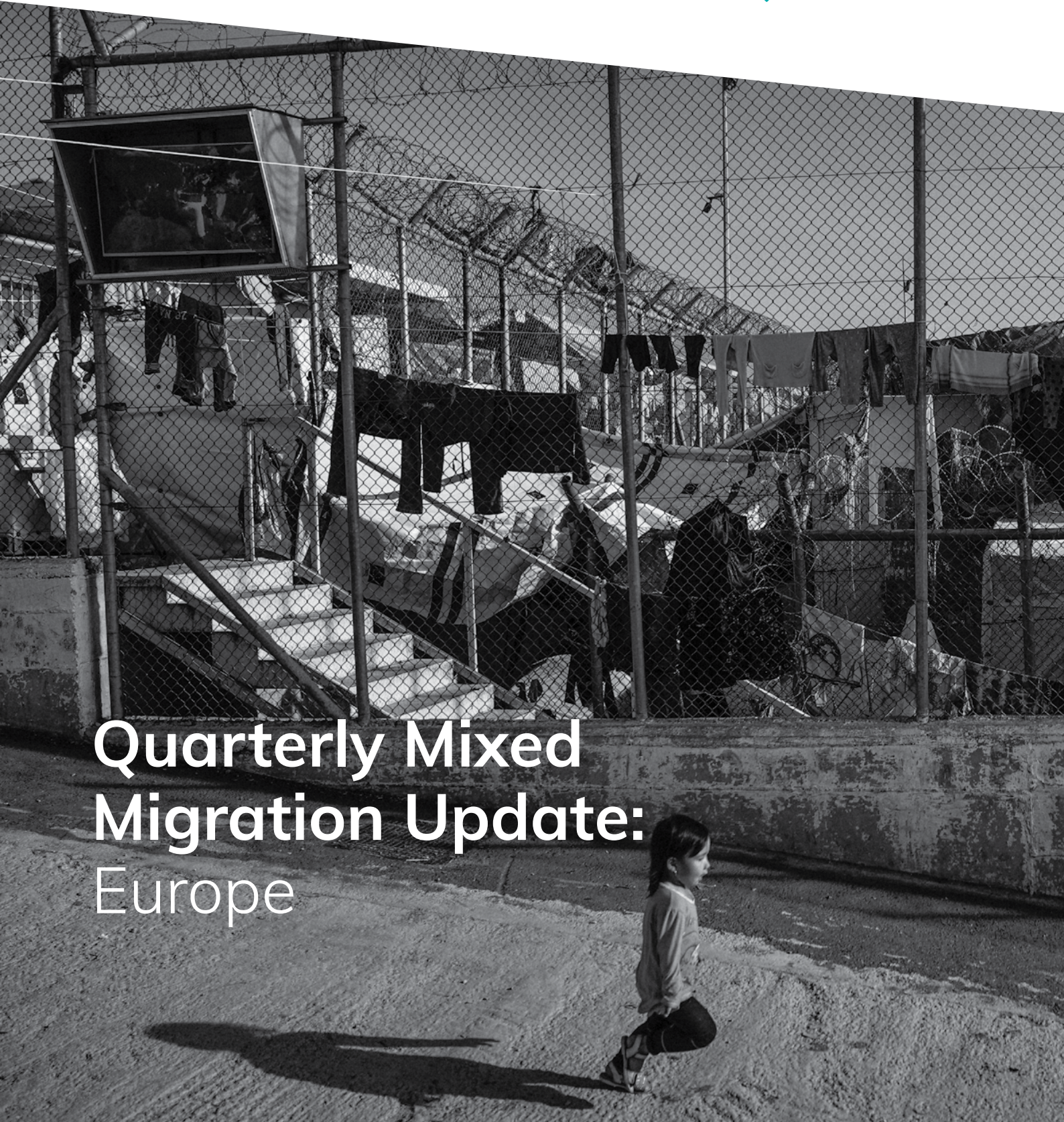


MMC Europe

QUARTER 3 2023



Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Europe

This Quarterly Mixed Migration Update (QMMU) covers Europe. The core countries of focus are Spain, Italy, Greece and countries along the Balkan migration route. Depending on the quarterly trends and migration-related updates, more attention may be given to any of the countries over the rest.

The QMMUs offer a quarterly update on new trends and dynamics related to mixed migration and relevant policy developments in the region. These updates are based on a compilation of a wide range of secondary (data) sources, brought together within a regional framework and applying a mixed migration analytical lens. Similar QMMUs are available for all MMC regions.

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs hosted in Danish Refugee Council (DRC) regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels. For more information on MMC, the QMMUs from other regions and contact details of regional MMC teams, visit mixedmigration.org and follow us at [@Mixed_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)

MMC's understanding of mixed migration

"Mixed migration" refers to cross-border movements of people, including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking, and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people engaged in mixed migration have a range of legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Mixed migration describes refugees and migrants traveling along similar routes, using similar means of travel – often traveling irregularly, and wholly or partially, assisted by migrant smugglers.

Front cover photo credit:

Lesbos, Moria camp. Jan Krarup 2019

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Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Europe

Quarter 3 - 2023

Key Updates

- **Sharp uptick in the number of arrivals on the Eastern Mediterranean route:** [according to UNHCR](#), of the 30,694 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who reached Greece between January and the end of September, 22,011 arrived during the third quarter – far more than the total in the previous quarter of 2023 (4,946) and the total during the third quarter of 2022 (5,924). By far the largest national groups were from the State of Palestine (22%), followed by Afghanistan (13%), Somalia (11%), Syria (10.5%) and Eritrea (10.4%).
- **Cyprus suffers a wave of xenophobic violence:** From late August into September, anti-migrant protests broke out in the towns of [Chloraka](#) and [Limmasol](#), with groups of hundreds of people carrying out arson, looting and racially targeted assaults. Some [reports suggested that police stood by](#) while the attacks took place.
- **A surge in arrivals to Italy overwhelms Lampedusa:** [according to UNHCR](#), 67,968 arrivals reached Italy in the third quarter of 2023, up from 37,824 in the previous quarter, with the majority (56,373) originating from Tunisia. Many have entered through Lampedusa, [straining the island's capacity](#) to shelter new arrivals and prompting local authorities in mid-September to [declare a state of emergency](#).
- **A jump in the number of arrivals in Spain:** 14,194 people reached Spain in the third quarter, [according to UNHCR](#), up from 8,403 in the previous quarter. More than half of arrivals this year have entered via the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands, a journey that has seen a sharp [increase in deaths](#) in the third quarter (245).
- **A controversial partnership between the EU and Tunisia:** on 16 July a €1 billion [memorandum of understanding](#) was formalised between the EU and Tunisia, including support for tighter border management. Critics argued that it served to [whitewash](#) the Tunisian government at a time when it was carrying out mass [arrests and expulsions](#) of sub-Saharan nationals.
- **Passage of the UK's Illegal Migration Bill:** in July 2023, the UK parliament approved [legislation](#) forbidding anyone who reaches the UK irregularly from claiming asylum and mandates their removal to a third country, even [unaccompanied minors, separated children and survivors of trafficking or modern slavery](#).
- **Poland-Belarus border crisis in spotlight:** The award-winning film [Green Border](#), dramatising the plight of refugees trapped in the border area between Poland and Belarus, was [vilified](#) by members of the ruling party ahead of [elections](#) on 15 October and a [national referendum](#) on migration, the border wall and other issues (see thematic section).

Regional Overview*



*Information on the map relates to selected updates and does not represent all mixed migration within and out of Europe.

Mixed Migration Regional Updates

Europe region

The Eastern Mediterranean route to Greece

- [According to UNHCR](#), the Eastern Mediterranean route into Greece saw a sharp uptick over the summer. Of the 30,694 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who reached Greece between January and the end of September, 22,011 arrived during the third quarter – far more than the total in the previous quarter of 2023 (4,946) and the total during in the third quarter of 2022 (5,924). Among [registered arrivals](#) between January and the end of July 2023, by far the largest national group were from the State of Palestine (22%), followed by Afghanistan (13%), Somalia (11%), Syria (10.5%) and Eritrea (10.4%).
- Despite the increasing numbers of people attempting the journey through the Eastern Mediterranean in the third quarter, the death toll was lower than the previous quarter, with a total of 7 [dead and missing](#) compared to 12 in the previous quarter of 2022. The death toll during the year to the end of September was 54, much lower than the total during the same period in 2022 (264).
- In August, responding to Greece's "failure to provide prompt and effective assistance to migrants in distress and ensure safe disembarkation and adequate reception of migrants," [UN experts](#) called on Greece to introduce "safe, impartial border policies and practices".

Racist violence erupts in Cyprus

For years, Cyprus has received the largest volume of asylum applications in proportion to its overall population of any country in the EU, resulting in a situation where a significant minority of the population – by some estimates, as much as [6%](#) – are migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Numbers remain high, though first-time applications [appear to have reduced](#) during the year and at the same time returns have [risen sharply](#). In August, UNHCR expressed its concern following the [expulsion of more than 100 Syrians to Lebanon](#) by Cypriot authorities without pre-screening. In July, the government also announced that new arrivals in Cyprus would be [excluded from an EU resettlement programme](#) that has enabled some asylum seekers to be resettled in other countries in Europe. The rationale for this move was that the scheme might otherwise act as a lure for others to migrate to Cyprus.

In this context, against a backdrop of increasing hate speech and years of politicised rhetoric against refugees and migrants, from late August the island witnessed multiple outbreaks of protests and violence targeting foreigners. The first wave of attacks occurred in the town of [Chloraka](#), with migrant-owned shops vandalised and several attacks by armed men. This was followed a few days later by a similar outbreak of arson, hooliganism and targeted violence in [Limmasol](#), with hundreds of people looting stores, throwing Molotov cocktails and carrying out racially targeted assaults. According to reports, in some cases, police [appeared to stand by](#) while the attacks took place. [Amnesty International and other rights groups](#) highlighted the role that years of anti-migrant narratives had played in emboldening far-right groups and the need for authorities to take urgent action to prevent further incidents.

The Central Mediterranean route to Italy

[According to UNHCR](#), 67,968 arrivals reached Italy in the third quarter of 2023, compared to 37,824 in the previous quarter and 44,157 during the third quarter of 2022. The [most represented nationalities](#) were Guinea (14%, up from 2% in the same period of 2022), Cote d'Ivoire (13%, up from 3% during the same timeframe in 2022), Tunisia (10.6%), Egypt (7.3%), Bangladesh (6.5%), Pakistan (5.5%), Syria (4.5%), Mali (3.8%), Cameroon (3.8%) and Gambia (2.7%).

Tunisia was already the primary country of embarkation [in the middle of 2023](#), with 33,860 arrivals in Italy departing from Tunisia between 1 January and 2 July 2023, followed by Libya (27,863) and then Türkiye (2,844) and Algeria (279). However, this trend deepened in [the third quarter](#), when 56,373 arrived from Tunisia between 3 July and 2 October, compared to 9,521 from Libya, 2,718 from Türkiye and 153 from Algeria, with additional movement from Lebanon (214) and Cyprus (11).

The [number of dead and missing](#) along the Central Mediterranean route in 2023 as of the end of September was 2,093. This included 319 fatalities during the third quarter, compared to 1,295 in the previous quarter (including the sinking of a trawler off the coast of Messenia, Greece on 14 June which left an estimated 596 people dead or missing) and 369 in the third quarter of 2022. The number of deaths and disappearances in the first nine months of 2023 is the [largest since 2017](#) and exceeds the total annual death toll of the [previous five years](#).

Crisis looms in Lampedusa as rising numbers of arrivals reach Italy

The significant uptick in arrivals in southern Italy during the year has strained reception capacity and led to increasing political tensions around irregular migration. By the end of August, when [24,828](#) migrants, refugees and asylum seekers reached Italy – the highest monthly total recorded since October 2016, almost seven years before – the facility at Lampedusa was [reportedly housing around 3,600](#) in an area designed to accommodate just 400 people. This acute overcrowding has meant that the majority of new arrivals are now transferred to the mainland or Sicily. By mid-September, when 7,000 people (more than Lampedusa's entire resident population of the island) reached its shores in the space of just 48 hours, local authorities were [declaring a state of emergency](#) and calling for urgent assistance from the national government and EU. However, [other regions in Italy](#) have also announced that they have reached their capacity as hosts.

The number of arrivals in Italy has increased despite the rollout of increasingly hostile policies by the government, including a [proposed security package](#) intended to expedite the expulsion of unregistered migrants, particularly those caught engaging in unlawful behaviour. According to [humanitarian organisations](#), of particular concern are provisions targeting search and rescue operations for migrant boats in distress. This legislation stipulates, among other restrictions, that boats should immediately head to their assigned port of disembarkation (in some cases [more than 1,500 kilometres away](#)) after taking any migrants on board and not undertake further rescues. Those deemed to have violated these provisions can be detained and fined, with [three separate NGO vessels](#) impounded by Italian authorities in the space of a week in August, prompting [calls for their release](#). A number of human rights groups [filed a formal complaint](#) with the EU in July about the new legislation, arguing that it could be in violation of international law and puts lives at risk.

Vulnerable refugees and migrants sent back to Italy at the border with France

The effects of the increase in arrivals in Italy are also being felt further north. Refugees and migrants transiting through Ventimiglia at the French-Italian border, many of whom are extremely vulnerable and in poor health, were already being subjected to [violent pushbacks, humiliating treatment and other abuses](#) when attempting to enter France. By September, however, in response to increasing numbers of arrivals in Italy over the summer months, the French government announced that it would be [further tightening its borders](#). Germany also [suspended its acceptance of asylum seekers from Italy](#) under the Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism in September, due in part to Italy's failure to accept returned asylum seekers under the terms of the Dublin Regulation, though it [reverted this decision](#) two days later.

The Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes to Spain

- [According to UNHCR](#), 26,969 arrivals reached Spain between January and the end of September. Of these, more than half (14,194) took place in the third quarter, compared to 8,403 in the previous quarter and 4,372 between January and the end of March. It is also significantly higher than the total number of arrivals during the third quarter of 2022 (9,229).
- As of 1 October, 15,406 had reached Spain via the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands, 840 into Ceuta and 442 into Melilla from Morocco, 7,366 into mainland Andalucía, 2,045 through the Mainland Eastern Mediterranean (the eastern coast of Spain) and 1,121 at the Balearics. Each route has a distinct demographic in terms of the nationality of arrivals: while those travelling the Western Mediterranean route [in the first eight months of 2023](#) were predominantly from Morocco, Algeria and Syria, along the Atlantic route the most represented countries were Morocco, Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire.
- The [number of dead and missing](#) in 2023 was 210 along the Western Mediterranean as of the end of September, including 26 deaths or disappearances in the third quarter, a significant drop from the totals in the previous quarter (144) and during the third quarter of 2022 (164). Along the [Atlantic route](#) to the Canary Islands, on the other hand, the picture was very different: of the 424 fatalities between January and the end of September 2023, more than half (247) occurred in the third quarter of the year, more than twice the number in the previous quarter (120) and far exceeding the total in the third quarter of 2022 (38). On 3 July, for instance, the sinking off the North African coast of a boat travelling to the Canary Islands led to the deaths of [at least 51 people](#). On 16 August, a boat that had left Senegal on 10 July was found drifting off near Cabo Verde, with [at least 63 of the passengers](#) on board presumed dead or missing.

Spanish prosecutors investigate possible omission of duty following deadly shipwreck

On July 13, following [an initial investigation](#) by the Spanish ombudsman, the Spanish Prosecutor's Office announced that it would be [launching criminal proceedings](#) into the failure of both Moroccan and Spanish coast guards to respond in a timely fashion to rescue an inflatable boat carrying at least 60 people. The incident in question began on the evening of 20 June when the NGO Caminando Fronteras issued an alert to both authorities. However, 12 hours passed before Moroccan rescue services reached the vessel on the morning of 21st June, when [at least 35 passengers](#) had already died or were missing. However, while Spanish authorities insisted that the boat was located within Morocco's jurisdiction, a Spanish rescue boat

was located [only an hour away](#) and under international law it was best placed to respond. [According to Caminando Fronteras](#), who filed the complaint, this is the first instance where “a crime of omission of the duty to rescue has been investigated at the maritime border.” Despite this, however, the incident was far from unique: [poor coordination and overlapping jurisdictions](#) between Morocco and Spain have frequently contributed to long delays and avoidable deaths at sea.

The Western Balkans route

- The Western Balkans route remains the second most used irregular migration route into the EU, with [at least 62,967 entries](#) in the first eight months of 2023, including a total of 24,406 in July (10,199) and August (14,207), a significant drop from the total during the same period in 2022 (31,323).
- In terms of nationalities, the [most represented countries of origin](#) during the year remain Syria, followed by Afghanistan and Turkey. While this was [also the case in 2022](#), a cross-comparison of the [demographic make-up between the two years](#) suggests that the diversity of mixed migration movements has also reduced alongside the drop in numbers. In August 2022, for instance, to focus on a specific monthly snapshot, Syrians accounted for 9,883 crossings (almost 60% of the total), with significant representation from Afghanistan (2,399), India (1,393), Tunisia (755), Turkey (710) and Pakistan (615). In August 2023, by contrast, the 11,112 Syrians crossing borders accounted for a much larger overall share of mixed migration movements – 78% – with the remainder largely originating from Turkey (1,613), Afghanistan (575) and Pakistan (372), with only 14 from India and 6 from Tunisia. The decline in numbers can be attributed to the fact that, following pressure from the EU in response to growing numbers travelling the Western Balkan route, Serbia imposed [visa restrictions on Tunisian nationals](#) in November 2022 and [halted visa-free entry for Indian nationals](#) in January 2023.

More arrivals in Slovakia trigger new restrictions

A dramatic increase in the number of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers entering Slovakia from Hungary during the year – around [27,000 arrivals](#) by the beginning of September, nine times the number in the same period of 2022 – prompted the government to harden its migration policy. While the government announced that it would be sending [500 troops to support border police](#), their role will be primarily to support the registration of arrivals and patrol towns. As with Hungary, the large majority of those entering Slovakia are in transit, en route to other destinations in Europe. Nevertheless, movement through the West Balkans has been complicated by the [imposition of temporary border controls](#) further along the route by Germany and Austria at their borders. Some also [blame Hungary](#) for the large numbers crossing the border.

Despite the fact that most of those entering Slovakia intend to move on, these recent developments put migration at the top of the political agenda during national elections at the end of September. One particular area of contention is the issuance of registration documents to those arriving in Slovakia, a policy first introduced in 2018. Though this does not provide recipients with a legal right to remain in Slovakia, let alone travel across the Schengen area, there is some evidence to suggest that it may [act as a lure](#) for some migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who believe it may increase their long-term prospects of remaining in Europe. Consequently, the government proposed [ending the practice](#) in the hope that this would make the country less attractive as a country of transit and also ensure it is not responsible for arrivals under the terms of the Dublin Regulation.

Ahead of the elections, having pushed a populist narrative [framing migrants as a national security threat](#), the then-opposition Smer party called on the ruling party to [increase border controls](#) to curb irregular migration. In the wake of Smer's subsequent [electoral victory](#), the caretaker government imposed [new restrictions on its border with Hungary](#) in what is likely to be a sign of further policies to come once the coalition government is formed.

Ukraine

- At present, there are [more than 6.2 million](#) registered Ukrainian refugees globally, including over 5.8 million in Europe. The largest populations are present in Russia (1.28 million), Poland (959,900), Germany (1.1 million) and the Czech Republic (361,400).
- Despite the relatively welcoming environment for Ukrainians, particularly compared to refugees and asylum seekers from Africa, Asia and the Middle East, many challenges around integration and inclusion persist. Recent research by IRC, for instance, highlights the [difficulties faced by Ukrainian children in Poland](#), ranging from language barriers to social exclusion, and the [barriers adult Ukrainians also experience](#) in accessing secure housing and employment in the country.
- As of June, there are almost [5.1 million IDPs in Ukraine](#), with the largest concentration in the east of the country and around Kyiv, though most oblasts contain a significant internally displaced population. The situation remains especially challenging for residents [in conflict-affected areas near the frontlines](#), such as Kharkivska oblast, where intensified fighting has displaced numerous communities and led to deteriorating humanitarian conditions.
- There have been a significant number of returnees ([almost 4.8 million](#)) in Ukraine since the beginning of the conflict, some of whom have returned from abroad.

Where next for the Temporary Protection Directive?

The displacement of millions of Ukrainians across Europe, including in countries whose policies towards migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are largely exclusionary, is due to the passage of the EU's [Temporary Protection Directive](#) (TPD) by the EU. This extraordinary intervention, developed in the wake of the conflict in former Yugoslavia and dormant in the two decades that followed, was activated for the first time in March 2022 within a week of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The [provisions of the TPD](#) ensure immediate protection and access to social services, education, health care, accommodation and other needs, without the protracted bureaucratic procedures that normally accompany asylum processing. Initially lasting a year, the TPD was subsequently [extended to March 2024](#) in October 2023, with [calls to extend it](#) for the full three-year maximum within its provisions until March 2025.

Even if, as seems likely, the TPD is extended again, questions remain about what can replace it. Already, as of September 2023, the TPD has [passed the halfway mark](#) for its legal limits. There have been [a wide range of proposals](#) for how to proceed. One option is to extend the existing TPD, though this would likely require a legislative amendment to facilitate beyond the current limit in place. Other options include transferring Ukrainians into asylum applications or regular residency pathways. The former, however, is complicated by the fact that the specific context of the Ukraine conflict means that the majority of those benefitting

from the TPD cannot claim persecution on an individual basis or at the hand of their own government: the threat is primarily collective and posed by a foreign invader, not the Ukrainian state. Regular immigration routes, on the other hand, are generally designed around specific reasons for residency such as work or employment, rather than the protections needs Ukrainians face. In both cases, the existing administrative capacity of most governments to process applications would likely be strained.

An underlying challenge, too, is the implications of maintaining the temporary status of TPD beneficiaries over a protracted period and the challenges this could pose to their integration in the interim. There is also a danger that, if post-TPD arrangements devolve into an array of national-level policy solutions, then the result could be a confusing array of “[patchwork national solutions](#)” that only exacerbate uncertainty and even promote secondary migration within Europe to those countries with more favourable conditions. One option that has been put forward is the creation of a “[reconstruction permit](#)” that would tie the continued residency of those protected by the TPD while Ukraine’s housing and infrastructure are rebuilt – a duration that could realistically take 10 years or more – until the situation in their home country was appropriate for return.

United Kingdom

Deteriorating conditions and a growing backlog of asylum seekers

In the midst of the continued arrival of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers on small boats – including the arrival of [more than 800 people](#) on 2 September, the highest daily number so far this year, and a total [exceeding 25,000](#) as of 2 October 2023– the backlog of pending asylum applications in the country has reached a [two-decade high](#). A [report by Human Rights Watch](#), published in September, highlighted the dire living conditions that children and families seeking asylum face, accommodated in “temporary housing” for more than a year in many cases despite the 19-day limit specified in the government’s own guidance. “Instead of wasting resources on grudging, deficient, and short-sighted responses”, the report urged, the UK government should invest in long-term, sustainable solutions that protect the mental and physical health of those in need of protection.

The failure of the government to ensure adequate accommodation for asylum seekers was brought into sharp relief by the plan to house adult male asylum seekers who arrived in the UK irregularly on a barge, the Bibi Stockholm. With a total capacity of [around 500 people](#) and the first residents due to arrive in August, there were [widespread concerns](#) even before the boat was occupied about the potential risk of an outbreak of infectious disease or fire onboard. Though the move was justified as a necessary cost-cutting measure to provide shelter cheaply, it was opposed both by [human rights groups](#) who argued that it violated the rights of asylum seekers and [some local residents](#) who believed it could pose a threat to public safety. Almost immediately after the first asylum seekers were transferred to the ship, the announcement that previous tests of the water onboard had detected the presence of the [potentially deadly legionella bacteria](#) forced the government to remove them.

Policy and Legal Updates

A new agreement between the EU and Tunisia sparks controversy...

In response to the growing number of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers from Tunisia, driven in part by the country's economic and political instability, the EU is seeking to deepen its engagement with the Tunisian government. Despite President Kais Saied stating that [Tunisia would not act as Europe's border guard](#) by taking on responsibility for the interception and return of boats, on 16 July the [memorandum of understanding](#) was formally agreed, encompassing around €1 billion in financial and technical assistance including support for tighter border management by Tunisia. Among other provisions, it outlines closer cooperation around maritime search and rescue operations, increased border management and the targeting of smuggling networks in Tunisia. It also includes provisions on the return and readmission of Tunisians who have reached the EU irregularly, alongside increased opportunities for legal migration and seasonal work.

While the EU has announced that it could serve as a [blueprint for future agreements](#) with other countries exchanging financial assistance for increased border control, critics argued that it would serve to [whitewash](#) Saied's government at a time when it was responsible for [vilifying sub-Saharan migrants](#) in the country and subjecting them to [mass expulsions](#). While Amnesty International stated that the agreement made the EU [complicit in these abuses](#), the International Rescue Committee expressed its concern that the partnership would result in refugees, migrants and asylum seekers taking [even more dangerous routes](#) without a commitment to fundamental rights and protections.

...while highlighting divisions between EU member states

The longstanding disagreements between different countries in the EU around how to manage irregular migration and asylum were highlighted by the fact that the partnership with Tunisia was criticised not only by human rights groups but also by prominent stakeholders within the EU. In particular, Josep Borrell, a high-ranking EU representative, criticised the "[unilateral](#)" manner in which the agreement was brokered and the "incomprehension" it had triggered among a number of other member states. This to some extent reflects a wider rift between Italy (whose president, Giorgia Meloni, was one of the signatories of the agreement together with the European Commission president, Ursula Von Leyen, and the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte) and some other member states in the EU around migration. Borrell later highlighted the challenge for member states to resolve their differences, stating that migration could be a "[dissolving force](#)" in the EU if some kind of consensus could not be reached.

As the primary point of entry for the majority of arrivals in Europe, the far-right, anti-migrant Italian government has called on other countries in the EU to take a greater share of responsibility, with Meloni stating in September that her country would not become "[Europe's refugee camp](#)". Consequently, with the apparent support of Van Leyen who has recently promised a "[coordinated response](#)" from the EU around migration, the Italian government has pursued [bilateral collaboration](#) with Tunisia and even [fostered an alliance with Greece](#) to promote stronger partnerships with North African countries around curbing

irregular migration. While the agreement subsequently provoked [heated criticism from across the political spectrum](#) in the European Parliament, EU officials have been moving forward with discussions with Tunisia on [how to take their cooperation forward](#). On 22 September, the EU announced the immediate disbursement of [127 million Euros in assistance](#) for Tunisia to help reduce the increasing number of arrivals reaching Lampedusa, Italy.

The UK's Illegal Migration Bill

With irregular migration on the rise, particularly the growing numbers of arrivals on small boats from France, the UK government has sought to present its policies as a tough response to curb this movement. This included the controversial "[Rwanda plan](#)", currently in limbo after the UK appeals court ruled that it was illegal on 29 June. Since then, however, the equally divisive [Illegal Migration Bill](#) was passed in Parliament in July 2023. In what UNHCR has described as a de facto "[asylum ban](#)", the legislation forbids anyone who reaches the UK irregularly from claiming asylum and mandates their removal to a third country, even [unaccompanied minors, separated children and survivors of trafficking or modern slavery](#), and regardless of the merit of their claim for asylum.

Thematic Focus:

No end in sight to the crisis at the Poland-Belarus border

One of the standout films at the 2023 Venice Festival, the recipient of this year's Special Jury Prize, was Agnieszka Holland's [Green Border](#). The acclaimed director's latest film dramatizes the ongoing situation at Poland's border with Belarus, a protracted crisis that is now in its third year with no sign of resolution in sight. Its storyline focused around a Syrian family of refugees and the Polish border guards under orders to keep them out, shines a spotlight on a disaster that has cost the lives of dozens of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers but seems to have fallen off the radar at international level.

In July 2021, following a deterioration in diplomatic relations between Belarus and the EU, the country's dictator Alexander Lukashenko announced his intention to flood Europe with "[drugs and migrants](#)". A sharp uptick in the number of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers attempting to cross its borders into Latvia, Lithuania and Poland followed soon after – the result of what appeared to be a coordinated effort by authorities in Minsk to allow entry to thousands of nationals from Iraq, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere (many of them [members of marginalised minority communities](#)) with the promise that they would be able to move on freely into the EU. In response, all three countries rapidly imposed measures to contain this movement, with Poland subsequently constructing [a 15-foot high, 116-mile border fence](#) behind a two-mile exclusion zone.

While Lukashenko's efforts to weaponise migration were intended to destabilise neighbouring countries, the people paying the price were the many men, women and children who were, and still are, ushered across the Belarus border, only to find themselves repelled, [often violently](#), by Polish security forces towards the Belarus border where guards [armed with dogs and batons](#) again push them back towards Poland. Hundreds of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are still trapped between the two countries, unable to continue to return to Belarus or continue to Poland. With little in the way of food, water, adequate clothing or medical supplies, surrounded by dense primeval forest in temperatures that regularly fall below freezing, [dozens have died](#) and [hundreds of others are missing](#).

The politics of migration in Poland

This is the reality that Holland's film sought to capture. However, despite widespread critical acclaim and commercial success, with the best [opening weekend](#) of the year of any Polish film, it has also been vilified by senior representatives of the then ruling Law and Justice party ([including the president](#)), with one minister comparing it to [Nazi propaganda](#). These comments have been accompanied by [an online hate campaign](#) against Holland and right-wing demonstrations outside cinemas showing the film. For her part, Holland is adamant that the response to the film is driven by "[cynical denial](#)" on the part of a government that has long exploited anxieties around migration for its own political gain.

Law and Justice made migration a centrepiece of the current movement electoral campaign in 2015, mobilising support around its opposition to the EU's proposed refugee resettlement programme that ultimately led to it securing a parliamentary majority that same year. Eight years on, ahead of a [parliamentary election on 15 October](#), migration once again is looming large in national policy discussions. The party scheduled a [referendum](#) on the same day as the election, with voters asked a number of leading questions, including whether they support the admission of “[thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa](#)” (a reference to the EU's refugee resettlement programme) and if they approve [the removal of the border fence](#) between Poland and Belarus.

However, rather than galvanising the opposition to develop a shared position in support of the rights and protection needs of those trapped between the borders, in recent months this [anti-migration rhetoric has spread to other parties](#) who are seeking to present themselves as best placed to curb migration. Donald Tusk, leader of the centrist Civic Coalition and a former prime minister, has explicitly campaigned on the need to “[regain control over this country and its borders](#)”. He has done so by contrasting the low numbers of migrants admitted during his time in office with the [more than 130,000 migrants](#) “from countries like Saudi Arabia, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Nigeria and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan” he claims were let into Poland last year as workers.

This last point relates to labour migration, rather than asylum – an area that has come under even greater scrutiny when reports of [Polish consulates in Africa and Asia having illicitly sold visas](#) for thousands of dollars emerged in September. However, the anti-Muslim undertones have served to conflate what should be separate discussions around the agreed level of regularised labour migration into Poland with the urgent humanitarian needs of vulnerable groups at the border.

The impact of the Ukrainian crisis

In some ways, the increasing hostility of Belarus towards the EU was the preamble to the events of 2022, following the invasion of Ukraine by its close ally, Russia. On the one hand, the outbreak of conflict displaced millions of Ukrainian civilians over the border to Poland. In contrast to the treatment that the migrants, refugees and asylum seekers at the Belarus border have received, the Ukrainian arrivals were largely welcomed under the EU-wide Temporary Protection Directive and were quickly granted access to housing, services and employment. While some of this initial goodwill towards Ukrainian refugees [appears to have diminished](#) over time – with some far-right politicians even articulating openly [stoking fears of Poland's “Ukrainisation”](#) – even at its peak this solidarity did not translate into an expanded sense of sympathy for the plight of those at the Belarus border. More generally, across the political spectrum, there is now a widespread consensus that with close to 1 million Ukrainians in the country, Poland has already done enough to meet its humanitarian obligations.

Besides the risk of generalised fatigue setting in, the wider implications of the Ukraine conflict for the migrants, refugees and asylum seekers is that the border has become even more securitised following the [arrival of thousands of mercenaries](#) belonging to the Wagner Group organisation. This prompted the Polish government to announce in August that [10,000 more Polish troops](#) would be deployed at the border. While the future remains unknown, these developments have already created further difficulties for the [hundreds of men, women and children trapped at the border](#). Since the arrival of thousands of troops at

the border, activists in Poland report that the number of calls they receive from people requiring assistance has reduced dramatically, suggesting far fewer are now getting through. It also means that the situation of those trapped in the forest is even more uncertain, raising fears for those requiring urgent assistance.

A challenging humanitarian environment

In the absence of a concerted government response, a loose consortium of activists, volunteers and human rights groups have played a vital role in providing emergency assistance to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. More than two years on, the crisis remains as severe as ever, and these first responders – many of them undertaking this work in their spare time or holidays – must contend with the challenges of burnout and the hostility of officials and some local residents to their work. Though it is permitted to provide food, clothing and medical supplies, other assistance can potentially lead to [charges of human smuggling](#), accusations that have previously been levelled against volunteers and may be designed to discourage others.

The needs are also as acute as ever. Alongside the basic needs of food and water, the sub-zero temperatures of the harsh approaching winter could prove life-threatening for many without adequate clothing, blankets or shelter. There is also a litany of illnesses and injuries to contend with, such as hypothermia and diarrhoea contracted from drinking swamp water. Others have deep cuts or broken limbs from barbed wires and falls. Then there are injuries incurred as a result of direct violence by border guards on both sides of the border, with those in Belarus accused of perpetrating a wide range of abuses including [rape, beatings and extortion](#). Volunteers, meanwhile, lacking the means to provide sustained medical assistance, are generally only able to provide basic treatment and relief – though in many cases, this can prove lifesaving.

At present, the limited information coming from the border and the difficulty of securing witnesses to abuses carried out there is contributing to a climate of indifference and impunity. More evidence, including the testimony of victims of pushbacks (among them unaccompanied minors), offers an important way to challenge the official deniability of what is happening there and raise awareness about what is ultimately a question of domestic politics but universal human rights.

Detention of new arrivals

Many of those who have managed to continue into Poland, rather than be pushed back, end up in detention centres, where conditions are extremely harsh. Hundreds are crammed into overcrowded facilities where, following a legislative amendment in 2021, foreign detainees are now entitled to [just two square metres of space each](#) – just half of the minimum of 4 square metres stipulated by the Council of Europe. In addition to the lack of basic services, health care, internet access or communication with family members, the alleged [cruel and dehumanising treatment of security guards](#) in these centres can cause further trauma. Hundreds of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, [including children and torture victims](#), have been held in these facilities indefinitely [without being able to access adequate legal assistance](#). The situation has become so dire that in early September as many as 70 detainees went on [hunger strike](#) to protest their poor living conditions and the protracted uncertainty they face.

A new chapter

As this publication goes to press, the results of the election are suggesting that the Civic Coalition under Donald Tusk in partnership with a number of other opposition parties is [likely to form the next government](#). This outcome, seen by many as the most [meaningful milestone for Poland since the 1989 national elections](#), should signal a [decisive shift in direction for the country](#). The divisive referendum, held on the same day, also looks likely to have been invalidated due to low turnout as [many voters appeared to have boycotted it](#). Nevertheless, the continued silence of parties from across the political spectrum on the humanitarian crisis at the border with Belarus suggests that a swift resolution in the near future remains unlikely.

Highlighted New Research and Reports



[Denied passage - The continuous struggle of people on the move pushed back and stranded at the Italian-French border](#)

MSF | August 2023

This report shines a much-needed spotlight on the situation facing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers at the French-Italian border in Ventimiglia, where men, women and children have been subjected to systematic and repeated violent pushbacks by French border guards. It also details the array of illnesses and injuries that many experience and their limited access to healthcare.



["I felt so stuck": Inadequate housing and social support for families seeking asylum in the United Kingdom](#)

HRW | August 2023

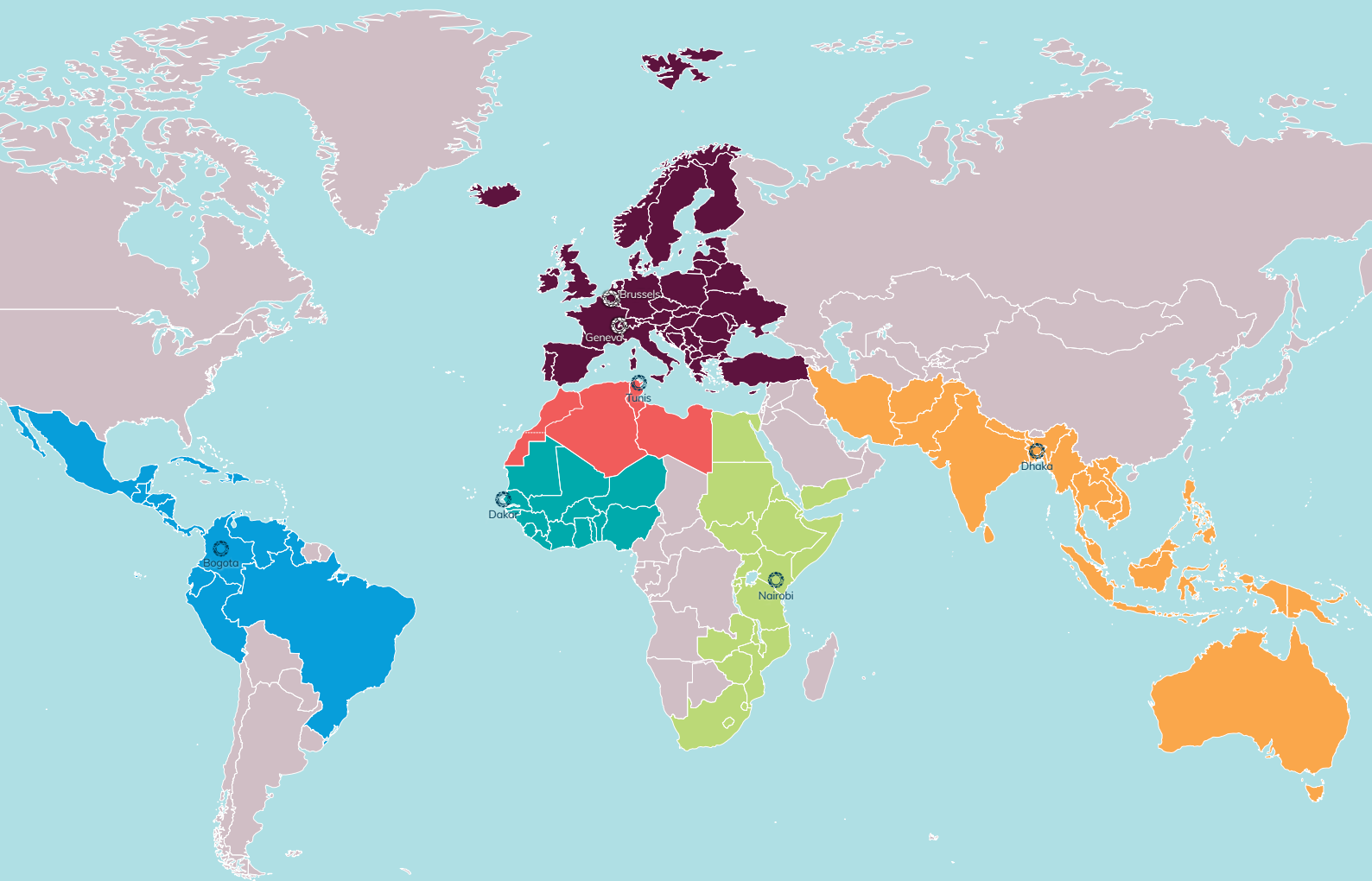
This publication summarises the deficiencies and shortcomings of the UK's increasingly exclusionary housing system for asylum seekers, in particular, the accommodation of families and unaccompanied children in contingency hotels and other temporary solutions for protracted periods of time. The impacts of this short-sighted approach are wide-ranging, undermining educational access, physical health and mental well-being of children trapped in this system.



[Responding to displacement from Ukraine: Options to remain when EU temporary protection ends](#)

ICMPD | July 2023

This report provides an overview of the current temporary protection regime in place across the EU for displaced Ukrainians and explores different pathways for integration, reconstruction and sustainable return to the country in the future. It encompasses a wide range of different solutions, from the mainstream asylum system and non-protection residence permits to longer-term "reconstruction visas", outlining the potential challenges and opportunities of each approach.



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs hosted in Danish Refugee Council regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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