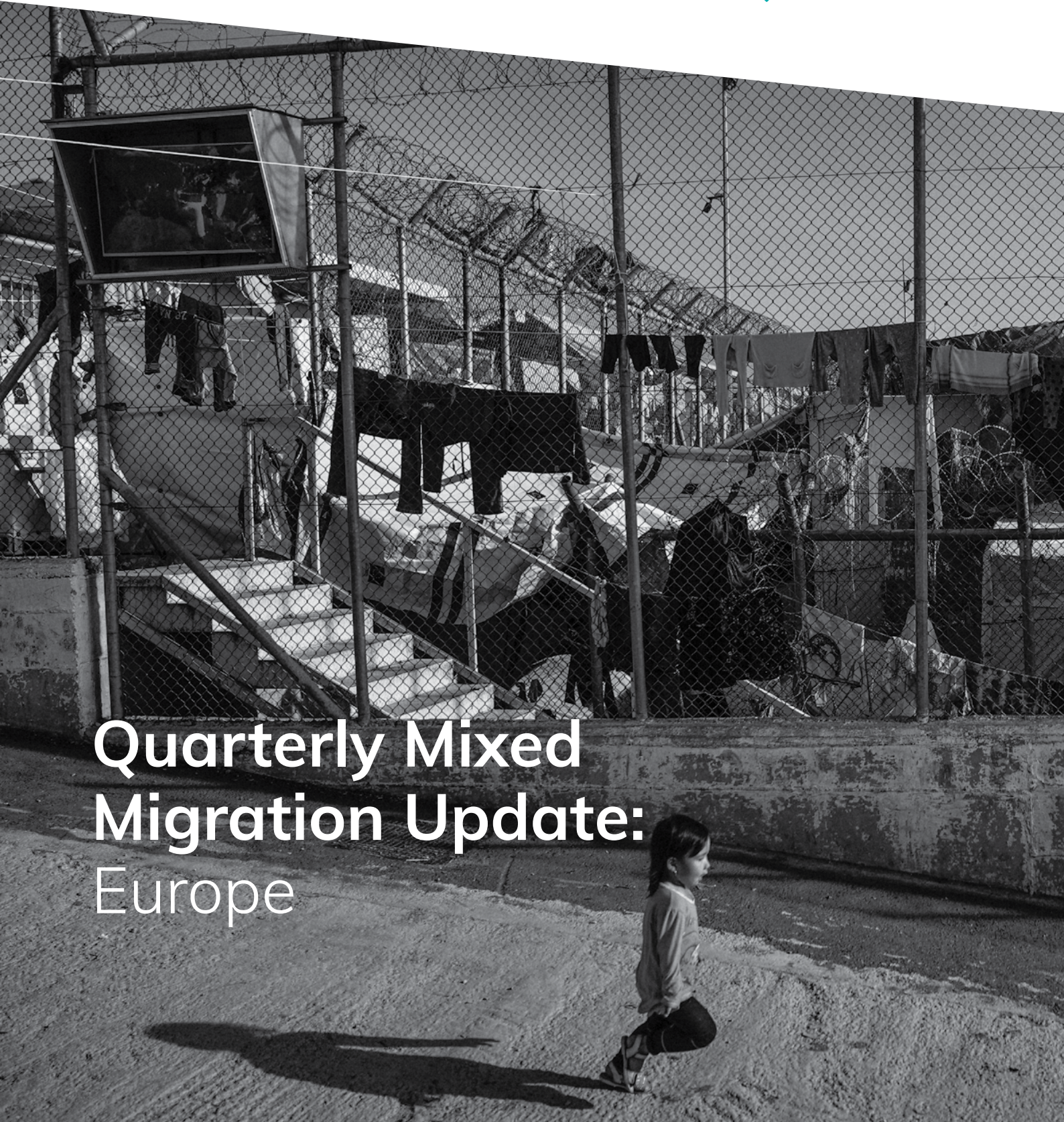


MMC Europe

QUARTER 4 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 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](https://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 migrants travelling along similar routes, using similar means of travel – often travelling 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 4 - 2023

### Key Updates

- **Greece regularises 30,000 undocumented migrants:** On 19 December, a resolution to regularise the status of 30,000 undocumented migrants was passed by the Greek parliament. Despite being criticised by right-wing politicians, the government justified it as a necessary step to [address the country's acute labour shortages](#).
- **A “chain reaction” of border closures to contain migration:** Despite a reduction in movement through the Western Balkans in 2023, the continued popularity of the route prompted multiple states including [Germany](#), [Austria](#), the [Czech Republic](#), [Poland](#) and [Slovakia](#) to impose or extend border restrictions with neighbouring states to curb irregular migration during the final quarter of 2023.
- **Tensions at the borders between Finland and Russia:** In [November](#) and again in [December](#), Finland imposed closures at its land borders following the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers that it claimed Russia had orchestrated as a form of “[hybrid warfare](#)”. Estonia [threatened to follow suit](#) in response to [similar incidents allegedly taking place](#) at its border with Russia.
- **The UK’s “Rwanda policy” is passed in parliament:** despite multiple legal challenges, including a [ruling by the Supreme Court](#) on 15 November, the government published a revised version of the legislation that was [passed with a majority of 44 votes](#) on 12 December. However, the bill may be subject to [further amendments in January](#) ahead of its formal ratification due to pressure from the party’s more right-wing faction.
- **Shock victory for far-right in the Netherlands:** [National elections in the Netherlands](#) in November saw the far-right Party for Freedom of Geert Wilders become the largest single party in the country with 37 of the 150 parliamentary seats. While it is [still unclear](#) who will be leading the next government, it seems likely that the next government will introduce a more exclusionary approach to refugees, migrants and asylum seekers.
- **Italy and Albania partner on migration:** In early November, Italy and Albania announced a surprise agreement between the two countries for Italy to process [up to 36,000 asylum applications](#) in Albania every year. Albania’s Constitutional Court subsequently [blocked ratification of the agreement](#), with a public hearing scheduled for 18 January to review its legality.
- **France passes tough legislation on immigration:** A new flagship immigration bill was rejected on 11 December in the lower-house National Assembly after opposition groups [refused to even debate it](#) in the chamber. A revised version of the text, incorporating more restrictive policies in an attempt to ensure the support of far-right MP, was [passed on 19 December](#).

## Regional Overview\*



**United Kingdom:** According to provisional data, the total number of small boat arrivals in the UK in 2023 was **29,437**, a drop of 36% compared to 2022, though still the **second highest number on record**. Compared to **24,830** at the end of September, including 13,397 in the third quarter alone, the final quarter of 2023 accounted for 4,607 small boat arrivals.

**Ukraine:** According to the most recent data there are **more than 6.3 million** registered Ukrainian refugees globally, including over 5.9 million in Europe, and **almost 3.7 million** IDPs in the country - a significant drop from the more than 5.9 million IDPs in December 2022.

**Spain:** While migration in general has been markedly high in 2023, this spike is especially pronounced in the Canary Islands, with a record-breaking 38,329 arrivals during the year – higher than the previous peak of 2006 – including almost 23,000 arrivals in the final quarter of 2023 alone.

**Italy:** 157,301 arrivals reached Italy on the Central Mediterranean route in 2023, an increase of almost 50% from 2022 (105,131). The total during the final quarter of 2023 (23,480), however, was only a fraction of the previous quarter (68,302) and significantly lower than the final quarter of 2022 (33,341).

**Central Mediterranean route:** According to IOM, 2023 had the highest number of fatalities on the route since 2017 - a total of 2,498 deaths or disappearances, including 259 during the fourth quarter. Estimates by the **NGO Caminando Fronteras**, however, suggest that 6,007 people died on the route during the year.

**Western Balkans:** This remains the **second most used irregular migration route** into the EU, with at least 96,734 entries in the first 10 months of 2023, including a total of 17,125 in October. This compared to 125,349 and 19,282 respectively during the same periods of 2022.

**Greece:** There was a significant rise in the number of arrivals in Greece during 2023, totalling 48,563 during the year – the highest number recorded since 2019. Much of this movement occurred in the second half of 2023, including 17,509 in the final quarter.

**Atlantic route:** According to IOM, the number of deaths and disappearances on the Atlantic route during the year was 914, considerably higher than the total for 2022 (559). More than half of the total number of fatalities in 2023 (490) took place in the final quarter and was significantly higher than the total for the last quarter of 2022 (211).

**Eastern Mediterranean route:** According to IOM, the total number of fatalities along the Eastern Mediterranean route in 2023 was 86, significantly lower than the total of 383 in 2022. This included 18 deaths or disappearances in the final quarter of 2023, compared to 119 in the last quarter of 2022.

\*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 data](#), the Eastern Mediterranean route into Greece saw a significant rise in movement during 2023, with a total of 48,744 arrivals (41,584 by sea) during the year – the highest number recorded since 2019 and far exceeding the total for 2022 (18,780). The majority of this movement occurred in the second half of 2023, including 22,226 in the third quarter and 17,587 in the final quarter (compared to 7,097 in the final quarter of 2022). Among registered arrivals between January and the end of September 2023, the largest national group were from Syria (25.5%), followed by the State of Palestine (18%), Afghanistan (17.2%), Somalia (9.1%), and Eritrea (5.9%). The proportion of Syrians has risen dramatically during the second half of the year, having previously been [10.5%](#) of all arrivals along the route between January and the end of July: [according to Frontex data](#), this trend has continued into the final quarter, with 3,936 Syrian arrivals detected along the route in October, more than the total number of Syrian nationals reported in the first seven months of the year.
- According to data from [IOM's Missing Migrants Project](#), the total number of fatalities along the Eastern Mediterranean route in 2023 was 86, significantly lower than the total of 383 in 2022. This included 18 deaths or disappearances in the final quarter of 2023, compared to 119 in the last quarter of 2022. Comparing the number of arrivals [recorded by UNHCR](#) with [IOM's estimates](#) on deaths and disappearances during the same period, around 1 in 566 people who attempted to cross the Eastern Mediterranean to Greece in 2023 died, compared to 1 in 49 during 2022. Compared to the year as a whole, the proportion of those who died attempting the crossing in the final quarter of 2023 – around 1 in 977 – was lower.
- An apparent thawing of diplomatic relations between Greece and Turkey in recent months, following Turkey's [increasing efforts to contain migration](#) to Europe, culminated in [a meeting between the two heads of state](#) on 7 December. However, reported pushbacks of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers by Greek authorities continue to occur, including [122 people who were subsequently rescued](#) by Turkish coast guards on two separate vessels on 11 December. Human rights groups have provided further corroboration of illegal pushbacks taking place, with a video published in October by a volunteer group apparently showing [Greek officials forcibly returning](#) 47 Afghans into Turkish waters. Similarly, a report published by MSF in November presents disturbing evidence of [continued violence and mistreatment of arrivals](#) at the border by uniformed men. Meanwhile, conditions for refugees and asylum seekers held in Greece remain dire, with the Greek Council for Refugees and other organisations issuing [a joint statement](#) in November condemning the “ongoing malfunctioning of the country’s reception system”, characterised by overcrowding, insecurity and inadequate health care.

## Greece regularises 30,000 undocumented migrants

On 19 December, a resolution to regularise the status of 30,000 undocumented migrants [was passed in Greece](#). Despite being criticised by right-wing politicians who argued that the move would [incentivise further irregular migration](#) to the country, the amendment was approved with [a large majority of 262](#) in the 300-member parliament, thanks to the centre-right government receiving support from the left-wing opposition. The government justified it as a necessary step to [address the country's acute labour shortages](#) in key sectors such as agriculture, construction and tourism while reducing the prevalence of informal employment. The regularisation, however, only applies to those who have been in Greece for [at least three years](#) from November 2023 and already with job offers from employers in place, meaning later arrivals are not eligible. The main beneficiaries of this temporary status, which is intended to only last three years, are nationals of [Albania, Georgia and the Philippines](#).

## The Central Mediterranean route to Italy

- According to [UNHCR data](#), 157,314 arrivals reached Italy along the Central Mediterranean route in 2023, an increase of almost 50% from the total in 2022 (105,131). The total during the final quarter of 2023 (23,493), however, was only a fraction of the total in the previous quarter (68,302) and significantly lower too than the total for the final quarter of 2022 (33,341). The majority of arrivals disembarked at Sicily (132,770), Calabria (13,202) and Apulia (4,272), with smaller numbers entering through Tuscany (1,628), Campania (1,490), Lazio (1,001), Liguria (734), Sardinia (728), Abruzzo (617), Marche (574) and Emilia-Romagna (285). Continuing from the previous quarter, this has placed extraordinary pressure on reception facilities in hotspots such as Lampedusa, with thousands more arrivals in the last months of 2023, including [over 1,000](#) on 20 November alone, followed a week after by [almost 600 people](#) on 27 November. Significant numbers also reached Cyprus, with [the arrival of hundreds](#) of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers reported in December, alongside [the rescue of many others](#) at sea.
- The [most represented nationalities](#) between January and the end of November 2023 were Guinea (12%, up from 4% in the same period of 2022), Tunisia (11%, down from 18% in 2022) and Cote d'Ivoire (10%, up from 5% in 2022), followed by Egypt (8%), Syria (7%), Burkina Faso (6%), Pakistan (5%), Mali (4%) and Sudan (4%). Between January and the end of November 2023, Tunisia was the primary country of embarkation, with 97,306 arrivals in Italy departing from Tunisia, followed by Libya (52,034), then Türkiye (7,153), Algeria (583), Lebanon (214) and Cyprus (11). In December, Tunisian authorities reported that they had intercepted [around 70,000 people](#) from January to the end of November, a rise of 124% compared to the same period the previous year.
- According to data from [IOM's Missing Migrants Project](#), the total number of dead and missing along the Central Mediterranean route in 2023 was 2,498, the highest annual death toll since 2017. This included 259 fatalities during the fourth quarter, including the deaths [of at least 61 people](#) in a single incident in mid-December when a boat capsized off the coast of Libya. The total death toll in 2023 was significantly higher than that in 2022 (1,417), though the number of fatalities in the final quarter of 2022 (254) was similar. Comparing the number of arrivals [recorded by UNHCR](#) with [IOM's estimates](#) on deaths and disappearances during the same period, around 1 in 63 people who attempted to cross the Central Mediterranean in 2023 died, compared to 1 in 74 during 2022. Compared to the year as a whole, the proportion of those who died attempting the crossing in the final quarter of 2023 – around 1 in 90 – was lower.

## A renewed spotlight on European complicity in human rights abuses in North Africa

Despite human rights concerns, cooperation between European governments and Libyan actors over interceptions and returns has continued. One [joint investigative report](#) released in December alleged that Frontex and Maltese authorities had been assisting a notorious militia group in intercepting and returning migrants at sea, placing them at risk of torture, forced labour and extortion. Italy was also criticised in a report by the [Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner](#) published in December for its ongoing collaboration with Libya and Tunisia around the interception and return of migrant vessels, with pushbacks, the rollback of rescue operations and other practices highlighted as particular concerns.

These issues have also been brought into further relief by the heavy death toll along the route this year, including an increasing proportion of children: a [press release](#) issued by Save the Children in October highlighted the growing proportion of children dying in the Central Mediterranean, accounting for 4% of all deaths along the route compared to 1% in 2014. According to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), [an average of eight people a day had](#) died attempting the crossing between January and November, making it the route's deadliest year since 2017. MSF attributed the uptick of deaths in part to the reluctance of European countries to uphold their human rights obligations, increasingly favouring third-country agreements and forced returns while curbing search and rescue operations by NGOs.

## The Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes to Spain

- According to [UNHCR data](#), 57,538 arrivals (57,071 by sea) reached Spain during 2023, compared to 31,763 during 2022. Of those in 2023, over half (30,569) took place in the final quarter. This was almost double the total in the previous quarter (14,194) and more than three times the number in the final quarter of 2022 (8,141).
- The most popular destination during 2023 was the Canary Islands (40,330), followed by Mainland Andalucía (9,683), Mainland Eastern Mediterranean (3,577), the Balearic Islands (2,175), Ceuta (1,135) and Melilla (638). These entry points are reached by distinct routes, each with a distinct composition [in terms of nationalities](#). Among those travelling the Atlantic route from the coast of West Africa to the Canary Islands in the first 10 months of 2023, the three most represented countries of origin were Morocco, Senegal and Guinea. Among those travelling the Western Mediterranean route to the Spanish mainland or the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, on the other hand, the three most represented countries of origin were Morocco, Algeria and Syria.
- According to data from IOM's Missing Migrants Project, the number of dead and missing in 2023 along the [Western Mediterranean route](#) was 333, though the large majority of these occurred in the first half of the year, with 35 fatalities in the final quarter of 2023, down from 114 in the previous quarter<sup>1</sup> and 197 in the last quarter of 2022. Along the [Atlantic route](#) to the Canary Islands, on the other hand, the number of deaths and disappearances during the year was 956, considerably higher than the total for 2022 (559). More than half of the total number of fatalities in 2023 (498) took place in the final quarter and was significantly higher than the total for the last quarter of 2022 (211). For the year as a whole,

<sup>1</sup> In the previous QMMU, we reported a total number of 26 fatalities for the third quarter of 2023. In light of the data currently available, this number has been amended.



compared the number of arrivals [recorded by UNHCR](#) in the Canary Islands with [IOM's estimates](#) on deaths and disappearances along the Atlantic route, this meant that around 1 in 60 people attempting the crossing during the year died. However, these figures likely capture only a fraction of the deaths and disappearances along the route. The NGO [Caminando Fronteras](#), on the other hand, estimates that 6,618 people died trying to reach Spain in 2023, [almost three times](#) the organisation's estimate for 2022. This amounts to an average of 18 fatalities a day, making it the deadliest year on record. Of these, the large majority – 6,007 – took place on the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands.

## A record number of arrivals in the Canary Islands

While migration to Spain in general has been [markedly high](#), this spike is especially pronounced in the Canary Islands, with almost 23,000 arrivals in the final quarter of 2023 alone. This included the arrival of [more than 1,300](#) refugees, migrants and asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa over the course of one weekend in October. By early November, [more people had reached](#) the Canary Islands over the course of the year than in the entirety of 2006, when the previous [peak of 31,678](#) was recorded. By the close of 2023, a record-breaking 38,329 refugees, migrants and asylum seekers were recorded: of these, more than half were recorded in the final quarter of 2023, beginning in October with [a surge in numbers](#) that saw the number of recorded arrivals in the first three quarters double again in the space of a month.

This uptick has been particularly concentrated in the [small southwestern island of El Hierro](#). Though in many ways an unlikely destination, given it is located the furthest of all the islands from the West African coast, its physical distance also means it is harder for Mauritanian and Moroccan coast guards to intercept vessels en route. However, the more protracted route involved to get there carries [significantly greater risks](#) for those attempting the journey. This increased movement has also placed even greater pressure on the already limited reception facilities, prompting the governor of El Hierro to describe it as "[the new Lampedusa](#)". Local authorities in the Canary Islands have [called for urgent resettlement](#) of recent arrivals, including [thousands of children and unaccompanied minors](#), to mainland Spain and Europe. The surge in numbers, though due in part to [improved weather conditions](#) in October, has also been attributed to the [continued unrest in Senegal](#). As discussed in the [previous QMMU](#), however, the dynamics of mixed migration from the country are complex and evolving, and the apparent uptick in the number of Senegalese migrating in the immediate wake of the unrest may have been driven by a range of factors and considerations. According to [Frontex data](#), the number of Senegalese arriving in the Canary Islands has fluctuated since July.

## The Western Balkans route

- The Western Balkans route remains the [second most used irregular migration route](#) into the EU, with at least [96,734 entries](#) in the first 10 months of 2023, including a total of 17,125 in October. This compared to 125,349 and 19,282 respectively during the same periods of 2022.
- In terms of [nationalities](#), the most represented countries of origin during the year remain Syria, accounting for 72,518 arrivals between January and the end of October, followed by Turkey (8,302) and Afghanistan (7,088). During the same period of 2022, on the other hand, while Syrians again made up the majority (67,901) of arrivals, Afghans (21,127) this time far outnumbered nationals of Turkey (7,989). As noted in the [previous QMMU for Europe](#), looking at the composition of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers between the two years, it is clear that the diversity of mixed migration movements has reduced. While nationals of countries other than Syria, Afghanistan and Turkey made up close to a quarter (22.6%) of



all arrivals between January and the end of October 2022, for instance, during the same period of 2023 they accounted for less than one in 10 (9.1%) of all arrivals. In October 2023, to focus on the most recent data, 16,607 refugees, migrants and asylum seekers – 97% of all arrivals that month – were from just three countries.

- According to data from [IOM's Missing Migrants Project](#), a total of 12 people died along the Western Balkans route in the final quarter of 2023, bringing the total for the year to 45 – a similar toll to 2022 when 12 died in the last quarter and 43 in the year as a whole. However, a joint report published by Lighthouse and partners in December [highlighted the absence of comprehensive data collection](#) around migrant deaths and argued that IOM's data likely represented a significant undercount: the study's authors identified at least 92 migrant deaths during 2023 to date that had occurred along the route. Given the [deteriorating living conditions](#) refugees, migrants and asylum seekers face along the route over the winter months, further fatalities are likely to occur.

## A “chain reaction” of border closures

Despite a reduction in movement through the Western Balkans in 2023, the continued popularity of the route has prompted multiple states to impose or extend border restrictions with neighbouring states to curb irregular migration during the final quarter of 2023. Beginning in late September, Germany – itself subject to increased border restrictions by its neighbour, [Denmark](#) - [introduced additional checks](#) at its borders with the Czech Republic, Poland and Switzerland at the end of September, subsequently issuing an [extension of these measures](#) in December until March 2024. In turn, in early October [Austria](#), the [Czech Republic](#) and [Poland](#), announced restrictions of their own at their border with Slovakia.

Slovakia, citing the “[chain reaction](#)” of closures by other countries, has subsequently pursued similar policies, first implementing [temporary controls](#) at its border with Hungary in early October and in December [announcing their extension](#) to January 2024. Other countries in the region, including [Italy](#), [Slovenia](#) and [Croatia](#), have also seen the introduction of additional checks and surveillance to control irregular movement between them. In October, Italy announced the [suspension of the Schengen agreement](#) at its border with Slovenia, citing security concerns and the increased risk of irregular migration.

## Mass round-ups in Serbia in the wake of fatal shootings

A [deadly confrontation](#) between migrants on 27 October in a disused warehouse near the Serbian border with Hungary left three dead and another seriously injured. This followed a [similar incident](#) the month before that left one dead and three wounded near the border, where clashes between rival smuggling groups frequently take place. In the wake of the shootings in October, police launched a [protracted crackdown](#) on smuggling rings that saw more than 4,500 migrants detained and over 120 arrested.

## The Ukraine crisis and wider region

- As of December 2023, there are [more than 6.3 million](#) registered Ukrainian refugees globally, including over 5.9 million in Europe. The largest populations are present in Russia (over 1.2 million), Germany (over 1.1 million), Poland (956,600) and the Czech Republic (373,100).
- As of September, there are [almost 3.7 million IDPs](#) in Ukraine, a significant drop from the more than 5.9 million IDPs in December 2022. The [largest numbers](#) are in the east of the country and around Kyiv and

Odesa, though most oblasts contain sizeable internally displaced populations. A [briefing published by IOM](#) in December, based on interviewees with IDPs, drew attention to the significant barriers that IDPs experience in host communities elsewhere in the country, particularly around employment: 22% of IDPs surveyed reported they or their families have experienced discrimination or unfair treatment since being displaced, primarily from local residents. The difficulties surrounding displacement are especially acute for those facing intersectional barriers due to age or disability, with many [older IDPs with disabilities](#) struggling to access housing or care, leaving some with no options besides residential institutions.

- There is a significant number of returnees ([almost 4.6 million](#)) in Ukraine, some of whom have returned from abroad.

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

Migration was a central issue in [Poland's landmark national elections](#) on 15 October, with the then-incumbent Justice and Law party [mobilising issues](#) around labour migration, the presence of Ukrainian refugees and the ongoing crisis at the border between Poland and Belarus in an attempt to win votes. While these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, with opposition leader Donald Tusk securing election in what was widely seen as a victory for [more progressive politics](#) in Poland, it remains unclear whether this will lead to an improvement in the deteriorating humanitarian conditions at the border.

To date, there has yet to be a resolution to the protracted plight of the thousands of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers trapped in the no-man's land between the two countries, unable to seek sanctuary in Poland or return to Belarus. While attempted crossings at the Belarus-EU border [have increased in 2023](#), their situation has remained desperate: in December, MSF reported that around 1 in 10 of the hundreds of people it treated during the year were in need of [life-saving assistance](#), in many cases as a result of violence and injury sustained when crossing the border. With another winter approaching, activist groups issued a warning in November that stranded migrants were [suffering from frostbite](#) and could be in danger of requiring amputations.

## Closures at the Finnish-Russian border

Tensions around migration have also been playing out at the borders between Finland and Russia. In [November](#) and again in [December](#), Finland imposed closures at its land borders following the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers that it claimed Russia had orchestrated as a form of "[hybrid warfare](#)" in reprisal for Finland's security cooperation with the US. Estonia, though yet to implement closures itself, has [threatened to follow suit](#) in response to [similar incidents allegedly taking place](#) at its border with Russia. The Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner subsequently issued a [statement of concern](#) relating to the rights of migrants at the border, noting that the total closure "may impact notably on the right to seek asylum, as well as the principle of non-refoulement and prohibition of collective expulsion."

## The United Kingdom

### Fewer small boat arrivals in 2023

According to provisional data, the total number of small boat arrivals in the UK in 2023 was [29,437](#), a drop of 36% compared to the 45,774 refugees, migrants and asylum seekers who crossed the English Channel from France in 2022, though still the [second highest number on record](#). Compared to [24,830](#) at the end of September, including 13,397 in the third quarter alone, the final quarter of 2023 accounted for 4,607

small boat arrivals, compared to [12,726](#) in the same period of 2022. [In terms of nationalities](#), the most represented group were Afghans, accounting for around 20% of the total, followed by Iranians (12%) and Turks (11%), while Albanians – representing 28% of arrivals in 2022 – made up just 3% in 2023. A number of people died attempting the journey, including [two passengers](#) on board a vessel that sank off the French coast on November 22 and [another death](#) in a similar capsizing on 15 December.

At the same time, there has been a renewed focus on the poor living conditions facing asylum seekers in the UK, in particular those held on the controversial Bibi Stockholm barge. After the first arrivals had to be removed from the vessel following a [legionella outbreak](#) days after the facility was opened in August, the [majority were moved back](#) in October, reportedly against their will. That month, a Nigerian man who was due to be transferred to the barge was hospitalised [following an attempted suicide](#). In December, following protests by those on board at the poor living conditions, one of the residents [took his own life](#), prompting [renewed calls from campaigners](#) for the barge to be closed.

## Policy and Legal Updates

### UK's revised Rwanda legislation passes in parliament, but uncertainties remain

The UK government's so-called "Rwanda policy" allows for the removal of asylum seekers who entered the country illegally and the processing of their claims in Rwanda, with a lifetime ban on re-entering the UK. Though first announced in April 2022, the proposal has since then faced multiple legal challenges, including a [ruling by the Supreme Court](#) on 15 November that upheld a previous Court of Appeal ruling that it was unlawful in its current form as Rwanda could not be classified as a safe third country.

However, the government subsequently brokered a new treaty with Rwanda on 5 December and published the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill the next day to [circumnavigate the ruling](#) and close most avenues for further legal challenges in the domestic courts. The legislation, despite resistance from opposition parties as well as hardline members of the ruling Conservative party who wanted to see it go further in challenging international law, [passed with a majority of 44 votes](#) on 12 December. There is speculation that the bill could be subject to [further amendments in January](#) ahead of its formal ratification on 30 January due to pressure from the party's more right-wing faction. Rights groups such as Amnesty International, in turn, remain deeply critical of the legislation in its new form, [condemning it](#) as "an attack on the rule of law and the very concept of universal human rights". Even before the legislation was passed, concerns were being raised about the [significant cost of the government's partnership](#) with Rwanda: despite no transfers having taken place to date, it was revealed that £240 million of public funding had already been spent on the policy, with another £50 million earmarked for 2024.



## Austria enters partnership with the UK

Notwithstanding these ongoing difficulties in the implementation of the Rwanda agreement, Austria has been advocating for the EU to adopt a similar approach to asylum processing and on 2 November entered a formal “migration and security” [agreement with the UK](#) to work more closely on this issue. Though the policy envisioned by Austria would differ from the UK’s in that applicants whose asylum claims were approved in Rwanda would then be eligible to return to Austria, the European Commission stated a few days after the signature of the agreement that any plans to process asylum claims offshore through an agreement with the UK [would not be compatible with EU law](#).

## Shock victory for far-right in the Netherlands

[National elections in the Netherlands](#) in November saw the far-right Party for Freedom of Geert Wilders, a politician who has campaigned for years on an anti-Islam, xenophobic platform, become the largest single party in the country with 37 of the 150 parliamentary seats. As of the end of the year, as coalition talks continued, it was [still unclear](#) who would be leading the next government. It seems likely, however, that any accommodation of the strongly anti-immigration PVV – whose [proposed policies](#) include an immediate halt to asylum claims, withdrawal from the UN Refugee Convention and the immediate deportation of undocumented migrants in the country – will lead to a more exclusionary approach to refugees, migrants and asylum seekers. The previous coalition leader, the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), had itself given greater prominence to migration as a political issue by [advocating for more restrictive policies](#) in the lead-up to the election: some commentators believe this decision may have [helped legitimize](#) the more extreme stance of Wilders among some voters.

## Italy and Albania announce surprise agreement on migration

In early November, Italy and Albania announced a surprise agreement between the two countries for Italy to process [up to 36,000 asylum applications](#) in Albania every year in two centres, to be built at Italy’s expense. Italian authorities have argued that [the system would be different](#) to the proposed arrangement between the UK and Rwanda. Only those intercepted by the Italian coast guard at sea would be eligible to be transferred to Albania, not those who reached Italian soil or were disembarked there by NGOs, and they would remain under Italian jurisdiction while their claims were being processed: [depending on the outcome](#), once an application was fast-tracked, Italy would then be responsible for allowing entry to successful asylum seekers or arranging the deportation from Albania of those whose appeals had been refused.

If implemented, it would be [the first time](#) an EU member state had outsourced aspects of its asylum responsibilities to a third country, though the asylum claimants would remain under Italian jurisdiction throughout the process. However, the response to the proposed agreement has been mixed, even within EU circles. While EU Commissioner Ylva Johansson [initially stated](#) that the agreement did not violate EU law, as President Ursula von der Leyen [subsequently praised](#) the initiative as “an example of out-of-the-box thinking”, the European Commissioner for Human Rights [expressed concerns](#) that “the lack of legal certainty will likely undermine crucial human rights safeguards and accountability for violations”. Similarly, Amnesty International [condemned](#) the “illegal and unworkable” agreement as a contravention of Italy’s

responsibilities under international law. In any case, on 13 December Albania's Constitutional Court [blocked ratification of the agreement](#) for potentially being in violation of the country's constitutional responsibilities, with a public hearing scheduled for 18 January to review its legality before the parliament can vote on it.

## France passes tough legislation on immigration

A new flagship immigration bill drafted by the government of President Emmanuel Macron, having been passed in the upper house, was rejected on 11 December in the lower-house National Assembly after opposition groups [refused to even debate it](#) in the chamber. A revised version of the text, incorporating more restrictive policies in an attempt to ensure the support of far-right MP, was [passed on 19 December](#) despite continued resistance from left-leaning opposition groups. The new legislation includes [a range of hardline measures](#) on immigration, including reduced safeguards on the removal of foreign nationals and the weakening of appeal rights for failed asylum seekers. It also [significantly curtails](#) welfare rights for migrants, restricts access to citizenship and allows for dual nationals who commit certain crimes against police to be stripped of their nationality.

While proponents of the legislation justified it as [a necessary measure](#) to fend off the rising popularity of the far-right in the country, critics have argued that Macron's government has [betrayed the progressive hopes](#) of those who voted for him in the 2022 election and [ceded political space](#) to the anti-migrant, xenophobic agenda of Marine Le Pen's National Rally. Dozens of human rights groups [condemned the legislation](#) as "the most regressive bill of the past 40 years for the rights and living conditions of foreigners, including those who have long been in France".

# Thematic Focus:

## The New Pact on Asylum and Migration

The New Pact on Asylum and Migration agreed on 20 December was swiftly [heralded by its proponents](#) as “historic” and an important step forward in achieving a more cohesive, unified policy system in the EU. The [five core components](#) of the agreement include the elaboration of coherent screen protocols around the arrival of non-EU nationals in the Schengen area, as well as the creation of a shared database on irregular movements into EU territory. It also outlines the application of fast-tracked asylum to accelerate border procedures and the creation of a legally binding solidarity mechanism, to ensure costs and responsibilities are more equitably distributed between countries. Finally, it envisions strengthening preparedness in the event of a major crisis, including the so-called “instrumentalisation of migration” – a phrase that implicitly points to the ongoing situation at the Belarus-Poland border, though the [term itself has been critiqued](#) by those who believe it dehumanises the actual refugees, migrants and asylum seekers who comprise these supposedly “artificial” movements.

While the response to the new legislation has been sharply divided, among the different camps there is at least a consensus on one point: that EU asylum and migration policy as it currently stands is nowhere near as effective as it needs to be. The new legislation has been more than three years in the making, beginning with the [proposal in September 2020](#) of a new framework, with the President of the European Commission Ursula von Leyen [stating that](#) “the old system no longer works”. Within the umbrella of the EU, however, a wide range of positions has developed, meaning that any agreement had to balance seemingly contradictory priorities and viewpoints. For southern countries such as Italy and Spain, both frontline receivers for disproportionate numbers of new arrivals, [solidarity and shared responsibility](#) among member states were at the top of their agenda. This is at odds with the stance of countries such as Hungary, however, which has [for years attempted to resist](#) any resettlement of asylum seekers in its territory.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the broader context, the resulting agreement has been divisive. While the European Commission [argues that the new pact](#) “improves asylum procedures and reception, thus ensuring better protection of the individuals applying for international protection in the EU”, it has attracted criticism from opposite ends of the political spectrum: while groups such as Human Rights Watch have [labelled it](#) a “disaster” that will “severely curtail the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers”, Hungary’s far-right prime minister Viktor Orbán has also [condemned it](#) as “certain to fail”.

### A troubled political backdrop

The tensions provoked by the new legislation are more understandable when set against the backdrop of the EU’s current political landscape. At a time when even assistance to Ukraine – until recently, a near-unanimous point of European solidarity following Russia’s illegal invasion of the country in February 2022 – is now being questioned in [some quarters](#), including the [newly elected Slovak prime minister](#), Robert Fico, champions of the new pact see it as an essential bulwark against a further slide to the far-right and the erosion of the fundamental right to asylum. The European Parliament President Roberta Metsola,



for instance, has admitted that the new pact is “[not a perfect package](#)” but defends it as a pragmatic compromise between centrist groups [that represents](#) “a decisive victory for the constructive pro-European centre ahead of the start of a European elections year”.

The spectre of 2024, with [EU parliamentary elections in June](#) at a time when the far-right appears to be making striking political gains in many countries, may have provided an added impetus for a deal to be brokered. With irregular migration into the EU at its highest since 2016, [according to Frontex data](#), one of the fundamental principles of the EU's border-free Schengen Area – freedom of movement between member states – has come under pressure in recent months as a number of countries [established or extended temporary border restrictions](#) to curb irregular entries into their territory. Recent terrorist attacks by foreign nationals, including [the killing of a teacher in France](#) in October and [the shooting of two Swedes in Belgium](#) a few days later, have provided added justification for governments to impose these controls as necessary security measures. Meanwhile, with [more than 1 million asylum applications](#) registered in the EU during the year, some governments are seeking to broker further [agreements with third countries](#) to prevent people from entering EU territory, with [Georgia, Ghana and Moldova](#) joining Rwanda as potential partners under consideration.

In this context, centrist supporters of the legislation might argue, that the very fact that the new pact still [recognises and protects](#) the right to asylum is a significant achievement. It certainly reflects the at times contradictory impulses in EU migration policy between, for example, the agreed resettlement and humanitarian admission of [61,000 refugees](#) in the EU in 2024-25 and the move towards further policies of externalisation [such as offshore processing and agreements with African partners to curb the number of arrivals](#). The latter, an approach that would have been largely unthinkable a few years ago, is now not only being advocated by countries such as Austria, Denmark and Italy but is even reportedly under consideration in [Germany](#), where the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) has given greater prominence and credibility to anti-migrant rhetoric. The new pact, according to one line of thought, seeks to neutralize these more extreme positions by balancing the responsibility to protect with firmer, more effective regulations to address irregular migration.

## Rights under threat?

For human rights organisations and left-wing parties, on the other hand, the picture is very different. Many view the legislation not as a strategic manoeuvre against the far-right but as a [capitulation to its anti-migrant, xenophobic agenda](#) that will only give added legitimacy to these groups while further whittling down the basic rights and protections of vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers. The European Council on Refugees and Exiles, a consortium of NGOs, [described the new pact](#) as a “dark day for Europe” and “byzantine in their complexity and Orban-esque in their cruelty”.

One of the main points of contention among critics of the new pact is that it creates more opportunities for basic rights and procedures to be overlooked, misinterpreted or suspended, a situation that could compound the lack of clarity and confusion already in place. For example, [Human Rights Watch](#) has drawn attention to the danger that the accelerated border procedures would enable inadequate and perfunctory reviews of disembarked arrivals. These concerns were echoed by [Save the Children](#) in its lambasting of the “historically bad” agreement and the “blatant violations of children’s rights” it will enable, including family

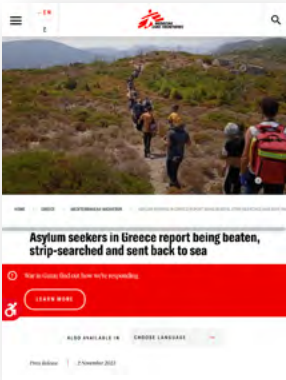
separation and systematic detention of minors. The [International Rescue Committee](#), meanwhile, noted that the dispensation of normal procedures in the event of an opaquely classified “crisis” could undermine legal obligations towards refugees, migrants and asylum seekers might be suspended. Noting that “everything is a crisis”, it raised concerns that “the Pact could make diverging from EU law the ‘new normal’”.

Furthermore, the new pact’s critics argue that its provisions do little to address the underlying dysfunctions and inequities of the EU’s asylum and migration system. For instance, despite the emphasis on responsibility sharing, in practice the fact that the proposed mandatory resettlement programme can be sidetracked by other member states with [per capita payments of 20,000 Euros](#) – money that could [end up being ploughed into militarised surveillance](#), the construction of border fences and third country interceptions rather than reception and humanitarian support within the EU. Countries such as Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Malta will likely continue to be the primary arrival points for refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, a [situation that encourages](#) their use of pushback and inadequate rescue response to boats in distress. Predicting a “surge in suffering” as a result of the new agreement, [Amnesty International](#) warned that “after years of complex negotiations, the EU now risks sleepwalking into a system in even greater need of reform than the current one.”

## Eyes on the future

At present, the only certainty appears to be that the pact’s long-term impact is [difficult to predict](#). Its implications, for good or ill, will to a large extent depend on the ability and willingness of different member states to work together and ensure the fundamental right to asylum – still, it should be noted, enshrined in the new pact – alongside the [externalisation policies and third country partnerships](#) that have defined EU migration policy in recent years and seem likely to continue unabated. If the new agreement had landed in a broader context where governments were cooperating effectively and taking care to observe their legal obligations towards refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, then there might be less cause for alarm among activists and human rights experts. At present, however, given the widespread [culture of impunity](#) at the EU’s borders, the [lukewarm attitude](#) among some of its signatories and the [outright hostility](#) of Hungary and [Poland](#) to key provisions of the pact, it is clear that much work needs to be done to get the agreement off the ground.

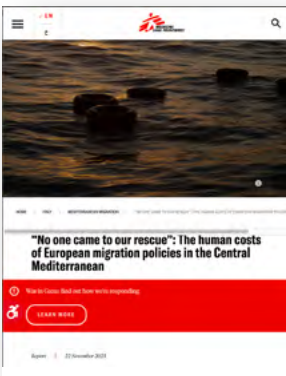
# Highlighted New Research and Reports



## [In plain sight: The human cost of migration policies and violent practices at Greek sea borders](#)

### MSF | November 2023

This report draws on first-hand testimonies of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers treated by MSF between August 2021 to July 2023 on the Greek islands of Lesbos and Samos. It outlines the repeated, systematic practice of violent pushbacks, beatings and humiliation of people intercepted at the Greek border, many of them already fleeing conflict and persecution elsewhere, by uniformed men.



## [“No one came to our rescue”: The human costs of European migration policies in the Central Mediterranean](#)

### MSF | November 2023

This publication, building on MSF’s experience of rescuing more than 9,400 people between May 2021 and September 2023 in the Central Mediterranean, outlines the severe human rights abuses perpetrated against migrants, refugees and asylum seekers along the route. While search and rescue operations are now subjected to increasing restrictions, the medical and humanitarian needs are more acute than ever.



## [Europe’s nameless dead](#)

### Lighthouse Reports | December 2023

This short piece presents the findings of research undertaken by investigators along the Balkans route, including data from selected morgues and interviews with forensic pathologists, to identify migrant deaths along the route in the absence of officially corroborated statistics. The researchers uncovered a total of 155 deaths in six facilities, including 92 during 2023 – a figure that, though likely representing a lower estimate than the true number, is significantly higher than estimates by organisations such as IOM.



**THEMATIC BRIEF**  
**SOCIAL COHESION AND PUBLIC TRUST** | IOM

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TENDENCIES RELATED TO SOCIAL ASSISTANCE	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>20 per cent of IDPs reported to have received social assistance in the last 12 months.</li> <li>20 per cent of IDPs reported to have received social assistance in the last 12 months.</li> </ul>
PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>20 per cent of IDPs reported to have participated in public affairs in the last 12 months.</li> <li>20 per cent of IDPs reported to have participated in public affairs in the last 12 months.</li> </ul>
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PLANS FOR INTEGRATION/RETURN	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>20 per cent of IDPs reported to have plans for integration/return in the last 12 months.</li> <li>20 per cent of IDPs reported to have plans for integration/return in the last 12 months.</li> </ul>

**BACKGROUND**

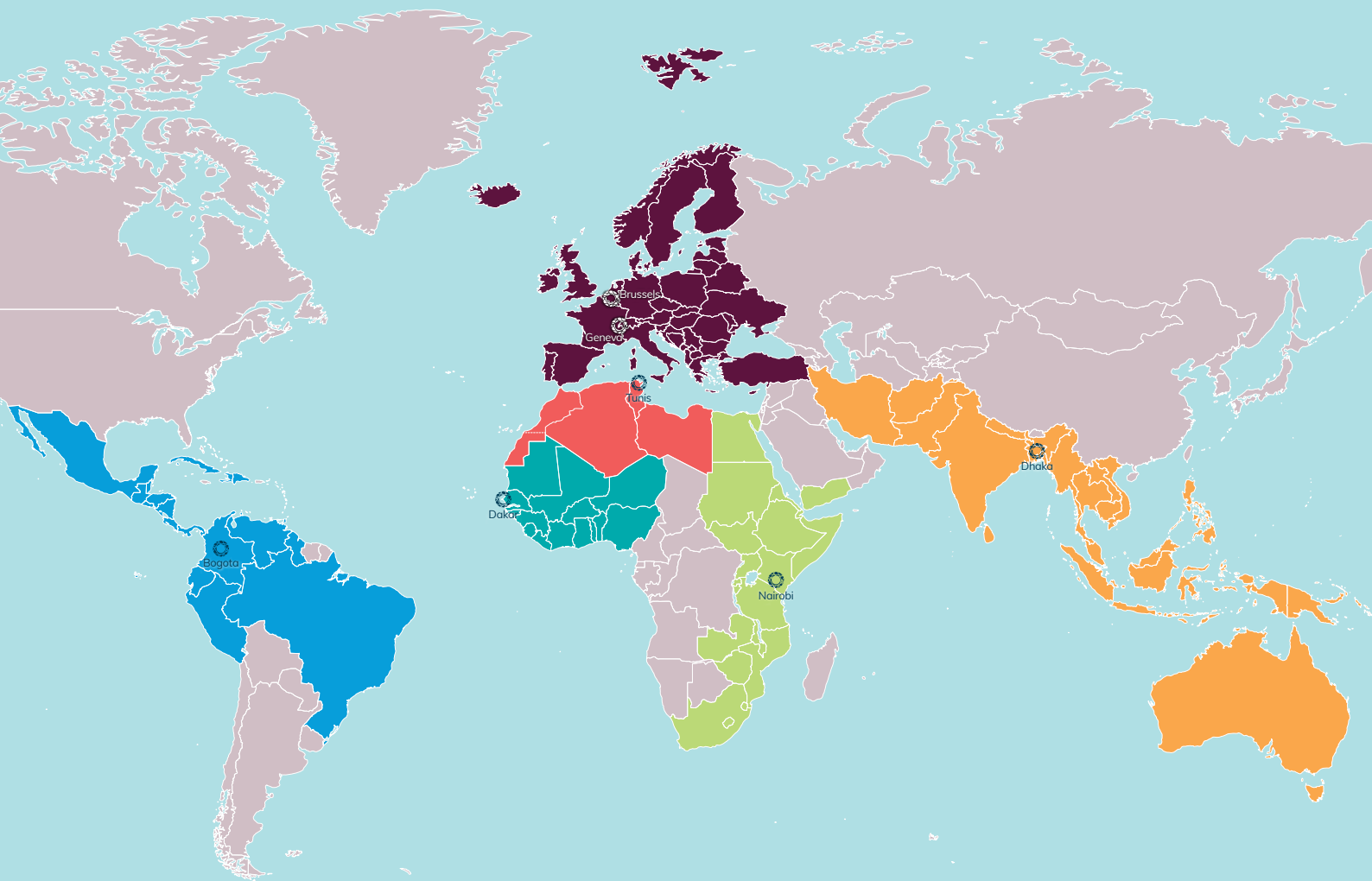
**BRIEF METHODOLOGY**

IOM UKRAINE - DATA AND ANALYTICS

# Thematic brief: Social cohesion and public trust

## IOM | December 2023

While the discrimination experienced by Ukrainian refugees abroad is now receiving considerable attention, this briefing paper by IOM presents the findings of research conducted with Ukrainian IDPs. Among other headlines, close to a quarter (22%) of IDPs interviewed stated that they or their families had experienced discrimination or unfair treatment among local communities, with others also reporting social tensions due to perceived inequities in the provision of assistance.



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs 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 mixed migration 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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