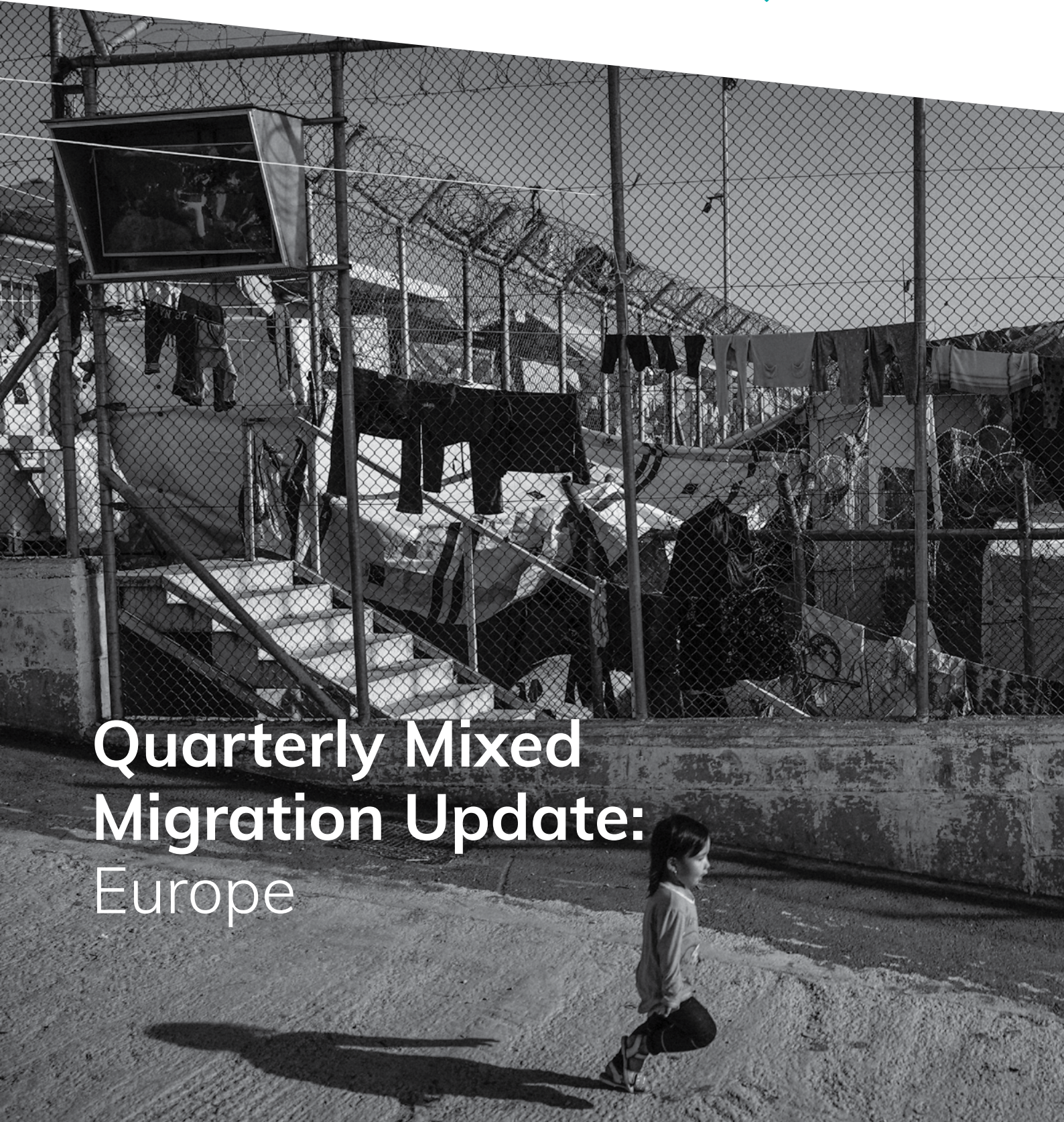


MMC Europe
QUARTER 1 2024



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 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 1 - 2024

Key Updates

- **Changing route usage into the EU:** According to [Frontex and UNHCR](#), the data indicates a significant drop of almost 60 per cent (compared to the same quarter in 2023) in detections on the Central Mediterranean route, and 65% on Western Balkans. The Western African and Atlantic routes recorded the biggest rise (391%) and arrivals more than doubled on the Eastern Mediterranean route.
- **Mediterranean deaths this quarter:** According to the IOM [Missing Migrants](#) project, 459 migrants were recorded as having died or gone missing on all the routes related to the Mediterranean this quarter.
- **Greek court acquits humanitarian rescue workers:** In late January, sixteen aid workers who were involved in refugee and migrant rescues on the Greek island of Lesbos at the peak of the 2015/2016 crisis [have been acquitted](#) of espionage charges after 6 years of criminal proceedings.
- **EU Ombudsman issues findings on massive 2023 boat tragedy:** In late February European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly [released her findings](#) on the June 2023 event in which 650 migrants died, reportedly under the Hellenic Coast Guard jurisdiction. Her report "calls for changes to EU search and rescue rules".
- **EU expansion of 'external partnerships':** In deals that are becoming more common, in February EU President Ursula von der Leyen, promised Mauritania [more than €210 million](#) in new allocations to support Mauritania manage migration. EU-Tunisia migration cooperation deepens with an additional EURO 150 million [allocation made in March](#) despite the European Parliament's concerns. Morocco too remains a major 'gatekeeper' for the EU in a new deal expected to be concluded this year. Meanwhile, Italy's new 'offload asylum' [deal](#) with Albania was ratified this quarter and the UK government relentlessly pushed their [Rwanda plan](#) forward.
- **Beefing up Bulgaria's border with Türkiye:** The EU and its border force, Frontex, are planning a major beefing up of border security for Bulgaria.
- **Alarming evidence of systematic pushbacks continues:** Migrants seeking to cross European borders are systematically being pushed back. In January, the eighth report from Protecting Rights at Borders (PRAB) once again documents how illegal pushbacks and rights violations continue to be widespread and have evolved into an accepted tool for border management, while accountability is even further ['out of reach'](#).
- **All Finish border crossings with Russia remain shut while Estonia restricts passage:** All eight crossing points Finland shares with Russia, along a border of almost 1,400 kilometers are currently closed and will reportedly remain shut up to [mid-April 2024](#). Estonia threatened at the end of November 2023 to do the same – and by [February 2024](#) both Estonia and Russia had closed vehicle passage between their two countries.

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

After the 2023 highs of cross-Mediterranean movement and numbers of Mediterranean migrant fatalities, 2024 has started with a significant fall in numbers of migrants using the Central Mediterranean route. Meanwhile the number using the Western Africa and Eastern Mediterranean route have risen significantly. [According to UNHCR](#), 41,201 new arrivals were recorded by the 31st March, approximately 40.2% using the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic route (Spain), 26.8% using the Central Mediterranean route (Italy), 25.5% using the Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan route and 6.7% entering the EU through Cyprus.

Overall however, according to [Frontex](#), the number of irregular border crossings into the European Union in the first two months of 2024 remained similar to the level in 2023 in the same period. The significant drop in the numbers using the Central Mediterranean route was effectively offset by the rise in those using the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic route.

The Eastern Mediterranean route to Greece

- The second most active migratory route to the EU this quarter was the Eastern Mediterranean route. According to [UNHCR data](#), covering all 3 months of this quarter, [10,117 people](#) arrived by land and sea into Greece and 2,675 into Cyprus. These increased numbers continue an upward monthly trend that started mid-2023 when this route saw a significant rise in new arrivals (almost 49,000 in total), far exceeding the total for 2022 (18,780). According to UNHCR the top three nationalities using the route in the last quarter of 2023 came from Syria, Afghanistan and Palestine, but in this quarter (as of end February) the nationalities [most using this route](#) were from Afghanistan (49 percent), Syria (14 per cent) and Egypt (13 per cent) with 5 per cent of the total from Eritrea.
- According to data from IOM's Missing Migrants Project, the total number of fatalities (or missing, presumed drowned) along this route in the first quarter of 2024 is 49, of which 10 were children. This represents a fatality rate of 0.5% of those who travel, or 1 person out of 200 who make the passage. To date, this is a higher fatality rate than the 0.17% fatality rate (1 in 566) of those who attempted the crossing in 2023 but not as lethal as 2022 when the rate was 2% (1 in 49).

UN High Commissioner visits Greece amid continued violation accusations

In late February, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, conducted a two-day [visit to Athens](#), where he reaffirmed the commitment of UNHCR to continue working together with the Greek authorities, civil society organizations and refugee communities, in providing protection and solutions to people forced to flee. Concerning reports of pushbacks and human rights violations, Grandi noted “the reduction of reported incidents” on the islands and emphasized the need to investigate any allegations. Meanwhile, and emphasising Grandi’s concerns more concretely, this quarter saw the release of various [reports](#) and [alerts](#) documenting a wide range of incidents and cases of alleged violations against refugees and migrants attempting to enter the EU via Greece.

Greek court acquits humanitarian rescue workers

In late January, sixteen aid workers who were involved in refugee and migrant rescues on the Greek island of Lesbos at the peak of a refugee crisis [have been acquitted](#) of espionage charges after 6 years of criminal proceedings. Defenders of humanitarian solidarity with migrants in Greece considered the case to be part of a wider effort of harassment and intimidation of those saving lives and documenting rights violations and pushbacks in the Aegean.

EU Ombudsman issues findings on massive 2023 boat tragedy

In late February European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly [released her findings](#) on the June 2023 event in which 650 migrants died reportedly under the Hellenic Coast Guard jurisdiction.

Her report examines the EU border agency Frontex's shortcomings during the disaster. The death toll from the capsizing of the [Adriana on June 14, 2023](#), is one of the highest in the Mediterranean in the last ten years. Setting out from the Libyan coast, the fishing boat had more than 750 passengers on board. It sank off the Greek coast. The enquiry has exposed that the current rules binding Frontex leave the EU's Border and Coast Guard Agency unable to sufficiently fulfil its fundamental rights obligations and that its jurisdiction is too reliant on Member States to act when boats carrying migrants are in distress. Perhaps, most damning, on the inquiry's release [O'Reilly stated](#) that, "Nearly eight months after the Adriana incident, no changes have been made to prevent such an incident from reoccurring."

Ongoing sea travel, rescue and missing people; Greece and Cyprus

Despite strong criticism of government action and inaction in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean route, the Hellenic Coast Guard along with the Cypriot coast guard was also [busy rescuing hundreds of migrants in different incidents](#) this quarter. Typically, the arrival of boats often overcrowded and unsuitable vessels in distress or at risk of capsizing is continuous, depart from multiple countries including Lebanon, Türkiye, Libya and Egypt. There were cases of this nature throughout this quarter. For example, [on January 14th](#) the Greek coast guard reported it rescued 117 people from a boat off the island of Crete. The migrants had departed Libya earlier in the week. [On January 20th](#) four people were missing from a group of 20 whose boat capsized between Türkiye and Greece. On the same weekend the Greek coast guard and passing merchant ships rescued a total of [149 migrants](#) in a period of just 48 hours. Another report citing Lebanese media in early January, claimed that [over 80 people](#) who had left Lebanon a month previously were still missing after intending to sail to Cyprus. Meanwhile, on March 11th the Cypriot coast guard found and [rescued 458 migrants](#) on six boats that set off from Lebanon, including unaccompanied minors, mostly from Syria or Lebanon.

The Central Mediterranean route to Italy

- The Central Mediterranean route, which saw the largest number of irregular crossings in 2023, started 2024 in a downward trend compared to the last months of 2023 which themselves saw a lower volume than earlier quarters in the year. UNHCR recorded [11,055](#) arrivals in Italy for the three months of this quarter representing a 60 per cent drop compared to figures in the same period in 2023 ([27,695](#)). The top nationalities in these maritime movements were Bangladeshi, Syrian and Tunisian with Egyptians close behind Tunisians. The winter months are typically less used by migrants along this route, but the lower figures could also be an indication of the EU's efforts of externalising migration control to

north African countries and others deeper inside Africa to restrict irregular migration from the Horn and Sub-Saharan Africa (see below).

- According to [UNHCR data](#), there have been 335 deaths in the first three months (up to 31st March) of 2024, compared with 535 for the same period in 2023. In the last quarter of 2023, the number of fatalities was 259 - slightly lower than this quarter.¹

MSF accusations of pushback in international waters as their ship is detained

In late March the large rescue ship operated by Médecins sans Frontières (Geo Barents) was [detained by Italian authorities](#) for the twentieth time in what MSF consider to be Italian implementation of a 2023 law designed to obstruct and frustrate refugee and migrant rescue in the Central Mediterranean. The 20-day penalty detention is for allegedly failing to comply with instructions issued by the Libyan Coast Guard during a rescue event. MSF's claim is that the event took place on March 15th when their staff witnessed a pushback by the Libyan Coast Guard in international waters, outside the Libyan Coast Guard area of responsibility, in the Maltese search and rescue (SAR) region. Allegedly, [Maltese authorities and Frontex](#) coordinated with a Libyan Coast Guard patrol vessel to intercept and forcibly return to Libya over 100 people. In a second event on the March 16th, MSF claim that Libyan Coast Guard patrol vessel obstructed MSF rescue operations of 146 people in distress in international waters.

The Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes to Spain

- This quarter continues a sharp uptick in numbers of people using this route representing a rise of 391% compared to the same quarter in 2023 – a trend that started last year when the Western African and Atlantic route experienced the biggest percentage rise in irregular crossings of all Mediterranean routes.
- The Western African and Atlantic routes to Spain were the busiest migratory routes in the EU for the whole quarter. [UNHCR recorded 16,648 new arrivals](#) in various Spanish territories including mainland Spain, Ceuta, Melilla, The Canary and the Balearic Islands. By far, the Canary Islands were the most popular destination (almost 13,000 arrivals this quarter).
- Most of the arrivals [departed from Mauritania](#) where it appears people smugglers have been quick to respond to an increased demand from sub-Saharan migrants seeking to enter the European Union via the Canary Islands. Most arrivals in the Canary Islands were from Mali, Mauritania and Senegal. The three most represented countries of origin among those arriving irregularly on the Spanish mainland or the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla are Morocco, Algeria and Mali.
- In the first three months of this year, IOM's record of fatalities and missing people on the Western Mediterranean route is 36, and for the Atlantic route, 115.

¹ [IOM's Missing Migrants Project](#), estimate the total number of dead and missing along the Central Mediterranean route in 2023 was 2,498 illustrating some difference between the UNHCR and IOM datasets.

Spain's Supreme Court ruling on unaccompanied minors sent back to Morocco

In January, Spain's Supreme Court ruled in a historic case that sending back unaccompanied child migrants to Morocco in May 2021 was '[illegal](#)'. These repatriations had taken place in the aftermath of a border crossing attempt when more than 10,000 migrants scaled a border fence and swam from [Moroccan territory](#) to Spanish territory. As Spain sent thousands back to Morocco without processing, legal action was started by migrant rights campaigners which also led to the suspension of the forced repatriations in August 2021.

The Western Balkans route

- In the first two months of 2024, [3,049 people](#) were recorded using the Western Balkans route into Europe, representing a 65 per cent fall in numbers when compared to the same two-month period in 2023. The top three countries of origin of using this route remains Syria, Afghanistan and Türkiye.
- According to data from [IOM's Missing Migrants Project](#), a total of 3 people died along the Western Balkans route in this first quarter of 2024. Compared to other routes, this route has typically lower death / missing cases.

Beefing up Bulgaria's border with Türkiye

The EU and its border force, Frontex, is planning a [major beefing-up](#) of border security for Bulgaria for two key reasons. First, the 2023 end-of-year numbers of those using the Western Balkans route were high with [99,068](#) irregular crossings detected – it remains the second-most used route into Europe. However, that number was a [31-per-cent decrease](#) compared to the number in 2022. In early 2023 the EU Commission President, called the border between Turkey and Bulgaria one of the EU's most "[pressing issues](#)." It is also understood that the EU is using [Bulgaria's desire](#) to fully join ([currently only partial](#)) Schengen [as a carrot](#) for completely halting irregular migration through their Western Balkans border.

A "chain reaction" of border closures continues

As mentioned in the [2023 QMMU Q4](#), the continued popularity of the Western Balkans route prompted multiple states to impose or extend border restrictions with neighbouring states to curb irregular migration during the final quarter of 2023.

As of the end of March 2024, [Germany, Austria, Italy, Slovenia and Denmark](#) have currently-running border restrictions directly related to irregular migration and human smuggling. Some early statistics suggest the closures had an [immediate effect in terms of reducing movement of irregular migrants across Europe](#). Most closures will expire in May or June of this year, but they could also be extended. The challenges irregular migration poses to Schengen have been analysed in [recent years](#) and questions continue to be raised about the need for the EU to better [address irregular migration](#) if the Schengen arrangements are [to survive](#).

Alarming evidence of systematic pushbacks continue

Migrants seeking to cross European borders are systematically being pushed back. In January, the eighth report from [Protecting Rights at Borders](#) (PRAB) once again documents how illegal pushbacks and rights violations continue to be widespread and have evolved into an accepted tool for border management, while accountability is even further '[out of reach](#)'.

Additionally, the [Border Violence Monitoring Network](#) (BVMN) in early 2024 gave written input by civil society organisations to the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA) with comprehensive reports and testimonies on continued border violations in the Western Balkans and Eastern regions. The lack of inquiry or response to repeated submission of reports by organisations like PRAB, BVMN [and others](#) over recent years - sometimes supported by video evidence - suggests the findings are falling on deaf ears and there is no appetite to expose or censure nations' involvement in illegal and often brutal pushbacks from EU territory.

The Eastern border

- Proximate to the Western Balkan route is what Frontex call the Eastern Route, comprising the 6000-kilometre-long land border between Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the eastern EU Member States - Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Slovakia and Romania. The overall scale of irregular migration across this route is typically lower than on other migratory routes into Europe. In January and February [Frontex recorded](#) a total of 638 people using this route, mainly Ukrainians leaving Ukraine, but representing a 41 per cent drop on figures from the same period in 2023.

Possible light at the end of the Polish/Belarus migrant tunnel

In January [a group of 101 NGOs and 550 activists](#), artists and academics have called on Poland's new prime minister, Donald Tusk, to end the practice of pushbacks, practised regularly under PiS - Poland's previous government party Law and Justice. Extraordinarily, Poland's government now under the [more progressive](#) Tusk, has for the first time published data on so-called "pushbacks" of migrants and asylum seekers trying to irregularly cross the border from Belarus. They reveal how the practice took place over [6,000 times](#) in the six months between July 2023 and January 2024.

New deputy interior minister, Maciej Duszczyk, claimed that the pushbacks had [dropped considerably](#) since Tusk's administration had taken over in mid-December 2023, and that the government was formulating [new procedures](#) to "enable effective border protection operations but at the same time allow assessment of the individual situation of each migrant who finds themselves in Poland".

All Finish border crossings with Russia remain shut while Estonia restricts passage

As reported in the [2023 QMMU Q4](#), from mid-December 2023, Finland imposed [closures at its land borders with Russia](#) 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 NATO and the US. By [February 2024](#) both Estonia and Russia had closed vehicle passage between their two countries. **For more details, please read the Thematic Focus at the end of this QMMU.**

The Ukraine crisis

- As of mid-March 2024 and according to UNHCR, there are [6,486,000](#) registered Ukrainian refugees globally, including over 5.9 million in Europe ([5,982,900](#)). 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). Just over half a million (503,100) reside outside Europe, mainly in the United States.
- As of the end of February and according to IOM data, the IDP population within Ukraine stood at [3,4689,000](#) a significant drop from the more than more than 5.9 million IDPs in December 2022. For this assessment, IOM defines IDPs as individuals who have fled their place of habitual residence since 24 February 2022, and are officially registered as an IDP in the registry kept by local, regional or national authorities.
- As of the 14th February, the UNHCR have recorded [952,109](#) active registrations of Ukrainian refugees in Poland for temporary protection under the national PESEL UKR mechanism.

Employment rate for Ukrainians refugees in Germany and the Netherlands lower than expected

Of the over a million refugees from Ukraine arrived in Germany in the past two years, [only 214,000 were officially employed by the end of 2023](#). Some politicians attributed the low employment rate to generous financial assistance provided to the refugees, while analysts suggested that the complexity of administrative procedures, language barriers, and a lack of streamlined access to the labor market are the main factors hindering access. Also in [the Netherland problem for access of Ukrainians refugees to labour market are reported](#). Statistics Netherlands (CBS) data from October last year but released only this quarter reports that approximately one in six Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands, aged between 4 and 23, are neither employed nor enrolled in education, with around one-third of those aged 18 to 22 falling into this category.

Uncertain future for Ukrainian refugees in Poland

In the first quarter of 2024, nearly one million Ukrainian refugees, including 41% school-age children, continue to reside in Poland, [grappling with the ongoing uncertainty of returning home amidst the war's prolonged stalemate](#), with an estimated 14.6 million Ukrainians in need of humanitarian aid and 3.7 million internally displaced. As Poland navigates the challenges of longer-term hosting, in the background of important political shifts, approximately 65% of refugees have secured employment.

United Kingdom: the channel 'small boats'

- [According to the Home Office](#), 5,435 irregular migrants and asylum seekers crossed the English Channel this quarter (30% higher than in the same quarter in 2023), with nearly 800 making the journey over the Easter 'bank holiday weekend' – the final days of the quarter. 442 migrants crossed the Channel to the UK on March 31st - the greatest number of arrivals in a single day so far this year. Figures to date means 2024 is set to be a record year. With the onset of spring, police are worried that crossings [will intensify](#). The previous record for January to March was 4,548 in 2022.

Rising deaths in channel crossing

This first quarter [nine](#) people have drowned attempting the journey, compared with 12 for the whole of 2023. The latest to die was a [seven-year-old Iraqi girl](#), when a smuggler's boat capsized on a [French canal](#), a few kilometres from the waterway's exit into the Channel. According to French authorities, smuggling gangs are increasingly compelling migrants to board increasingly overcrowded and unseaworthy boats throughout the year. In late March new evidence obtained by the [Observer](#), [Lighthouse Reports](#), [Le Monde](#) and [Der Spiegel](#) show the French maritime police, partly-funded by the UK government, have tried physically to force small boats to turn around – manoeuvres known as “pullbacks” – in an attempt to prevent them from reaching British shores - using tactics that search and rescue experts say could cause a “mass casualty event”.

Policy and Legal Updates

New EU deal with Egypt and continued support to Tunisia

In March, the European Union announced a staggering [7.4 billion euro](#) funding package and an upgraded relationship (“strategic partnership”) with Egypt also as part of a push to stem migration to Europe and [criticised by rights groups](#).

Despite strong [concerns from the European Parliament](#) about Tunisia's democratic backsliding, the European Council keeps pushing Tunisia forward with concrete action points that would establish the country as a foremost partner in preventing irregular migration into Europe. According to [Statewatch](#) migration-related funding from the EU to Tunisia is both currently on-going and planning to be extended: an additional EURO 150 million allocation was made available in March.

EU deal with Mauritania for migration management

In February the European Commission has pledged approximately €217 million in new money to support Mauritania manage irregular migration. It comes during a period when the number of people transiting through Mauritania to Spain's Canary Islands in small boats has been rising fast. Reportedly, Spain's interior ministry estimates 110 boats carrying 7,270 migrants reached the islands' coasts in January alone – with a high proportion (80 per cent) departing from Mauritania.

EU- Morocco political trade-off to be concluded in 2024

In what appears not to be a financial deal but a political ‘trade-off’, in late 2023 Morocco will take a more active role as the EU's [gatekeeper](#) against migrants in exchange for European acceptance of Morocco's claim to disputed Western Sahara. As a result of multi-year negotiations and in addition to a series of earlier payments to support migrant management, Morocco and the EU agreed to work on a [migration pact](#) in December 2023. New discussions and financial [allocations were made this quarter](#). This agreement is expected to be finalized by the end of 2024. According to a statement by the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces, already around 87,000 migrants were [‘stopped’](#) in 2023.

Albania ratifies contested migration deal with Italy as appetite to 'offload asylum' rises

The [new 5-year deal](#) between Italy and Albania agreed in late 2023 and discussed in [previous QMMU's](#) was ratified this quarter. In February, weeks after the Italian lawmakers approved the policy, the Socialist Party-dominated Albanian Parliament passed the agreement which was already endorsed by the European Commission in what some have called the EU's 2024 '[hunt](#)' to find new partners to 'offload' asylum seekers. Rights groups criticise the agreement which could see up to 36,000 people a year held in Italian-run asylum-processing centres, as [cruel, costly and counterproductive](#), claiming it may be '[illegal](#)' while suggesting it also makes a [nonsense of the notion of European solidarity](#) on asylum.

The UK government relentlessly pushes the doomed Rwanda plan forward

In November 2023, and described in some detail in the [2023 QMMU Q4](#), the UK Supreme Court [ruled unanimously that the Rwanda scheme was unlawful](#). After the Supreme Court ruling, during this quarter, the government introduced a bill to [make clear in UK law that Rwanda is a safe country](#). Determined to pass this new legislation the bill has been passed between the [Commons and Lords](#) in a parliamentary process that will [eventually see the law passed](#) unless it is obstructed until after the national elections - which the conservative party currently in power are not expected to win. Even if they succeed in time, the likely winners of the election, Labour, have promised to [repeal the law](#). In late March the progress of government efforts to push on the process was halted by the Parliament's Easter break. During this quarter, in March, the government offered failed asylum seekers up to £3,000 to move to Rwanda [under a new voluntary scheme](#).

Germany and France new migration laws

Germany's interior minister has [outlined a new law](#) to expedite the return of failed asylum seekers to their home countries. However, conservative opposition lawmakers (AfD) say it doesn't go far enough and will make no difference to what they see as unacceptably high numbers of asylum seekers, refugees and irregular migrants coming into the country every year.

Meanwhile, France's controversial [new immigration law](#), promulgated on 26 January (and after the Constitutional Council [struck down](#) 35 of the 80 measures contained in the bill), was described as racist by the left-wing opposition and civil society but considered an "ideological victory" by the chairwoman of the far-right Rassemblement National (RN, ID) parliamentary group, Marine Le Pen. However, [analysts say](#) it is similar to immigration laws around Europe and reflects a wider trend of more repressive migration policies, particularly concerning access to the right of asylum.

Italy's Mattei Plan

At the end of January 2024, Italy hosted an Africa summit during which Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni [outlined the vision](#) and first projects of the so-called "[Mattei Plan](#)", an ambitious project announced officially at the end of 2023 that aims to shape Italy's strategy for Africa in the years to come, specifically as a way to respond to the root causes of the irregular migration that troubles Italy and Meloni so much. Meloni is regarded by some as an ['essential player'](#) in EU migration issues playing a more [influential](#) role in EU migration discussions after her [initial hardline approaches](#) did not yield the results she hoped for.

Thematic Focus:

Russo-Finish border games – more serious than they look

Because of rising irregular arrivals, Finland began closing borders to Russia in November 2023, but now all eight crossing points closed up to mid-April when the situation will be reviewed. Meanwhile, the situation has catalysed Finland to push a new Bill that will not only allow temporary border closures to continue, but also toughens the country's immigration and asylum regulations - while ignoring condemnation from human rights groups, the UN and EU.

Finland claims Russians funnel asylum seekers through borders

Finish authorities accuse Russia of recently funnelling asylum seekers and migrants towards the Finish border, facilitating their travel, accommodation and final ride on bicycles or scooters across the border zone before they all apply for asylum on arrival in Finland. [In September](#) 2023, thirteen people sought asylum in Finland after crossing the Russian border. In October, that number rose to thirty-two, and in the first two weeks of November, it was 500. [According to the government](#), approximately 1,300 asylum seekers arrived in Finland via the eastern border in November, December and January. They say it is clear that foreign authorities have been facilitating *instrumentalised* migration which, if escalated, risks posing a serious 'threat to national security and public order' in Finland. [Normally, people](#) without valid visas are prevented by Russia's FSB Border Guard Service to enter the Russian border zone. In late 2023 and early 2024 the border guards let migrants through the checkpoints without the travel documents, often selling or giving them bikes to travel the last 5 km and thereby bypass the rule banning people from walking between the Russian and Finnish border checkpoints.

No laughing matter

The relatively low number of predominantly Syrian and Somali asylum seekers [riding children's bicycles through the snow](#) to reach the Finish border may conjure a somewhat humorous if not farcical image, but for Finland it is no laughing matter. They see these events as a form of "[hybrid warfare](#)" in reprisal for Finland's security cooperation with the US and NATO, which it joined, despite Russian [disapproval](#), in April 2023. Finland recognises that its eastern borders are not only the outer limits of the EU Schengen area but a new front line between NATO and Russia along their shared 1,340 km border.

An end to pragmatic cooperation

Previously Finland was neutral in its position towards Russian foreign policy, but after Russia's invasion of Ukraine [it aligned itself to NATO](#) and the EU positions - heralding an end [to its longstanding pragmatic cooperation](#) with Russia and a distinct chilling of relations. Since joining NATO, Finland has stepped

up military training of reserve units and border surveillance, [allowing NATO planes](#) to patrol the border airspace - also angering Russia. In response Putin stated he was reestablishing the [Leningrad Military District](#) - an administrative move he said could lead to a buildup of troops in the regions east of Finland. Russia now sees Finland as a hostile state as part of the 'Western coalition' and presumably Finland will [respond accordingly](#).

Russia's instrumentalising of irregular migrants and asylum seekers at Finland's borders may be a form of testing Finnish reactions while also enjoying seeing the sociopolitical policy panic and the frequent shift to right wing populist politics caused in Europe by irregular migration.

A threat already anticipated

Interestingly, Finland had already anticipated cross border non-militarised actions of this kind two years earlier. Specifically, following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and actions by Belarus, the Finnish government's own security review noted the risk of Russia or Belarus [directing asylum applicants](#) en mass towards the Finnish border to 'destabilize' the country. On July 7, 2022, the Finnish Parliament adopted legislation to amend the Border Guard Act ([Rajavartiolaitos 2005/578](#)) to allow for protection against nonmilitary, so-called hybrid attacks from foreign governments – including temporary border closure. Shortly afterwards in [a letter](#) addressed to the Finnish Minister of Interior, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, called for clear safeguards to ensure that recently adopted amendments to the Border Guard Act would not lead to human rights violations.

Bilateral tension of this nature – as a result of using migrants 'against' a neighbouring country as a form of [weaponised migration diplomacy](#) had been seen, inter alia, [in Belarusian anger with the EU \(at their Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian borders\)](#); from Turkey against the EU (at their Greek border and [in Cyprus](#)) and in [Moroccan disagreements](#) with Spain. At the end of November 2023, Estonia threatened to copy Finland in response to Russia – and by [February 2024](#) both Estonia and Russia had closed vehicle passage between their two countries.

A gift to Finland's anti-migrant, anti-refugee lobby

In mid-2023 a new right-of-centre government took over in Finland in a coalition government which includes the far-right Finns Party. Immediately after taking power, the new government with the far right politicians heading the interior ministry, announced plans to crack down on immigration in what they called a necessary '[paradigm shift](#)' - this included aiming to halve the number of refugees the Nordic country receives through the [UN](#) refugee agency from 1,050 a year to 500. [In 2021](#), around 8.5 percent of Finland's population, or 470,000 people, were of foreign origin.

In this context, Russia's action with asylum seekers and migrants may have been a gift to the anti-migrant agenda of the new government and the Finns Party. With the Finns party now the [second largest](#) in Parliament and a reported [80 per cent](#) of surveyed Fins approving of the current border closures there is a strong tailwind for lawmakers to push through a tough new Bill on asylum regulations. [The Proposal](#) which is being pushed through Finish parliament rapidly will include legislative amendments designed to help

'[strengthen border security](#) and effectively combat any attempts to put pressure on Finland in the form of instrumentalised migration'. Apart from allowing for continued border closures, it aims to halve the number of asylum seekers Finland takes annually, reduce refugee's benefits, make citizenship harder, reduce family reunification and increase deportations of those not accepted for asylum. According to [UNHCR](#), if activated, asylum-seekers, albeit with some exceptions, would be prevented from accessing Finnish territory, removed from the country, and redirected to a different entry point where applications for international protection would be accepted. More contentiously, it allows border guards to make decisions concerning access to Finnish territory for further processing while the new laws would also enable faster asylum processing with a view to returns back to Russia for those rejected – assuming Russia would cooperate by accepting them.

For the law to be adopted, a [five-sixths majority vote in Parliament is required](#). Additionally, a consultation period has taken place until March 25th, after which the law is meant to be swiftly adopted. On 15th March, [the Ministry of the Interior](#) sent out for comments the draft act (on temporary measures to combat instrumentalised migration). The proposed act is scheduled to enter into force as soon as possible but would be temporary and would be valid for one year after its entry into force. It does appear the government may be effectively using the 'crisis' to push through a raft of measures that in another context may have met more scrutiny and resistance.

Rights Groups and UN's fear and condemnation

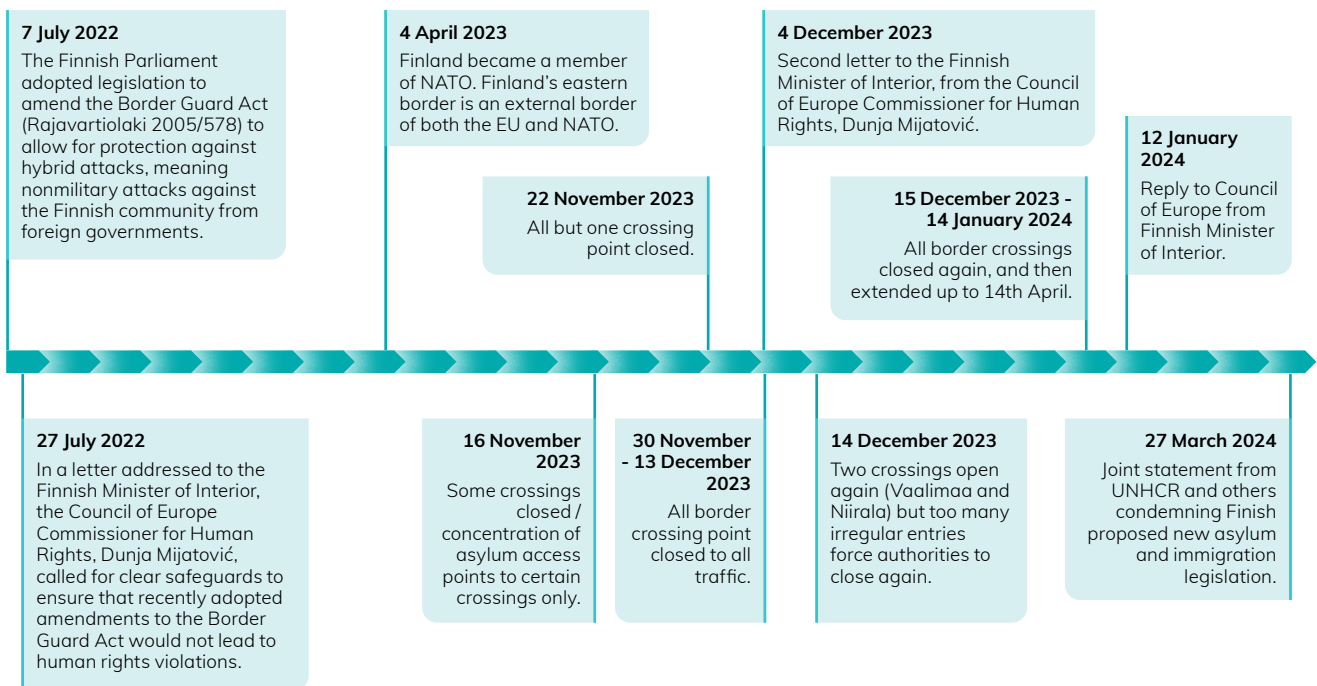
However, Finland's movement towards harsher refugee legislation and the closed border crisis has not escaped scrutiny or resistance from the UN or rights groups, even if the laws have similarities with the EU's newly passed [Pact on Migration and Asylum](#). In early December, Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, [wrote to](#) the Minister of Interior of Finland, Mari Rantanen, [strongly condemning](#) border closures and requesting assurance and clarifications concerning the planned Bill. The Minister [responded on the 12th January](#) with a unapologetic defence and justification of Finland's actions: 'It is the state's job to effectively protect its borders and territory. If we continue to be naïve, unreservedly open, we will lose the support of the people'.

Seeing things develop in an alarming manner, on the 27th March, UNHCR went [public boldly with an announcement](#) insisting that Finland should not violate international agreements by restricting the rights of people in need of protection. This was a joint statement from UNHCR Nordic and Baltic Countries, the Finnish Red Cross, the Finnish Refugee Council, and the UN Association of Finland, directed to the Finnish government. They claimed Finland is in the process of introducing a new bill that would 'instrumentalize asylum seekers and refugees to achieve political goals' through the restriction of access to various border points in their long eastern land border with Russia. Furthermore, the UNHCR statement claims that the Finnish proposal conflicts with international and European refugee and human rights law, and reminds Finland that pushbacks are illegal and 'the principle of non-refoulement is a non-derogable obligation under international law that applies to all states and cannot be deviated from'. UNHCR has also produced a [detailed legal analysis](#) of the proposed bill explaining its deficiencies and contraventions of international law. To date no pushbacks have been perpetrated but according to international law, closed borders that deny asylum seekers ability to apply for asylum at an international border is also [in breach of the principle of non-refoulement](#).

It appears that external condemnation and fear in relation to forthcoming legislation has had little impact on Finnish legislators, but it still needs to pass a high bar of positive votes in parliament before it becomes law.

On closer examination, what may look like a temporary border security response, by Finland, to an increase in, but still very low number of asylum seekers from Russia is more likely to be part of a longer-term action that responds to shifting attitudes in Finland towards asylum seekers and a serious and longer-term chilling of bilateral relations between Russia and Finland. Meanwhile, the asylum space shrinks again in trends that are sweeping Europe and are likely to be echoed in multiple EU countries during the forthcoming national and EU elections in 2024, not to mention already captured in the new [EU Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) which rights groups have already [condemned](#).

Figure 1. Summary timeline related to the current situation:



Highlighted New Research and Reports

[Two years of response to the acute humanitarian crisis at EU's eastern borders](#)



MSF | February 2024

This quarter [MSF published a report](#) of their two years (October 2021 to October 2023) working in the Belarus-Poland border area, describing it as an acute humanitarian crisis and assisting at least 2,000 people before or after they had attempted to cross the Belarus-EU border. It builds on the substantial accusations from collected testimony in their November 2023 [report](#), and [a report](#) revealing widespread violence in Greek camps and detention centres published by Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN), as well as the 2023 report by [Border Criminalities](#).



[Development Pathways in the Context of the European Green Deal](#)

IOM | January 2024

This report explores the need for enhanced coherence between migration and climate action policy within the European Union's internal and external policy. Its core argument is that this should be a priority in the context of the envisaged green transition in the European Union. Also, that the European Green Deal, as well as the New Pact on Migration and Asylum and other policy instruments, should be better merged with agendas such as the European Skills Agenda or the Skills and Talent Package. The report's position is that climate-resilient development should be firmly anchored in the design and the implementation of (labour) mobility schemes and attempts to reskill and upskill migrant workers – and vice versa, migration-related considerations must be integrated into the major frameworks for achieving climate-resilient development.



[ICMPD's 2024 Migration Outlook report](#)

ICMPD | January 2024

This report uses ten selected migration issues to look out for in 2024 - in a year full of European, national, and regional elections, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) expects migration to be a pivotal topic. While many governments implement what they describe as quick fixes ahead of their electoral cycles, opposition parties are tying their campaigns to migration-related promises. ICMPD's 2024 Migration Outlook report forecasts record displacement levels resulting from war and conflict, leading to a further securitization of migration and offshoring of asylum procedures, as well as a rise in secondary movements.



[Confronting Compassion Fatigue: Understanding the Arc of Public Support for Displaced Populations in Turkey, Colombia, and Europe](#)

Migration Policy Institute | January 2024

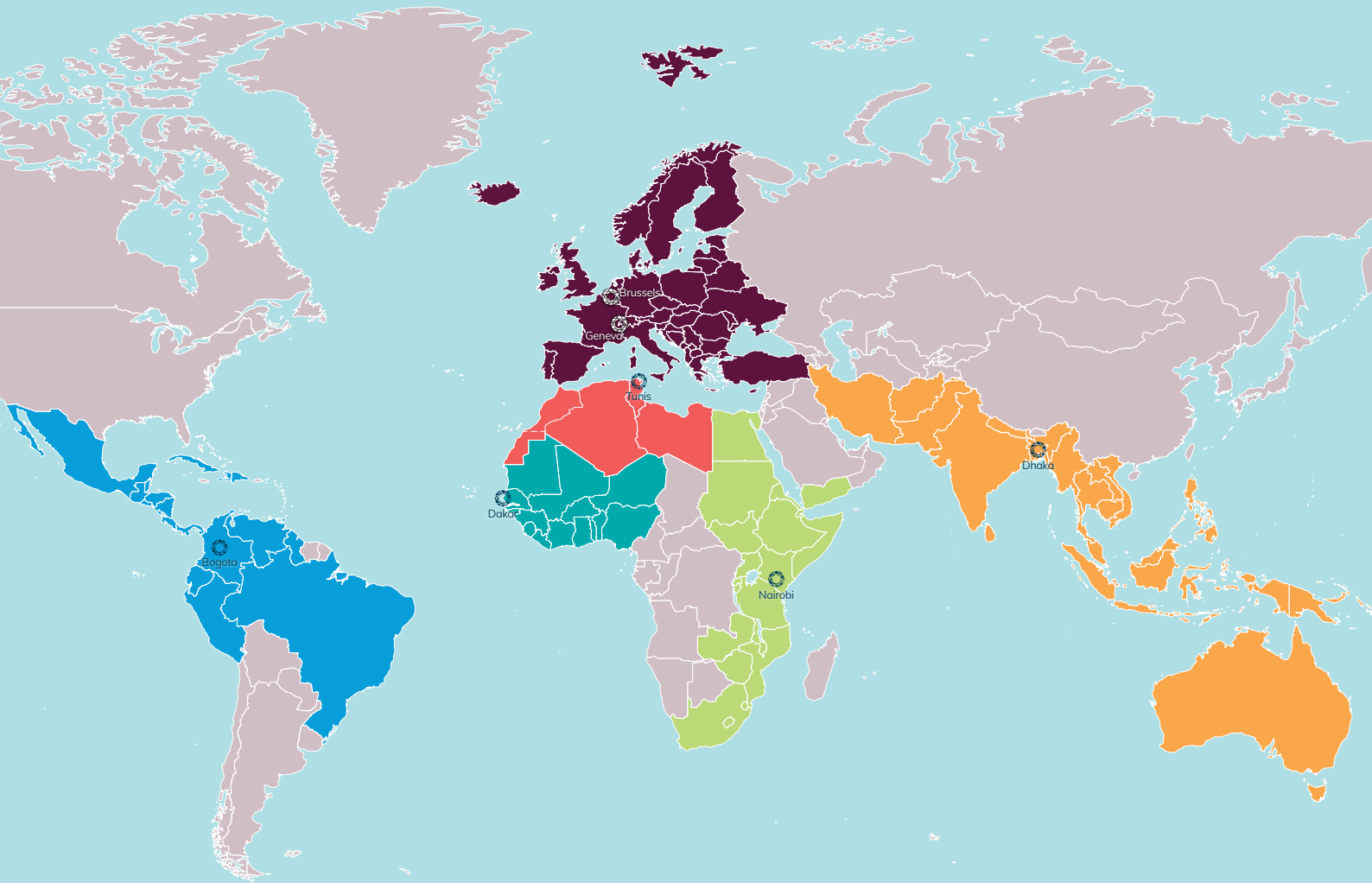
This three regions report highlights, inter alia, the case study of Ukrainians in Europe to explore perceptions and support of displaced people in the context of protracted crises and so-called compassion fatigue. Historic levels of global displacement have put pressure on systems designed to protect people fleeing conflict, instability, and persecution. MPI use the three headline cases that in recent years have triggered a particularly 'generous response amid enormous upheaval': Turkey's reception of nearly 4 million Syrians since 2011, Colombia's hosting of nearly 3 million Venezuelans who have arrived since 2015, and Europe's welcome of more than 5 million Ukrainians (with nearly 2 million in Poland alone). This report examines the dynamics of public support for forced migrants. It highlights factors that have contributed to initial widespread solidarity, ways in which support has been sustained over time, and when and why it begins to fade. It concludes by drawing lessons on what policymakers can do to better anticipate and address compassion fatigue.



EU: Migration Pact agreement will lead to a “surge in suffering”

Amnesty International | December 2023

In this report published and released at the end of December 2023, Amnesty echoes various other right-based organisations’ concerns about the New EU Migration and Asylum Pact. They consider that reforms captured in the Pact will diminish the rights of people on the move, set European asylum law back for decades to come and claim that its “likely outcome is a surge in suffering on every step of a person’s journey to seek asylum in the EU”.



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).

For more information visit:
mixedmigration.org and follow us at [@Mixed_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)

