balkan partner can sequence within its own system. At the same time, some roadmap measures will only work in practice if the legal basis is clear—particularly where obligations and consequences need to be defined (for employers and intermediaries), where lawful flexibility is introduced (such as job-change options), where access rules for registries are formalised, or where more structured cooperation with countries of origin is required. Legislation is therefore treated as a practical enabler: partners choose the appropriate legal instrument domestically, while regional cooperation supports convergence in outcomes rather than uniformity of legal form.

Digitalisation: Across consultations, digitalisation was consistently framed as foundational rather than a standalone priority. Many improvements in the roadmap depend on information becoming visible at the right moment and being usable across institutions—whether for evidence generation, activation confirmation, post-entry tracking, handovers, or worker-facing communication. Digital maturity varies widely across the region, and progress does not always require full system integration. In many contexts, light-touch solutions, such as digital notifications, clearer access rules, or basic interoperability between existing registries, can unlock operational gains.

Digitalisation is treated as an enabling accelerator, allowing each Western Balkan partner to advance at its own pace and with tools suited to its context. The emphasis is on improving data exchange in practical, incremental steps, often without creating a single centralised system, by connecting existing databases where feasible and by ensuring that access authorisations are clearly defined, purpose-limited, and regulated by law. Consultations also underlined that cybercrime presents a growing challenge and that partners in the region have already recorded hacking incidents, reinforcing the need for strong safeguards, audit trails, and security-by-design as digital exchange expands.



PRIORITY AREAS AND ACTIVITIES

Priority area 1: Evidence-based labour migration policy design

Baseline assessment

Across the region, labour migration planning currently relies on partial datasets and uneven analytical routines, with limited use of data tracked over time, labour market statistics and broader demographic analysis to track trends and anticipate pressures. This reduces comparability, limits the ability to anticipate emerging pressures and makes it difficult to draw systematic lessons over time. As a result, planning often relies on immediate administrative data, rather than a comprehensive picture of labour supply and demand dynamics.

Regional direction



Establish an evidence-led planning process for reviewing labour migration across the Western Balkans, using reliable, up-to-date, consistent information on demography, labour demand, past trends and migration patterns (inbound and outbound), so partners can detect emerging pressures early, compare patterns meaningfully, calibrate policy tools more predictably, and reduce incentives for irregular onward movement.

Partner-level implementation approaches

- ➔ Strengthen the legal basis and governance for data sharing and planning cycles, including data on labour demand, permits, registrations and mobility trends, with clear roles, authorisations and decision points.
- ➔ Leverage existing databases and administrative records (i.e. tax and social insurance records) to strengthen labour market needs assessment and post-entry visibility.
- ➔ Expand coverage of the data collection to under-tracked categories (cross-border workers, seasonal workers, etc., where relevant) and incorporate outbound mobility trends and analysis into labour mobility planning.
- ➔ Establish a formal process for carrying out sector-specific labour market analysis and for periodically reviewing needs-assessment methods across institutions or partners, to improve the quality, consistency and reliability of the data used for labour needs assessment.
- ➔ Review policy tools (quotas/labour tests) against evidence, including shortage occupation approaches where appropriate;
- ➔ Consider integrating information about employers; eligibility, compliance history and labour-needs reporting (or equivalent mechanisms) into planning and targeting to strengthen the collection, use and feedback of evidence for policy and operational decisions;
- ➔ Strengthen measures on the labour demand-side that respond to the identified shortages, including skills/certificate recognition (with relevant ministries where needed) and training pathways aligned to priority sectors.
- ➔ Agree on a minimum set of core labour-migration planning indicators, as key performance indicators (KPIs) and embed them in a regular review process (e.g., quarterly or annual), with scope to expand over time (e.g., forecasting and sector modules).

Recommendation: Build a practical evidence base for labour migration decisions, so planning and policy tools are adjusted based on comparable, regularly produced information rather than one-off administrative snapshots. Anchor this in a minimum indicator set and a recurring review cycle that can be strengthened over time as data and analytical capacity improve.

Priority area 2: Oversight of recruitment (intermediaries and employers)

Baseline assessment

Across the region, recruitment chains are geographically longer and more commercially complex than in the past. Oversight of intermediaries and employer compliance signals is uneven, with informal brokerage persisting in some sectors. Transparency on fees and contract terms is not consistently assured, and findings from inspections and enforcement actions do not always feed back into screening and targeting of higher-risk cases for closer scrutiny.

Regional direction



Establish a coherent approach to recruitment and employer oversight across the Western Balkans, so legal pathways remain trustworthy and enforceable: contractual terms and conditions are transparent, compliance expectations are clearly understood, and recurrent patterns of misuse can be detected early and addressed consistently, reducing exploitation, preventing early pathway breakdowns, and lowering incentives for irregular onward movement.

Partner-level implementation approaches

- ➔ A minimum due diligence checklist for employers and intermediaries, i.e. basic advance checks to confirm that employers and intermediaries are genuine, compliant and suitable to participate in recruitment;
- ➔ Peer learning for inspectorates and relevant authorities on recurring patterns of employer non-compliance and recruitment chain abuse (i.e. repeated non-activation, contract substitution, non-registration, recruitment fee abuse, document retention or misleading job offers), alongside fee contract transparency checks;
- ➔ Define a common set of reference data points for optional tools that support labour migration system integrity and the detection of misuse, such as lists or registers used to record recurring patterns of abuse, fraud, non-compliance or other irregularities;
- ➔ Where feasible, maintain and use structured registers of employers and recruitment agencies that have been sanctioned or found non-compliant, to inform eligibility checks and risk-based targeting;
- ➔ Strengthen the legal and regulatory framework governing licensing conditions, eligibility rules and sanctions;
- ➔ Standardise key elements of hiring and recruitment procedures to reduce potential misuse;
- ➔ Clarifying and strengthening oversight of recruitment mediation channels, including, where feasible, ensuring that application submission takes place through employers and licensed agencies;
- ➔ Special attention to the recruitment of seconded and posted workers. Ensure compliance with international regulations on recruitment of seconded and posted workers, as well as with regard to the supply chain regulatory framework.



- ➔ Improve supervision of licensed intermediaries through coordinated oversight (beyond a single institution);
- ➔ Reduce reliance on informal recruitment channels and unlicensed mediators by strengthening oversight of recruitment chains and improving early identification of misuse, thereby lowering the risk of abuse and trafficking in human beings;
- ➔ Introduce „trusted actor”; approaches (e.g. accredited registries or white lists) for employers or agencies with a solid track record, to facilitate and accelerate recruitment procedures, with clear criteria, safeguards and review mechanisms;
- ➔ Strengthen cooperation with origin-country counterparts, including pre-screening/verification steps where feasible;
- ➔ Consider targeted outreach and compliance communication about the labour migration pathway to reduce reliance on informal channels, alongside promoting lawful recruitment channels.

Recommendation: Reduce early pathway breakdown by shifting from ad hoc checks to systematic oversight of employers and intermediaries. Make recruitment processes more robust by requiring minimum due diligence, clearer licensing, and predictable use of compliance history for eligibility checks and targeted enforcement.

Priority area 3: Improving post-entry visibility and follow-up (activation, changes, termination)

Baseline assessment

Across the Western Balkans region, labour migration systems do not consistently check whether authorised employment has started (activation) and have no tools to detect early termination of contracts. Changes of employer, worksite or address are also not recorded in time to enable effective follow-up. Where these are not captured reliably, follow-up actions rely on ad hoc notifications or inspections rather than scheduled actions. This reduces overall traceability, weakens timely protection and compliance responses, and increases the likelihood that cases drift out of sight. This also reflects uneven post-entry notification and compliance practices among employers and, where relevant, recruitment intermediaries, with limited standardisation of who must report key changes and how those signals are used.

Regional direction



Strengthened and improved post-entry visibility of foreign labour migrants by making activation, key changes, and termination routinely captured events, linked to clear institutional handovers and proportionate follow-up. Improved routine follow-up within partners; respective institutional models, which support lawful employment pathways and reduce incentives for irregular onward movement.

Partner-level implementation approaches

- ➔ Advance or clarify the legal/procedural basis for activation, termination and notifications of important changes, such as change of employer, worksite, address or contract status, including who must notify whom, within what timeframe, and consequences for non-compliance. Additionally, introduce clear activation confirmation procedures appropriate to the domestic institutional set-up;



- ➔ Where feasible, introduce controlled and clearly regulated options for workers to change employers when the contract fails and strengthen post-entry traceability across job changes, including recording and reviewing the underlying reasons;
- ➔ Introduce or strengthen a unique foreign worker identifier /ID as the primary reference across the labour migration pathway, and link key records (permit, employer, worksite, contract status, inspection findings, status changes) to improve traceability and follow-up, using existing data for minimum basic cross-checks where full integration is not yet available;
- ➔ Where feasible, maintain structured records of identified 'false' applications (applications found to contain false information or non-genuine employment arrangements), to support traceability, screening integrity and follow-up;
- ➔ Strengthen coordination mechanisms between inspectorates and decision-making authorities for post-entry follow-up, including structured information flows from inspection findings to permit/residence decision-makers and expanded inspectorate access to relevant databases where feasible and lawful;
- ➔ Use thematic/risk-based inspections to improve detection of non-activation, substitution and early termination patterns, and ensure employer/agency compliance signals are usable for follow-up and targeting (e.g., repeated non-activation/early termination patterns feeding into inspections and risk-informed monitoring). Where recruitment intermediaries remain involved post-entry, define their role and accountability for key notifications and handovers (activation, changes, termination), including response expectations when problems arise.

Recommendation: Make post-entry follow-up effective by clarifying notification responsibilities and timeframes, by embedding simple confirmation procedures in relevant administrative and digital workflows that confirm whether employment has started and whether it remains consistent with the authorised purpose of stay. Strengthen traceability through workable notification rules, usable identifiers and stronger links between inspection findings and status decision-making.

Priority area 4: Institutional communication and information exchange

Baseline assessment

Labour migration governance spans multiple institutions that depend on timely information from one another. Yet, communication and data exchange are often handled through ad hoc requests, informal contacts and non-standardised formats rather than through routine channels with agreed responsibilities, timing and minimum information requirements. As a result, the same information is requested repeatedly, critical updates do not consistently reach all relevant actors, and follow-up is delayed—particularly at handover points where a case moves from one authority to another. These gaps reduce visibility and timely problem-solving, increasing the likelihood that cases drift out of lawful pathways and creating conditions that can enable irregular onward movement.

Regional direction



Strengthen institutional and intra-institutional communication and information exchange so that labour migration governance functions as a connected operational chain, with timely, reliable transmission of key information at handover points.

Partner-level implementation approaches

- ➔ Map critical points where responsibility is transferred from one institution or procedure to another, and formalise them where feasible, including clarifying responsibilities at key points in the labour migration pathway;
- ➔ Establish or strengthen data governance arrangements, including clear rules on who can access what information, for what purpose, and with what accountability, in line with the applicable legislation;
- ➔ Introduce targeted legal, bylaw and procedural updates where needed to give effect to roles, handovers, access rights and reporting obligations;
- ➔ Improve the speed and practical functioning of information exchange between institutions, including through more automated mechanisms, so that important updates can be shared and implemented without unnecessary delay;
- ➔ Establish routine operational-level communication mechanisms-where useful, set up two-level coordination (technical working group and strategic steering) to connect operational issues with decision-making;
- ➔ Consider including non-traditional partners (tax/social insurance, business registry and, where relevant, consular services) in operational coordination;
- ➔ Reduce duplication of administrative steps through shared checklists and standard formats where feasible.

Recommendation: Make labour migration governance function as a connected chain by moving from informal, episodic exchange of information to routine communication at critical handover points. Put in place clear, lawful access rules and standard operating arrangements so information reaches the right institution in time for action.

Priority area 5: Improving access to the safeguards for foreign workers and employers

Baseline assessment

Access to information and protection pathways for workers vary and are often unavailable in languages other than the official language. This disrupts workers' access to information about their rights and available support. Complaint and referral mechanisms exist, but can be difficult to navigate, slow to resolve, or insufficiently connected to the institutions that can act. In cases of unmatched working and living conditions, mistreatment, coercion, etc., problems can escalate quickly, and the workers can fall out of the formal pathway, thus becoming vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and trafficking. Particularly vulnerable are foreign workers arriving due to the growing recruitment in medium- and low-wage, labour-intensive occupations.

Employers also face uncertainty and would benefit from clear procedures for employing foreign workers, clearer rules governing cooperation with recruitment agencies, and better information on their obligations, applicable standards and available lawful recruitment channels.

Regional direction



Strengthening the implementation of the protection services across the region by improving access to timely information, clear referral pathways and supporting lawful employment continuity, proportionate problem-solving and reduced incentives for irregular onward movement.

Partner-level implementation approaches

- ➔ Upon arrival, provide foreign workers, in relevant languages, with clear and practical information on their rights, obligations and available support. Additional rules and documents should be made available in understandable language - general rules when working and residing in the country, occupational safety, content, etc.
- ➔ Establish simple contact-point arrangements, one-stop-shop information points: a single place that provides information relevant to foreign workers arriving in the region, for example, a designated helpdesk at the employment agency;
- ➔ Establish clear complaint and referral pathways with defined responsibilities for institutions, workers and employers, as well as clear response expectations and escalation routes;
- ➔ Strengthen prevention of abuse and under-reporting through clear communication of confidentiality options and non-retaliation expectations (clear assurances that workers should not face punishment or unfair treatment for raising concerns in good faith);
- ➔ Broaden and diversify complaint channels where appropriate to ensure accessibility for workers with limited literacy or disabilities;
- ➔ In cases of suspected or identified misuse or abuse of workers, connect the complaint system with the existing social protection, migration, and anti-trafficking systems, so that the person can receive adequate protection and support to their needs;
- ➔ Where relevant, provide support for workers (vocational training, language training, etc.) to improve retention and reduce early drop-out;
- ➔ Connect the support of the foreign workers with the system for the integration of migrants. Interlink and use the available services;
- ➔ Provide clear employer guidance (sector-tailored where relevant) on obligations, timelines, legal recruitment procedures and channels, and consequences of non-compliance;
- ➔ Establish support mechanisms for the employers (designated contact point/helpdesk) to answer procedural questions and reduce accidental non-compliance;
- ➔ Clarify employer's obligations, including contract information, registration procedures and relevant contact points, to reduce misunderstandings and support predictable compliance;
- ➔ Where feasible, link employer non-compliance to proportionate follow-up (warnings, corrective actions, escalation), to improve predictability and deterrence.

Recommendation: Improve the support and protection arrangements for workers and ensure access to clear information, contact points, referral pathways, and assistance where needed. Provide information and support to employers to guide them through the legal recruitment process and their obligations. Strengthen mechanisms for resolving conflicts between employers and foreign workers to support legal compliance and prevent irregular practices by either party.



Priority area 6: Cooperation with countries of origin

Baseline assessment

Cooperation with countries of origin regarding legal labour migration is expanding. Still, in practice, it remains uneven and often relies on ad hoc contacts rather than established official arrangements. Verification of documentation related to permit applications and clarification of contract terms between the employer and the recruitment agency or state authority responsible for recruitment in the country of origin are not always required. Pre-departure safeguards are not yet consistently in place, increasing the risk of misinformation, hidden fees and contract substitution. This can create avoidable uncertainty, misunderstandings and risks for both workers and employers. The recruitment of foreign labour extends to new countries with limited or missing consular services and points of contact. The lack of cooperation can reduce the predictability of timelines and working arrangements for both employers and workers, making it more difficult to receive reliable information and manage expectations before departure.

In cases where foreign workers obtain irregular status in the country of employment and must be deported or have become victims of misconduct, fraud, exploitation or trafficking, effective cooperation with the sending country is essential, but is reportedly often missing or inefficient.

Regional direction

Strengthen operational cooperation with countries of origin so verification and contract clarification become more operational, and workers arrive with realistic expectations of the job and the legal pathway.

Partner-level implementation approaches

- ➔ Establish working-level verification channels with designated contact points, where feasible, and develop practical verification routines for key documents and contract terms;
- ➔ Develop or strengthen bilateral arrangements (such as labour cooperation agreements, protocols or MoUs) supported by implementable action plans. Where relevant, ensure that these arrangements support cooperation across the labour migration pathway by addressing labour migration together with return and readmission, and cooperation on trafficking in human beings, including for labour exploitation;
- ➔ Improve visibility of origin-side actors involved in recruitment (e.g., lists/directories of agencies or counterpart institutions), where feasible and useful;
- ➔ Strengthen selection and corridor monitoring (clearer prioritisation of corridors/channels and communication to reduce reliance on informal intermediaries);
- ➔ Align pre-departure information with worker-facing guidance (rights, obligations, contract terms, complaint routes), where feasible, to support realistic expectations and reduce misinformation;



- ➔ Strengthen consular coordination and address capacity constraint in priority corridors with limited coverage, through practical resource-sharing arrangements, such as shared consular support models or pooled verification capacity, and ensure clear contact points for verification and case support;
- ➔ Expand formal data sharing agreements with priority origin countries to support verification, case management and labour migration cooperation;
- ➔ Incorporate operational procedures for collaborative verification of recruitment agencies, exchange blacklists of fraudulent intermediaries, and establish clear frameworks for the assistance, protection, and respectful repatriation of recognised victims of exploitation and trafficking.

Recommendation: Improve predictability in key recruitment corridors by putting in place practical cooperation arrangements, verification workflows and contract-clarification processes with countries of origin, building a foundation for stronger information-sharing and referral networks between origin and destination countries. Combine this with clearer pre-departure information on core job terms and support channels, and strengthen consular coordination where capacity is limited. In this respect, Skills Mobility Partnerships (SMPs) and similar government-to-government mobility arrangements can provide a practical vehicle for operationalising origin-country cooperation, where they exist or are under development. An ICMPD mapping indicates growing interest in such partnerships in the Western Balkans, including with countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. It identifies a range of partnership formats already involving Western Balkan economies (protocols, MoUs, and sector-specific projects). These arrangements can be used to structure working-level contact points, verification routines, and clearer expectation management for workers and employers.



CONCLUSION

This roadmap lays the groundwork for strengthening legal labour migration pathways across the Western Balkans. By identifying shared priority areas and setting out implementation approaches that can be adapted by each partner, it provides a practical basis for collective action to reduce the risk of irregular onward movement.

The next step is for each Western Balkan partner to decide which elements of the roadmap are most relevant to its own context, and how best to sequence the legislative updates, digital enablers and institutional coordination needed to take them forward. In doing so, partners should draw on regional experience, as well as on the practical knowledge, networks, and operating models available through the EU and EU Member States and, where relevant, with countries of origin, for potential collaboration. Experience across the region suggests that progress depends not only on formal structures but also on direct professional exchange, familiarity between counterparts and opportunities to learn from what works in practice. The next phase should therefore include peer exchange, exposure to operational models, and practical cooperation.

The roadmap should also be understood as a platform for learning and practical use. Certain processes have already been initiated in the region, and this roadmap provides a useful framework to build upon those efforts. Some partners are developing labour market observatories and real-time databases; some are revising employment legislation or strengthening the role of labour inspectorates in licensing and oversight; and some are considering how inspection findings, employer track-record and performance indicators could be used more systematically in planning and monitoring. These efforts differ, but they point in a common direction, and the roadmap offers a structure within which such initiatives can be compared, refined and, where useful, scaled through continued exchange.

Crucially, the roadmap also recognises that stronger labour migration systems do not rest solely on control measures. It emphasises the importance of providing foreign workers with clear information, accessible protection safeguards, and a predictable resolution of disputes. By prioritising and safeguarding the rights and well-being of migrant workers, the Western Balkans can create legal pathways that are not only more secure but also more attractive and sustainable.

Peer learning, joint technical work, and continued regional dialogue will be important in this next phase. The aim is gradual convergence around practical approaches that improve transparency, communication, traceability, and protection across the labour migration pathway. Over time, this should help reduce the misuse, strengthen the reliability of legal pathways, prevent potential abuse and exploitation, and give institutions and employers greater confidence in how the system operates.

Ultimately, this roadmap should be treated as a living tool in a vibrant and fast-evolving area of policy and practice. As new challenges and good practices emerge, the roadmap's approaches can be refined through continued dialogue and evidence-sharing among the Western Balkan partners. With sustained commitment, practical cooperation and a shared focus on integrity, predictability and protection, the region can build labour migration systems that are more and better able to meet the realities ahead, thereby helping to prevent secondary irregular movements.

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International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)
Rothschildplatz 4
A-1020 Vienna
www.icmpd.org

International Centre for Migration Policy Development
Vienna, Austria

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