



External evaluation of the EUAA's cooperation with MARRI

Evaluation report

Prepared by Ramboll Management Consulting

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Acronyms and definitions

| Term | Definition |
|-----------------|---|
| CEAS | Common European Asylum System |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus disease 2019 |
| DG NEAR | Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations |
| EUAA | European Union Agency for Asylum |
| EU | European Union |
| GIZ | Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Development Agency) |
| IISG | Integrative Internal Security Governance |
| IOM | International Organisation for Migration |
| IPA | Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance |
| MARRI | Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative |
| MARRI RC | MARRI Regional Centre |
| PaCT | Preventing and Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans |
| RRIS | Regional Remote Interpretation Service |
| WB-MIDEX | Regional Platform for Migration Data Exchange in the Western Balkans |



Executive summary

This document constitutes the final report on the evaluation of the cooperation between the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) and the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI) established for the period 2017-2022 (hereinafter EUAA-MARRI cooperation). The aim of this report is twofold: to assess how well the cooperation worked so far and what its added value has been, and to inform the EUAA about what potential future cooperation could look like to maximise its effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and added value for both the Agency and MARRI.

The cooperation between the EUAA and MARRI **aimed to build the capacity of MARRI to support the Western Balkan partners in identifying regional training needs and to support the implementation of EUAA training** (by local trainers) in the region from an organisational perspective. During the 2020-2022 period, MARRI staff was trained on the EUAA training needs assessment methodology and supported the Agency in carrying out a training needs assessment and developing a regional training plan. Two regional training sessions were rolled out by the end of 2022, and three more were planned to take place in 2023. The involvement of MARRI in terms of administrative or logistical tasks was limited to registering participants for the second training rollout because the EUAA bore full financial responsibility for the implementation of training in the region. Because of its limited involvement, the added value of MARRI was low, and the work could have been fulfilled to the same degree by the EUAA acting alone. That being said, **it could be beneficial for MARRI to take on additional administrative and logistical tasks in the future to lessen the administrative burden placed on EUAA staff**. MARRI is well-placed to do so because of its physical presence in the region, understanding of the challenges faced by administrations and knowledge of local languages, which put MARRI at an advantage to carry out logistical tasks, such as identifying and booking venues and transportation services for participants.

Based on the evidence collected from MARRI annual reports, project information and stakeholder interviews, the evaluation concludes that **MARRI's capacity has improved in recent years**, as a result of professional capacity-building support provided by its donor or partner organisations, experience built up through project implementation, and a range of legal, financial and administrative reforms initiated in 2016 by the current MARRI RC Director. MARRI has **ample experience organising in-person and online events** (up to 24 per year, with up to 80 participants per meeting). A few of its **staff members have been trained** on financial management and European Union (EU) funding/programme management and have **successfully implemented grants** of up to € 105,000 over a three-year period to support partner organisations with administrative and logistical tasks. MARRI is also capable of carrying out future training needs assessments on the basis of the EUAA's methodology and has experience hosting and managing databases of experts and information.

There are considerable constraints to MARRI's capacity, however. MARRI is **limited in its financial resource capacities to implement activities independently** and relies heavily on external sources of funding (notably project grants). The abovementioned legal, financial and administrative **reforms have not yet been finalised**, and could stall when the current Director is replaced in mid-2023. **Turnover** among other staff introduces a risk that can hinder continuity in the organisation's contacts in the region. MARRI's nature as a regional intergovernmental body requires approval from all MARRI Participants before any activities can be implemented, which is challenging in a region that is subject to political pressures. Moreover, the **internal processes**, related to who could sign or approve certain documents, reportedly slowed down the work. Finally, there are **political tensions** in the Western



Balkan region, hindering full active participation from all Western Balkans in activities organised through MARRI. Importantly, Serbia reserved the right to participate in the regional training needs assessment and did not participate in any regional training rolled out with the involvement of MARRI. At the same time, interviews with a representative of the Serbian Asylum Office and MARRI donors revealed that their main reason for non-participation is not the involvement of MARRI, but rather their wish for bilateral support from the EUAA that is tailored to their own needs.

Nevertheless, consulted stakeholders who have worked with MARRI in the past believed that MARRI would be the most appropriate organisation to take on administrative and logistical management of EUAA regional training activities in the Western Balkan region and has the capacity to do so. They all acknowledged that MARRI demonstrated a unique ability to work around the political sensitivities in the region, e.g., by not referring to its members as ‘countries’ but rather ‘Participants’, and that there had been considerable improvements in MARRI’s work and organisational capabilities in recent years. They agreed that with **sufficient financial support, time and clarity in their tasks, MARRI would be able to deliver.**

On the basis of these results, the evaluation brings forward two recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Should a need for further cooperation with MARRI RC on regional training be identified, decide, based on an assessment of risks and potential benefits, whether this would be worthwhile.

Despite MARRI RC having the organisational capacity to be more involved in the administrative and logistical organisation of training activities, the Agency would have to carefully weigh up the potential risks of reinforcing cooperation with MARRI RC against the potential benefits of doing so. Risks to be considered notably include the non-participation of Serbia and changes in human resources capacity of MARRI, among others.

Recommendation 2: If a decision to continue cooperation is made, explore the possibility of MARRI functioning as a regional training hub on asylum and consider the modalities that could be used to provide financial support for such a function.

The Agency could consider the potential time savings resulting from MARRI RC taking over administrative and logistical management of regional training rollouts. A decision would also have to be made by the Agency on making financial support available to MARRI RC to fund the cost of the services they could provide with due consideration being made to MARRI RC’s limitations in managing certain modalities of EU funding.



1. Introduction

This document constitutes the final report for the evaluation of the cooperation between the EUAA and MARRI established during the period 2017-2022 (hereinafter EUAA-MARRI cooperation). The aim of this report is twofold: to assess how well the cooperation worked so far and what its added value has been; and to inform the EUAA about whether and in what format the MARRI cooperation could continue, based on the capacity of MARRI to take it forward. Thus, the evaluation covered two evaluation questions:

- To what extent has the MARRI cooperation worked well so far and why? How has the cooperation been working and what has been its added value?
- Has MARRI reached a sufficient level of capacity to prepare and implement the training plan independently? What could future cooperation between the EUAA and MARRI look like?

To answer these questions, the evaluation combined evidence from secondary data with primary data collected through stakeholder interviews, to enable an in-depth assessment of the results of the intervention. Secondary evidence notably included documents and presentations related to the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) regional project implementation, work carried out in the context of the EUAA-MARRI cooperation, and documents related to the functioning and activities of MARRI. Interviews were conducted with the EUAA, the European Commission (Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)), staff from MARRI RC, training coordinators (heads of asylum offices) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia, an international organisation, and three donors/partners of MARRI RC (see Annex 1 for more details on the methodology). Despite numerous follow-ups, the planned interviews with a selection of MARRI committee members (i.e., representatives from Ministries of Foreign Affairs) and MARRI coordinators (i.e., representatives from Ministries of Interior) could not take place, constituting a gap in the evidence base. Based on the evidence base and findings derived from this, the evaluation draws conclusions and presents recommendations on whether the partnership could continue, and in what format.

2. Intended results of the action

MARRI is a regional intergovernmental body which brings together representatives¹ from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. It was established in 2004, with a mandate to promote closer regional cooperation and a common, comprehensive and harmonised approach in the areas of migration, asylum, border control, visa regime, integration and return of refugees within the ambition to reach international and European standards in these areas. MARRI RC, based in Skopje, acts as the Executive Secretariat of MARRI and focal point for consultations, dialogue, training, information exchange, capacity building and other activities agreed by MARRI Participants. In the context of the regional project *'Regional Support to protection-sensitive migration*

¹ Representatives from the respective Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of each MARRI Participant.

* 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.



management in the Western Balkans and Turkey’ funded by the IPA, the EUAA foresaw the provision of support to MARRI.

Cooperation between the EUAA and MARRI started in January 2017 through a range of visits. Since then, the Agency contributed to the [MARRI Strategy \(2018-2020\)](#) and organised a policy meeting on cooperation with MARRI where possible areas of cooperation were discussed, namely: the establishment of a regional training function on asylum within MARRI RC, and the establishment of a practitioners’ network on country of origin information for the Western Balkan region. Only the former (cooperation on training) has actually been implemented so far and is thus the focus of this evaluation.

In April-May 2019, in the framework of the project *’Regional Support to protection-sensitive migration management in the Western Balkans and Turkey’*, a needs assessment mission on training on asylum at regional level in the Western Balkans in cooperation with MARRI was conducted. A Member State expert, funded by the EUAA, assessed the **capacities, expertise and added value of MARRI to establish a regional training function**. Its aim was to identify potential areas of support from the EUAA to MARRI in this regard, related possible future steps, and the necessary pre-conditions to be fulfilled.

Following the needs assessment, the Agency and MARRI agreed on an EUAA-MARRI pilot training workplan which was set to kick off in November 2020. Its general objective was to respond to the common training needs of the Western Balkan partners at a regional level. Doing so was identified as beneficial to all MARRI Participants by the expert who carried out the needs assessment. Most of the MARRI Participants have relatively small administrations, meaning that a limited number of people would require training and that they do not have many of their own trainers. Based on these considerations, paired with the fact that the region shares the same or similar languages, taking a regional approach to training was considered to be more efficient than organising training bilaterally.

The cooperation between the EUAA and MARRI aimed to build the capacity of MARRI to support the Western Balkan partners in identifying regional training needs and to support the implementation of EUAA training (by local trainers) in the region in terms of organising the training. The objectives of the EUAA-MARRI training pilot were organised along four phases of support, which were to be implemented sequentially.

Phase 1: Capacity building of MARRI on training methodology

- Objective 1.1: Build capacity of MARRI to carry out regional training needs and capacity building assessment.
- Objective 1.2: Develop skills of MARRI staff to organise regional training sessions.

Phase 2: Training Needs Assessment

- Objective 2.1: Identify joint training needs of MARRI Participants (to be delivered in multilateral format).
- Objective 2.2: Map training needs in each of the MARRI Participants.



Phase 3: Pilot Training Plan on Evidence Assessment

- Objective 3.1: Increase the skills of the asylum officials on evidence assessment in line with the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the EUAA's training methodology.

Phase 4: Pilot joint regional training plan on thematic priorities identified through the training needs assessment

- Objective 4.1: Provide targeted, needs based training to officials involved in the asylum process on the thematic priorities identified through training needs assessment.
- Objective 4.2: Increase the skills of the asylum officials (trainers and participants) and harmonise practices in line with the CEAS and the EUAA's training methodology.

3. Implementation of the action: current state of play

In September-November 2019, two MARRI participant representatives took part in the EUAA train-the-trainer session on inclusion to gain an understanding of how the Agency's training is structured and delivered. In January 2020, a work visit to the Agency involving four MARRI representatives was organised to conceptualise a pilot training plan. In 2020, the Agency organised a series of online workshops to transfer knowledge on the Agency's training needs assessment and training methodology to MARRI RC staff.

Based on the knowledge gained, MARRI RC, in close cooperation with the Agency, conducted a training needs analysis in 2021. It consisted of a survey questionnaire that was jointly developed, translated by MARRI RC, and disseminated to all MARRI Participants. A total of 28 asylum and reception officers from almost all MARRI Participants responded (all except Serbia, which reserved their right to continue the cooperation with the Agency on a bilateral basis only).² On the basis of the results, a pilot training workplan was proposed in November 2021.

The first regional rollout of training, on interview techniques, took place on 17 and 18 May 2022 in Ohrid, North Macedonia. It was organised in three sessions: one in Albanian for Albania and Kosovo, one in Croatian for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, and one in Macedonian for North Macedonia. While this was initially planned to take place between July and December 2021 (as per the training pilot workplan), it was postponed to May 2022 due to the COVID-19³ pandemic. The training was organised by the EUAA, and two MARRI representatives participated.

A second regional rollout, on interviewing vulnerable persons, took place on 25 and 26 October in Budva, Montenegro, in a similar setup. For the second rollout, MARRI RC was more involved in the preparation and organisation. While full organisational responsibility remained with the EUAA, MARRI RC supported with the registration of training participants (i.e., creation of an online registration link, collecting information on participants and sharing it with the EUAA to send formal invitations).

² Responses were divided as follows: 2 from Albania, 9 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 7 from North Macedonia, 8 from Montenegro, and 2 from Kosovo.

³ Coronavirus disease 2019.



There is a plan for three more rollouts to take place in 2023. After that, if the cooperation is considered relevant to continue in the future, another regional needs assessment will be carried out for the 2024-2025 period.

4. Evaluation findings

4.1. To what extent has the MARRI cooperation worked well so far and why? What has been its added value?

As a result of the capacity building support offered by the EUAA, **MARRI RC was able to carry out a training needs assessment with support from the Agency which informed the development of a pilot training plan for the region.** MARRI RC staff gained better insights into the training curriculum offered by the Agency, and knowledge of how to identify when a certain training might be relevant to roll out. Through their participation in an EUAA train-the-trainer session and subsequent workshops on training needs assessment methodology, the relevant MARRI RC staff also felt better equipped to ask the right questions of the administrations in the Western Balkan region to uncover future mutual training needs. In general, MARRI RC staff felt supported by the EUAA and its experts and considered the pace of the support to be appropriate.

However, the **training needs assessment took quite some time**, according to the EUAA. The needs assessment survey was launched on 4 July 2021 and closed on 9 September 2021. The resulting needs assessment report was delivered by MARRI in November 2021, i.e., two months after the data had been collected. It was the first time MARRI RC staff conducted such an analysis, and they required quite some support from the EUAA's Training and Professional Development Centre staff who have ample experience conducting training needs assessments at administration level. According to MARRI RC staff, they learned from the experience and would be able to produce a needs assessment report within a shorter timeframe going forward.

The **pilot training plan that resulted from the needs assessment was relevant to meet the needs of MARRI Participants' authorities** that participated in the needs assessment, because it led to the identification of training modules that were of relevance to two or more administrations, and participation in the training sessions organised as a result of the needs assessment was voluntary. However, the pilot training plan was developed by the Agency, and approved by all MARRI Participants, with no direct involvement of MARRI RC. As such, while regional training needs assessments and subsequent regional training delivery are relevant in the region, this can in principle (resources allowing) be organised by the EUAA without any support from a regional organisation such as MARRI.

The training rollouts themselves were delayed compared to what was initially planned, in large part due to the COVID-19 pandemic hindering the organisation of in-person training sessions. The **role of MARRI RC in the logistical organisation and management of the physical meetings was limited**, because the EUAA bore full financial responsibility for the implementation of training in the region. As outlined in chapter 3, MARRI RC was responsible for registering participants for the second regional training rollout. According to MARRI, their knowledge of local contexts and languages, paired with personal contacts in the MARRI Participants' administrations, enabled them to liaise effectively and



efficiently with relevant staff in the administrations directly, to promote the training activities. However, a concern was raised by the EUAA that these contacts are primarily staff in the international/EU cooperation units; not the asylum units to which the training is targeted. As such, additional outreach efforts from the EUAA were needed. Therefore, the **added value of involving MARRI RC, rather than the EUAA organising regional training independently, was limited.**

4.2. Has MARRI reached a sufficient level of capacity?

This section considers the degree to which MARRI RC has built up sufficient capacity to independently prepare and implement future regional training plans. It considers MARRI RC's organisational structure and modus operandi, presents examples of how its capacity has increased over time on the basis of examples from other projects, and considers the stronger and weaker points of MARRI RC in relation to its ability to prepare and implement the training plan independently.

MARRI RC funding, organisational structure, and modus operandi

MARRI RC is **primarily funded by financial contributions from the MARRI Participants, supplemented by funds from donor organisations.** As of January 2020, all participating parties contribute equal amounts on an annual basis, amounting to approximately € 125,000 per year from 2020 onwards. A review of MARRI Annual Reports, however, shows that there have been considerable delays in payments of annual contributions from MARRI Participants, hindering operations for MARRI RC. Over time, MARRI RC has become more and more reliant on additional project funds from donor organisations to function effectively, as the contributions from MARRI Participants primarily cover the salaries of RC staff.

Every year in June, one of the MARRI Participants takes over the Presidency-in-Office for a one-year term. A Director is appointed for a three-year period (once renewable for two additional years) after a competitive recruitment procedure open to all MARRI Participants. The current Director has been in office since August 2018 and is due for replacement in the summer of 2023. Each of the MARRI Participants is also expected to second a member of staff from the relevant administration to MARRI RC, for a four-year period. At the time of writing (November 2022), all except Albania (position vacant June 2019) had appointed participant representatives. In previous years, there were vacancies from other Participants as well, namely Bosnia and Herzegovina (vacant from January 2017-October 2020) and Montenegro (vacant from October 2018-March 2021). As noted by MARRI RC staff, the **capacities of MARRI RC are heavily dependent on seconded representatives** from MARRI Participants, not only from a capacity and expertise perspective, but also because they facilitate, ease, and speed up communication and decision making. As such, **if certain Participants are not represented, MARRI RC's capacity to communicate effectively and efficiently with the concerned administrations is reduced.** This risk is magnified by the fact that representatives are supposed to be replaced every four years.

In addition to the Director and five participant representatives, MARRI RC consisted of **six additional members of staff** at the time of writing. Support staff is contracted to improve the functioning of MARRI RC or to implement specific tasks within projects in which MARRI partners with donor organisations. They cover tasks related to financial management, administrative tasks, communication, and statistical analysis. Some of them were recruited specifically to implement a



project and paid for with those project funds but were later retained by MARRI RC to carry out horizontal tasks beyond the framework of the project as well, as explained in more detail in relation to specific projects in the next section.

Developments in capacity over time, examples from other projects

In 2016, MARRI RC initiated a series of **administrative, managerial and financial reforms**, with support from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), based on an identified need to clarify MARRI RC's organisational structure, job descriptions and reporting lines; and to produce internal work procedure rules. To this end, a Legal Framework Reform Working Group was established in June 2017 and worked on the development of a range of documents in subsequent years (MARRI Statute, MARRI RC General Rules, MARRI RC Financial Rules and Regulations, MARRI RC Office Rules, MARRI RC Code of Ethics, and MARRI RC Organigramme), of which drafts were finalised at the end of November 2019. As per the latest MARRI Annual Report (June 2021-June 2022), the **documents had not been adopted** as revisions, based on several rounds of feedback from MARRI Participants, were ongoing at the time of writing. The slow pace at which reforms were being implemented highlights the complex political situation in which MARRI RC operates. The fact that the reforms had not been finalised at the time of writing also leads to a risk that they may not be adopted in the end, especially if they are not finalised before the current Director is replaced in the summer of 2023.

In parallel with the formal reforms, a series of **internal reforms spearheaded by the MARRI RC Director** took place, notably to establish a mechanism for assigning tasks fairly and efficiently among MARRI RC staff, based on their interests, skills, special knowledge and experience. The reforms included a comprehensive capacity needs assessment conducted in the period September 2020-March 2021, with support from GIZ. Subsequently, through GIZ, **MARRI RC personnel received training on a range of topics**, including knowledge management, public communications, fundraising strategy, financial management, EU funding/programme management, and human resource management. It should be noted that specific staff positions for related tasks (i.e., one finance officer and one programme/project manager) were in part (70%) financed by GIZ in the context of the project [‘Preventing and Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans’ \(PaCT Project\)](#), though MARRI RC is responsible for their payroll.

According to interviewees from GIZ, there have been **considerable improvements in the quality, professionalism, and efficiency of the work of MARRI RC** as a result of the abovementioned capacity building activities. Interviewees explained that MARRI RC did not have a process in place for financial management prior to the start of the PaCT project in 2019. GIZ provided MARRI RC with a € 105,000 grant through a local subsidy contract, to support organisational development and the organisation of events (including conferences with 50-70 participants each) over a three-year period. MARRI RC staff was fully responsible for budget management of the grant, and reportedly **submitted all financial and narrative reports on time**. Interviewees reported a good working relationship and high degree of independence from MARRI RC staff and acknowledged that MARRI RC's efforts to establish new Financial Rules and Regulations showed a **clear progression in its capacities when it comes to finances**. GIZ confirmed their intention to provide grants to MARRI RC in the future as a confirmation of their positive experience working together since 2019.



Such **positive developments in MARRI RC's capacities were also underlined by other consulted donors/partners**. For example, IOM developed a Regional Migration Data Exchange Platform (WB-MIDEX)⁴ with IPA II funds and transferred ownership of the platform to MARRI RC in 2019. The transfer gave MARRI RC responsibilities related to statistical methodologies, formats, quality, quantity and periodicity for collecting, processing and disseminating relevant migration data through the WB-MIDEX platform. **MARRI RC still hosted and administered the platform at the time of writing, under coordination of one of its staff, and was fully responsible for its financial management**. In fact, MARRI RC changed the IT platform used for hosting, with a view to facilitating the process of data sharing for MARRI Participants. MARRI RC also established a Working Group on migration statistics, composed of migration data experts from MARRI Participants' Statistical Agencies and Ministries of Interior/Security, to advance harmonisation in statistical reporting in the region, which has met three times since November 2021. In the first year after the transfer, IOM paid for the salary of a migration data analyst, but after that, MARRI RC paid their salary. The recruitment of this analyst was a joint effort between MARRI and IOM; terms of reference were agreed together and both actors were involved in the interview panels. At the time of writing, no statistical analysis had been produced because not all MARRI administrations had been able to transfer comparable data to the platform, but both IOM and MARRI interviewees reported being ready to start developing these as soon as data issues were resolved. Thus, the **delays encountered were not caused by a lack of capacity of MARRI RC**, but technical issues among MARRI Participants.

A related activity was the Regional Remote Interpretation Service (RRIS) project. RRIS is a regional roster of interpreter services which all MARRI Participants can use to share interpretation services for remote use (i.e., interpreters located in one country can be used to interpret asylum interviews in another), which was deemed necessary in light of limited interpretation resource availability in the region. The project was initiated by MARRI in response to the 2015-2016 migration crisis, and its development and coordination supported by IOM. **MARRI RC was fully responsible for the RRIS maintenance and hosting in its current form, providing an unimpeded quick interpreter-scheduling service** for rare extra-regional languages. IOM continued to support MARRI through the secondment of an expert to MARRI RC, who serves as RRIS administrator. As of June 2022, the RRIS had only been used once, by the Bosnia and Herzegovina Asylum Office, in November 2021.⁵ MARRI RC provided remote technical support and coordination among the authorities and the remote interpreter.

Another example was provided by Hilfswerk International, which involved MARRI RC as a project partner in a project co-funded by the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and the Austrian Ministry of Interior 'Reducing irregular migration to the EU by strengthening the capacity of migration-related structures in the Western Balkans', aimed at raising capacity of security agents in the Western Balkan region to conduct their work to better manage migration. Hilfswerk **involved MARRI RC as a point of contact to the relevant authorities** in the region, which reportedly significantly helped them increase the reach of the project because **MARRI was seen as a recognised regional player with a clear agenda on migration and personal contacts** within the relevant administrations. The project

⁴ WB-MIDEX is a custom-made software solution for exchanging non-personal migration data and statistics among the MARRI Participants in pre-defined templates in line with EU standards ([Regulation \(EC\) 862/2007](#) on Community Statistics on Migration and International Protection). Source: [IOM news article](#) - Regional Migration Data Exchange Platform Changes Hands.

⁵ There were subsequent requests from other administrations, but for migrant languages not currently represented in the pool of interpreters.



included the organisation of four conferences, totalling more than 1000 participants, for which **MARRI RC supported with the logistics**, i.e., recommending facilities and establishing communication with them. MARRI RC was responsible for planning the events within a budget provided by Hilfswerk, but the ultimate responsibility for payments remained with Hilfswerk. This reportedly went well; MARRI RC staff was considered to be very organised, detail-oriented and precise. Interviewees also highlighted MARRI RC's communication skills and media presence provided an added value.

Finally, an interviewee from the Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) noted that **under the previous management, MARRI RC did not function as well**. The interviewee reported that MARRI RC now works more effectively and efficiently, delivers better quality work, is more organised, more visible, and more proactive. They found that MARRI RC staff is knowledgeable of the political and operational situation of the Western Balkan partners and capable of mitigating the challenges associated with it.

MARRI RC capacity to become a regional training hub for asylum

As already mentioned in section 4.1, MARRI RC has built up **capacity to carry out a training needs assessment** in line with the EUAA's methodology through participation of two staff members in workshops, and the subsequent joint conduct of a training needs assessment in the Western Balkan region. While the first one took quite some time, MARRI RC staff feels capable of conducting the analysis faster now that they have done it once before. Since carrying out the training needs assessment with support from the EUAA, MARRI RC carried out a few other needs assessments. For instance, MARRI RC carried out a needs assessment to assess why the RRIS was not being used prior to November 2021. This exercise consisted of the conduct of interviews with the Participants' authorities, desk research and reports of relevant EU and international actors like the EUAA, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and IOM. They also supported the mapping of capacity building needs in relation to border security according to an interviewee from the IISG in the framework of their work. While thematically different, these experiences nonetheless demonstrate MARRI's **increased experience in communicating with the authorities to understand their needs**.

MARRI RC is **very experienced with organising meetings, conferences and events**, and can thus support the organisation of regional training rollouts, including at a frequency of, e.g., three or four rollouts per year. For example, in 2019 MARRI organised 24 in-person events. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the work of MARRI RC, but the centre was reportedly able to support MARRI Participants in shifting to online meetings and events. As explained by interviewees from GIZ and Hilfswerk, **MARRI RC helped them identify meeting venues, accommodation for participants, and travel arrangements** which were all adequate and appropriate for their purpose. Both organisations believed MARRI to be a well-respected regional organisation with strong contacts within each of the relevant MARRI administrations, resulting in persons from all MARRI Participants attending their events. In the case of events and workshops organised in the framework of GIZ-funded projects, MARRI RC was responsible for financial management through grants, but this was not the case for projects implemented by other donors/partners. As already mentioned above, GIZ found that MARRI RC did a good job in this regard.

As for **maintaining a roster of EUAA-trained trainers in the region**, MARRI has relevant expertise as well. MARRI RC maintains a [database of experts](#) that brings together policymakers, practitioners and



researchers with interests in border management, asylum, readmission, trafficking in human beings and other migration management areas relevant to the Western Balkan region. They collect background information on these experts, including on their field(s) of expertise and language knowledge that is contained in a searchable database. MARRI RC also maintained the database of interpreters in the framework of the RRIS project, which as of June 2022 included 31 regional interpreters. MARRI RC thus has the **capacity to set up a similar database with information on all EUAA-trained trainers** and which modules they are certified to teach, for the coordination of future EUAA training rollouts.

Potential weaknesses and threats to MARRI RC's capacity

There are a few **issues which hinder the capacity of MARRI RC** to become a regional hub for training on asylum. The first is that MARRI RC is limited in its financial resource capacities to implement activities independently, but this could be mitigated if it were provided with financial support. In terms of human resource capacities, MARRI RC currently has no participant representative from Albania, which limits its reach in that country. At the time of writing, efforts were ongoing to try and recruit someone to join. However, evidence shows that there have been other gaps in the past, and there is a risk of countries not being represented in the future as well. Moreover, the current Director is due for replacement in the summer of 2023. As this Director spearheaded most of the internal reforms, which according to all interviewees has led to significant improvements in the functioning and organisation of MARRI RC, his being replaced may risk slowing down the progress made to date.

Another hindrance is that there has been a **reluctance from Serbia to participate** in training activities organised through MARRI RC. While interviews with representatives of given relevant ministries in Serbia who cooperate with MARRI directly could not be carried out, other interviewees shed light on the reasons for non-participation from Serbia. As explained by interviewees from the EUAA, reluctance to participate stems from the fact that Serbia is a candidate country for accession to the EU that is comparatively more advanced in the process compared to the other Western Balkan partners, and therefore considers it of added value to liaise directly with the EUAA rather than via a regional organisation such as MARRI. Similar constraints were noted by IOM in the implementation of the WB-MIDEX project, as Serbia would rather share migration data directly with the EU than with the Western Balkan partners through MARRI. No such constraints were reported by GIZ or Hilfswerk, however, which reported that their events, organised in cooperation with MARRI RC, were widely attended by stakeholders from all MARRI Participants. As explained by an interviewee from the Serbian Asylum Office, they are a supporter of MARRI but believe that capacity building should be tailored to the needs of individual Participants, which is why they prefer to coordinate bilaterally with the EUAA rather than in a group setting involving the other MARRI Participants.

Finally, all consulted donors/partner organisations reported that **working with MARRI RC could be time-consuming** due to the organisation's formalised procedures and ways of working. Its nature as a regional intergovernmental body requires approval from all MARRI Participants before any activities can be implemented, which is challenging in a region that is subject to political pressures. They also acknowledged, however, that MARRI RC demonstrated a unique ability to work around the political sensitivities, e.g., by not referring to its members as 'countries' but rather 'Participants'. Moreover, the internal processes, related to who could sign or approve certain documents, reportedly slowed



down the work. However, all of those consulted agreed that **with sufficient time and clarity in their tasks, MARRI RC was always able to deliver.**

4.3. What could future cooperation between the EUAA and MARRI look like?

MARRI RC and all donors/partners who were consulted⁶ considered it **relevant and appropriate for MARRI RC to take on more responsibilities over time to become a regional training hub for asylum.** Interviewees explained that a regional intergovernmental organisation such as MARRI is well-placed to organise the logistics of such training because they know the people working in the Western Balkan administrations, understand the context they work in and the language(s) they speak, and can easily liaise with travel agencies, hotels, and venues for the organisation of face-to-face training sessions. Logistically, having MARRI involved in the organisation of training (registering participants; booking hotels, flights for participants and venues and catering; liaising with EUAA-trained trainers for the agenda and training materials to be shared with participants; preparing news items on the training) should produce efficiency gains for the Agency, which would otherwise be responsible for these matters. Representatives from the relevant ministries in the Western Balkans could not be interviewed, but based on information shared by other interviewees, it seems all except Serbia have a positive view on the potential of MARRI taking a more prominent role.

MARRI RC has the administrative capacity to take on more logistical and organisational tasks in relation to EUAA training but is limited in its resource capacities. As apparent from the preceding sections, there has been a tendency for donors/partners to fund a staff member for the implementation of projects, at least temporarily. All consulted donors/partners confirmed that MARRI RC has the necessary knowledge, capacity and professionalism to support the EUAA in the organisation of regional training but were concerned that it does not have sufficient financial resources to do so independently. On this matter, too, the views of MARRI Participants are not known because they did not take part in interviews. Thus, **if the EUAA decided to move forward in cooperating with MARRI RC for the organisation of such training sessions, financial support would be required.** As for human resources, if the planned frequency of the pilot training plan were maintained, organisational tasks could be managed by MARRI RC with its current staff.

One way this **could be done is through MARRI RC becoming a beneficiary of an EU grant.** The experience of GIZ in implementing the PaCT project shows that MARRI RC has successfully managed a € 105,000 grant over a three-year period (i.e., around € 35,000 per year), and provided financial and narrative reports on time and with high quality. Having been trained in financial management and EU funding/programme management ensures that MARRI RC staff has the capacity to do so in line with the relevant rules and requirements. However, they may need to be retrained because they have never received an EU grant before, for which the financial management and reporting rules are quite complex.

⁶ Despite numerous follow-ups, the planned interviews with a selection of MARRI committee members (i.e., representatives from Ministries of Foreign Affairs) and MARRI coordinators (i.e., representatives from Ministries of Interior) could not take place, constituting a gap in the evidence base which should be taken note of when considering these findings.



5. Conclusions and recommendations

The **added value of involving MARRI RC in the planning and organisation of regional training rollouts so far has been limited**. Should a need for further cooperation with MARRI RC be identified, **there could be organisational benefits for the EUAA** if MARRI RC were to be more involved from an administrative and logistical perspective. MARRI RC staff, having previously worked in their respective ministries, have a **deep understanding** of the challenges faced in the region, putting them in a good position to assess training needs and communicate with the relevant administrations. Being **physically present in the region** and having knowledge of local languages puts MARRI RC at an advantage to carry out logistical tasks, such as identifying and booking venues and transportation services for participants. This **should produce time savings for the EUAA**, stemming from the Agency not having to plan and organise venues, interpreters and travel arrangements for participants.

The **capacity of MARRI RC in assessing training needs and supporting the development of a training plan accordingly has increased with the support of the EUAA**. MARRI RC has indicated that it would be ready and willing to continue carrying out these tasks, if required, as well as take on more responsibilities, notably in terms of administrative and logistical management of regional training rollouts. If MARRI RC were to assign a member of staff to such tasks specifically, MARRI RC would have the capacity to take over all administrative and logistical management immediately. However, there would be a few **risks associated with handing over more responsibility to MARRI RC**. Firstly, MARRI RC's capacity might decrease when the current Director is replaced in mid-2023 or if there is turnover in other staff that has been trained on project management, training needs assessment methodology, etc. as this would require additional investments to retrain staff. Moreover, while MARRI RC has staff that is trained on financial management and EU funding/programme management, it has never received a grant from an EU donor before, which comes with complex rules and requirements.

Recommendation 1: Should a need for further cooperation with MARRI RC on regional training be identified, decide, based on an assessment of risks and potential benefits, whether this would be worthwhile.

Despite MARRI RC having the organisational capacity to be more involved in the administrative and logistical organisation of training activities, the Agency would have to carefully weigh up the potential risks of reinforcing cooperation with MARRI RC against the potential benefits of doing so. Risks to be considered notably include the non-participation of Serbia and changes in human resources capacity of MARRI, among others.

Recommendation 2: If a decision to continue cooperation is made, explore the possibility of MARRI functioning as a regional training hub on asylum and consider the modalities that could be used to provide financial support for such a function.

The Agency could consider the potential time savings resulting from MARRI RC taking over administrative and logistical management of regional training rollouts. A decision would also have to be made by the Agency on making financial support available to MARRI RC to fund the cost of the services they could provide with due consideration being made to MARRI RC's limited experience managing certain modalities of EU funding.



Annex 1: Methodology and analytical methods used

The evaluation combined the use of existing sources of evidence with primary data collection, notably through (group) interviews.

Desk research included presentations and documentation pertaining to needs assessments preceding the regional cooperation with MARRI, training data, monitoring data on other regional events, information on projects implemented by MARRI RC with other donors/partners, MARRI Annual Reports (June 2016-June 2022 period) and relevant procedural documents related to the functioning of MARRI.

In terms of **interviews**, the evaluations made use of evidence collected through a total of ten interviews. Some of the interviews were carried out in groups, so fourteen stakeholders were consulted in total. The stakeholders consulted included relevant staff from the EUAA, the European Commission (DG NEAR), MARRI RC representatives, training coordinators (heads of asylum offices) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia, three MARRI RC donor/partner organisations and a former representative of the Regional Cooperation Council who is now working at the IISG. The evaluation was hindered by a lack of responses to interview requests from the authorities who participate in the MARRI committee or the MARRI coordinator network, despite numerous follow-ups.

The primary and secondary evidence collected underwent a process of **triangulation and synthesis**, with a view to deriving robust, evidence-based answers to the evaluation questions. The resulting conclusions and recommendations were discussed, to some degree, with the interviewed stakeholders.



Annex 2: Evaluation matrix

Table 1. Evaluation matrix

| Evaluation criterion | Operationalised questions | Interviews | Desk research |
|---|--|------------|---------------|
| <p>To what extent has the MARRI cooperation worked well so far and why? How has the cooperation been working and what has been its added value?</p> | <p>What have been the (quantitative and qualitative) effects of the EUAA-MARRI cooperation?</p> <p>To what extent do the observed effects link to the EUAA-MARRI cooperation? To what extent can these changes/effects be credited to this cooperation?</p> <p>To what extent are there other (internal and external) factors that influenced the observed achievements?</p> <p>What were the effects / implications of assessing training needs and rolling out the training plan at regional level rather than at national level?</p> <p>To what extent was the (regional approach to) MARRI cooperation relevant to the stakeholders?</p> <p>Were there any efficiency gains from taking a regional approach to the training needs assessment and training rollout? Which ones and why?</p> <p>To what extent and how did the implementation of the MARRI cooperation lead to changes in the actions implemented as part of the Roadmaps?</p> <p>Were there any other benefits that resulted from the regional approach? Which ones and why?</p> <p>Is there evidence suggesting that the specific outcomes (specifically rollout of training sessions) could not have been achieved to the same degree without the MARRI cooperation?</p> <p>What lessons can be learned for the future (e.g., is there a better way to do rollout of training sessions, is there a better way to manage the training pool, etc.)?</p> | <p>✓</p> | <p>✓</p> |



| Evaluation criterion | Operationalised questions | Interviews | Desk research |
|--|---|------------|---------------|
| <p>What should future cooperation between the EUAA and MARRI look like? Has MARRI reached a sufficient level of capacity to prepare and implement the training plan independently?</p> | <p>What could future cooperation between the EUAA and MARRI look like?</p> <p>Is there scope for MARRI to take on the preparation and implementation of the training plan independently? Why or why not?</p> <p>Does MARRI have the capacity to manage the needs assessment, training plan drafting and implementation of a regional training plan?</p> <p>Does MARRI have the capacity to manage funding in line with EU grant procedures?</p> | <p>✓</p> | <p>✓</p> |